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MY BODY, MY POST:
EMERGING ADULT WOMEN AND PRESENTATION OF BODY AND SEXUALITY ON
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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ABSTRACT

My Body, My Post:

Emerging Adult Women and Presentation of Body and Sexuality on Social Networking Sites

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Women receive many contradictory messages about what their bodies should look like and how they should behave. These messages necessarily impact how women are socialized to use social media and how they engage with online platforms. Little attention has been paid to the impact of these mixed messages on women's self-concept and social engagement online, or to the mental health and social consequences of these interactions. The present study, guided by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976), intended to gain a deeper understanding of how emerging adult women understand the messages they receive about their bodies and what they should be used for and how these messages influence their relational behaviors online. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 women (ages 19-25), focusing on messages concerning expectations of women's bodies and sexuality, performance of body and sexuality in social media spaces, social media activism, and social interactions online. Conventional content analysis was used to examine the interviews. Interview data revealed multiple themes, composing four broad domains: (1) expectations of women; (2) social media curation; (3) mental health and social effects of social media use; and (4) activism and advocacy. Notions about how women wanted to perform their identities online were shaped by several factors, including aspirational goals for self-love and body acceptance, an interest in portraying themselves authentically and in the best possible light, and a desire to be part of a movement of social change. The study underscores the impact of social media in

individual functioning and wellbeing and reveals deep-seated conflict that women face in integrating messages about who they should be with performance of their own identities. This study highlights the need for situationally responsive clinical practice, intervention, and future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexual violence and discussions of women's sexuality permeate U.S. culture, from frequent depictions of sexual violence in primetime TV shows, to near-daily reports of sexual assault and harassment proliferating U.S. news cycles, to advertising conventions that sexualize and objectify women's bodies. In the U.S., we live in a culture that places great value on gender differences and norms, where women and men are socialized to internalize sexism and conventional femininity. Cultural understandings of women and femininity can shape conflicting messages about women, gender, and sexuality, and possibly contribute to emotional responses that affect emerging adult women's experiences of and interactions with the world.

The messages we receive about what is acceptable to do to with women's bodies vary greatly, as responses to and outcry over allegations of sexual violence and discrimination seem to differ based on context. Prior to his election as President of the United States, Donald Trump faced allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct by more than 15 women, and was recorded on video talking about how he grabs women "by the pussy" (New York Times, 2016). Despite these events being highly publicized in the news, Trump was still nominated as the candidate of the Republican Party and then elected president. Following the 2016 presidential election, psychologists reported anecdotal increases in the number of female clients with anxiety and other mental health concerns related to Trump's comments about women (Burnett-Zeigler, 2016). Similarly, the 2018 confirmation hearing and subsequent supreme court confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh led many to question when and how women's voices are privileged compared to men's, as it promoted a message about who will be believed and rewarded in society. In contrast to the abovementioned cases of Trump and Kavanaugh, when more than 30 women accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault and misconduct, his career quickly ended and his

colleagues and family immediately took steps to distance themselves from him (Guynn & della Cava, 2017). The swift consequences for Weinstein and other Hollywood elite seem to directly contradict the lack of consequences for Trump's and Kavanaugh's similar behaviors; yet there are gaps in the research as to why some forms of treatment of women are deemed acceptable while others are not.

Literature Contributions

Messages about Gender and Sexuality

The responses to these public examples of sexual violence reflect the contradictory messages that women receive about sexual harassment and violence, and yet little research exists as to why society allows for some forms of behavior towards women's bodies in certain contexts but not others. The ways that women internalize these contradictions influence their own development and their perceptions of themselves and of other women and men. The contradictory messages about what is acceptable treatment of women's bodies may be linked to how women experience and view their bodies and sexuality. Indeed, Cook and Hasmath (2014) argue that gender is constructed through the subjects' participation in the "post-feminist masquerade" through which their gendered identity is defined in relation to a hegemonic masculine ideal. Women's perceptions of themselves and interactions with others are guided by the demands of different contexts and the roles that women are expected to fulfill.

In the context of sexual abuse and assault, women receive conflicting messages about how to respond to such experiences. Most rapes and sexual assaults are not reported (Rennison, 2002; U.S. Department of Justice, 2018; Wilson & Miller, 2016). This underreporting of women's experiences stands in contrast to trends in recent months, where women have used social media to define their sexual violence experiences on their own terms through participation

in the #MeToo and the Time's Up movements. This new trend in publicly sharing personal experiences of sexual violation contradicts general societal trends of silence around sexual violence, though there is insufficient research to indicate in which contexts these disclosures are deemed permissible.

There is a substantial body of research that suggests that experiencing both abuse and discrimination contribute to psychological distress (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Huntt, 2013; Moore, 2012; Nadal, 2008). Abuse is particularly harmful when it is identity-based, such that there is a link between gender-based discrimination and poor mental health outcomes among women in the U.S. (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Hurst & Beesley, 2013; Nadal, 2008; Nadal et al., 2013). Rehman, Evraire, Karimiha, and Goodnight (2015) note that people with mental health issues, like depression, may face increased difficulty in relationships due to their mental anguish. In this way, psychological distress caused by the confusing demands of performing femininity in our society may also affect relational health.

Women's Relational Experiences. Relationships hold significant power in people's lives. Internalized messages about womanhood and femininity affect the way that we form relationships with others in the world (Shields, 2008). Friendships between women have the ability to both bolster women's confidence and to devalue them, particularly through responses to relational aggression from other women and girls (Brown, 2013; Comas-Diaz, 2013). "Because of the ways in which all women internalize sexist and misogynist messages about one another, horizontal hostility has frequently been a strategy that women use with one another to maintain a sense of value" (Brown, 2013, p. 19). The messages that we receive about women's bodies and sexuality play a large role in women's relational experiences.

As much as views of the self and others affect women's platonic relationships with other women, it also affects women's romantic relationships. In a study with undergraduate students, researchers found that self-concept clarity was associated with higher relationship quality (Lewandowski et al., 2010). Furthermore, Hurst & Beesley (2013) identified having a restrictive relational strategy as being related to the negative mental health consequences of sexism. For these reasons, it is important to further examine factors that affect women's experiences of their own gendered and sexual identities as well their platonic and romantic relationships.

Emerging Adulthood

For many young adults in the U.S., emerging adulthood is a time of profound change. They are often going to college and getting a new set of roles and responsibilities, including coming of age to vote, and living on their own, often for the first time. This time period, from ages 18-24, is also associated with higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression (Goodman, 2017), particularly among females (Auerbach et al., 2018; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018). This is a critical period of development for young adults that requires additional attention and understanding, particularly because of the mental health implications.

Importance of Social Media

During the critical period of emerging adulthood, individuals are also more likely to use social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). They use social networking sites (SNSs) for a variety of reasons, which may be affected, in part, by gender. Women are more likely to Facebook as being an important part of their lives (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), and to post about content associated with relationships and feelings (Barker, 2009).

Social interactions in general are shifting, with social networking sites being one of the major ways that individuals communicate in modern American society. (Anderson & Jiang,

2018a, Rainie et al., 2013). Given the increasing importance of online social networking, it is important to more clearly understand the function of social media, and how it affects self-concept, or the ways that individuals think about, evaluate, and perceive themselves, particularly in regard to their bodies and sexuality. Yet many studies have not explored this idea in depth, and researchers lack a full understanding of the ways that intersectional identities affect social media use and outcomes.

Online Interaction and Self-Presentation

Self-presentation refers to the ways that people present themselves to others in an effort to shape how others view them and/or respond to them. In this way, it is a performative action based around self-monitoring and social construction (Butler, 1990; Papacharissi, 2012). The performance of gender and sexuality is a large part of self-presentation for women in all social interactions, including online interaction. Social media platforms have become increasingly popular as spaces for relational connection. Through their participation in social media, women have access to a relatively new space for social interaction– a space that requires continual consideration of presentation of and performance of gender and sexuality. Studies show that having interactions on social networking sites may also lead to positive associations among supportive interactions, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction (Oh et al., 2014). This research suggests that online interactions can have a profound impact on women's social functioning, and highlights a need to better understand how online presentation can affect women's relationships, self-concept, and self-esteem.

In the introduction to their book, *The Intersectional Internet,* Noble and Tynes (2016) argue that culturally-situated and gendered information technologies affect the way that individuals engage with the Internet through a series of power relations. They argue that

discourses around technology are linked to identity in a way that normalizes Whiteness and maleness. At the same time, SNSs also have become a place for individuals to come together and engage in social activism, particularly around areas of marginalized identity such as gender and race. Examples of this type of activism include the hashtag movements #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the subsequent demonstrations and protests associated with the increased awareness of these social issues. Social media offers a unique way for individuals to take social action and to empower individuals to embrace their multiplicity of identities (Lindsey, 2013; Tynes et al., 2016). The present study takes an intersectional approach in order to supplement the dearth of literature focusing on the performance of gender roles, sexuality, and relationships in the context of social media, and its relationship with psychological well-being.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Objectification Theory and Relational Cultural Theory to help understand how gender identity and sexuality relate to relationship formation and quality in an online context. Objectification Theory is a feminist theory that posits that women are acculturated to experience their bodies as being valued for and used to be consumed by others (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). In viewing their bodies as consumable objects, Objectification Theory suggests that women turn their objectification inward and internalize the perspective of the observer as their primary view of their physical selves, leading to shame, anxiety, lack of internal bodily awareness, and motivational difficulty (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). This study will frame exploration of women's social media posts in the context of Objectification Theory, and probe specifically into the ways that women understand the values of their bodies and words as they relate to how they present themselves on SNSs.

Objectification Theory, however, does not account for a relational context. Given what we know about the impact of negative views of the self and mental health on relationship quality, it is also important to explore how views of the self affect interpersonal relationships. Relational Cultural Theory ("RCT"), originally established to understand women's psychological experiences, is a feminist theory that views humans as necessarily social beings who achieve well-being through relationships (Miller, 1976). According to RCT, connection with others alleviates suffering and is central to human development (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Social media is one way that people are increasingly achieving relational connection. This study will explore the ways that interpersonal relationships are forged on SNSs. Taken together, these two theories guide how I approach women's responses to conflicting messages about their bodies and sexuality and how their representation of their bodies and sexuality on SNSs affects their relational experiences with others.

Any discussion of women's experiences must necessarily take an intersectional perspective, which considers the ways that factors such as race, gender, and sexuality affect an individual's experiences. Patricia Hill Collins (2015) argued that individual factors are "reciprocally constructing phenomena that…shape complex social inequalities" (p. 32). Furthermore, Shields (2008) argued that all the aspects of our identities play a role in how we experience the world, and in the messages we receive about women's bodies.

Rationale and Aims of Present Study

While many studies explore messages about women's gender and sexuality, few use qualitative methodology to identify the ways that contradictory messages are conceptualized and how these messages may influence experiences of self and others in social media. Furthermore, there are no known studies that identify the ways that women engage in online relationships via

social media sites in light of the contradictory messages they receive about their bodies and sexuality. The paucity of studies documenting the online experiences of women leads to insufficient understanding of the nuances of how these contradictions are experienced and how women approach and negotiate their social worlds, particularly around issues of gender, sexuality, and bodies. The present study will explore the online behaviors of young adult women (18-25 years old) given their unique use of SNS (Brandtzaeg et al., 2010; Rappleyea et al., 2014). Additionally, individuals in this age range would have been eligible to vote for the first time in the 2016 presidential election – a period in history that was particularly focused on public discourse surrounding women's bodies and sexuality and what is acceptable behavior to direct toward women.

One way that women navigate their worlds is through their inherent power to decide when and how to present themselves to others in social spaces. In the context of women's social media activism, women are increasingly being given socially acceptable opportunities to voice their truths and share experiences of violence against their physical selves. Yet research indicates that women still face many barriers to reporting abuse and harassment (Carson et al., 2019; Sable et al., 2006; Weiss, 2010; Wilson & Miller, 2016). Further, research has documented the negative effects of sexual violence on self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress (Krug et al., 2002; Herman, 1997; RAINN, 2019). Despite these negative consequences of domestic violence, women still struggle with when and where to disclose abuse – evidence that women still don't feel safe in speaking out. Given the possibility that these conflicting messages about acceptable treatment of women's bodies have detrimental effects on women's mental health, this study will help to provide a more nuanced understanding of what emerging adult women experience regarding messages about their bodies and sexuality, as well

as help to illuminate how they navigate these messages in the context of their self-representation on social networking sites.

The messages that women receive about their gender, bodies, and sexuality are all laced with implications about the power that women have to choose whether and how to abide by these messages. Given the gaps in the literature and the challenges that women face around issues identity and self-presentation, the examination of the ways that messages about bodies and sexuality may affect online relationships for women is important, particularly given the rising frequency and reliance on online interactions in everyday life. Addressing gaps in the literature about conflicting messages about women's bodies, roles, and femininity will also help inform how we develop psychological and social interventions with emerging adult women. Further, this research can illuminate potential policies related to women's rights, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Women's Rights and Feminist Movements

In the last 250 years, women's rights have made tremendous strides, while also facing a number of setbacks. While feminist movements and social activism around women's rights are a global phenomenon, and have been throughout history, this particular study will focus on the U.S. context. Many of the gains to women's rights have corresponded to periods of feminist activism. The periods associated with social improvement in women's rights are generally discussed as waves of feminism (Grady, 2018). Waves refer to organized political movements dedicated to political equality. A reference to the waves of feminism helps to identify periods in U.S. history when gender issues developed increased prominence and generated larger scale

social and political movements, often characterized by the mobilization of many individuals in public demonstrations and calls to challenge the status quo (Nicholson, 2010). This does not mean that no one advocated for women's rights or equal treatment under the law prior to the first wave. There have certainly been feminist thinkers throughout history (e.g., Plato (Smith, 1983)), though the notion of organized feminist movements did not emerge in U.S. society until the 19th century at the Seneca Falls Convention.

It should be noted that there is some disagreement about the idea that all instances of activism around gender rights can be labeled feminism (see Cott, 1987). The history of feminism has not been characterized by one single ideology, but rather by a series of tensions, thoughts, disagreements, and beliefs about women's rights and roles. Though some argue that the complexity of feminism and its goals goes beyond the metaphor of a wave (Nicholson, 2010), this study will use the construct of the wave to briefly summarize the historical context of the various peaks of feminism as well as their intended goals as an organizing structure to help understand women's movements in U.S. history and the struggle for women's equality.

1st Wave (1848-1920)

The first wave of feminism began in 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention, when 300 men and women advocated to end discrimination against women by signing the Declaration of Sentiments (Grady, 2018). This first wave of feminism focused on absolute rights for women and securing political equality for women. The goals of this first wave were primarily focused around women's suffrage, with additional focus on rights of women to education, better working conditions, abolishing gender double-standards, and women's right to own property.

The original suffragists held beliefs tied to fight for the abolition of slavery, and many early leaders in this thinking were women of color who were fighting for universal suffrage, not

just women's suffrage. Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frances Harper were among the Black women who initially worked toward the cause, though their contributions to the abolition and suffrage movements are often ignored in history books. In 1851, Sojourner Truth gave her now famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?", at the Akron Ohio women's right's convention. Her speech aligned Black and White women around a similar fight for gender equality. Despite this alliance, White women often stayed silent around issues of racial equality during this time in favor of advancing progress for the White middle class agenda.

In 1870, the passing of the 15th Amendment which granted Black men the right to vote, became a highly charged and polarizing moment in the history of women's rights. In response, many White women were mobilized to become suffragettes. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony spearheaded the women's suffrage movement, which was the primary focus of the first wave of feminism. Despite the initial contribution of women of color to the women's movement, the suffrage movement established itself as a movement specifically for White women, with women of color being either forced to walk behind White women or being banned altogether from demonstrations (Grady, 2018). This period in history ended in 1920 with the passing of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted White women the right to vote.

Women's reproductive rights were another notable focus towards the end of the first wave of feminism. In 1916, Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States. Ultimately, the shift in focus to reproductive rights, equality in employment and education, and voting rights for Black women did not have the unifying power that women's suffrage had, and widespread support for feminism began to dwindle (Grady, 2018).

2nd Wave (1963-1980s)

The second wave of feminism began in 1963 when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* (Grady, 2018). This book highlighted the systematic sexism that communicated to women that they belonged in the home, and identified the dysfunctional belief that there was something wrong with women who were unhappy as housewives (Friedan, 1963). Instead, Friedan suggested that women were not responsible for their own unhappiness, but instead that societal expectations around gender roles disadvantaged and placed unfair burden on women. Friedan's book had massive reach, particularly with educated middle-class White women. The popularity of the book provided the momentum and coalesced a new generation of women to fight for women's rights.

Spurred by Friedan's writing, the second wave of feminism aimed for social equality (Grady, 2018). This wave focused on ridding society of systematic sexism. This wave was characterized by the belief that cultural and political inequalities were inextricably linked, the idea of a sexist power structure, the goal to end discrimination, "Women's liberation," sexuality and reproductive rights, and a focus on social equality between the sexes through the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution (Grady, 2018).

In the period following WWII, more women began to enter the labor force (specifically, White, married, middle class, with children) (Nicholson, 2010). This change in the labor market led to the desire for equal pay for equal work as well as the belief that women could be both mothers and workers. The second wave of feminism saw an ideological shift toward liberal feminism. This belief was characterized by the notion that women were equal to men and they deserve to be judged as individuals (Nicholson, 2010).

Radical feminism, which ran parallel to the liberal feminist movement, though was not nearly as popularly supported, espoused the idea that the "personal is political." This aspect of the movement highlighted the struggle of sex role stereotypes and domestic abuse (Nicholson, 2010). Radical feminists, who tended to be a relatively small proportion of privileged women, believed that women should separate from men, no longer make themselves sexually desirable or follow traditional standards of beauty. This subgroup's perspective did not gain significant traction (Nicholson 2010).

The second wave of feminism was marked by a series of major women's rights legislative victories. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 theoretically ended the gender pay gap by promising equitable pay for the same work regardless of race, color, religion, or sex. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex in employment. A series of Supreme Court decisions allowed women the right to use birth control. In 1972, Title IX gave women right to educational equality. The following year, *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal and granted women reproductive freedom.

In addition to these legislative advances, women's rights moved forward through the creation of women's studies programs (Nicholson, 2010), the establishment of rape crisis centers and shelters for domestic violence survivors, and the advancement of the concept of marital rape (Brownmiller, 1975; Nicholson, 2010). Women also fought for the right to have credit cards in their own name and the ability to apply for mortgages (Grady, 2018). Feminists during this time worked to establish women's political organizations and create women's caucuses in male-dominated organizations (Nicholson, 2010). In 1968, women gathered to protest the Miss America pageant. This protest, which gave rise to the myth of feminist bra burners, aimed to eliminate symbols of female objectification as a way to fight against norms of female

objectification (Grady, 2018). Coupled with this protest, feminists during the second wave era were labeled as bitter, man-hating, and lonely (Grady, 2018).

In general, the second wave was more inclusive than first wave feminism, as it sought to be more inclusive of women of color, and aimed to seek sisterhood in solidarity. The second wave was marked by a belief that oppression is linked (e.g. class, race, and gender). However, while second wave feminism fought for women's rights, it also alienated many women. Like the first wave, second wave feminism focused primarily on problems of White, middle-class women, and did not account for concerns of women from other demographics, particularly Black women and other women of color (hooks,1981). Some of the concerns specific to Black women that were not addressed by second wave feminism included issues of reproductive freedom beyond contraception and abortion. Black women sought to end the forced sterilization of people of color and individuals with disabilities in addition to their support of reproductive freedom through contraception and abortion (Grady, 2018). Some feminists of this era (e.g. bell hooks, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde), reacted specifically to the way that second wave feminism neglected the concerns and identities of women of color.

3rd Wave (1991-2008)

Compared to the first and second waves of feminism, the third and fourth waves are not marked by the same agreement about the dates, time periods, and events that mark start and end of each wave. One reason for the more amorphous nature of the third wave was that it was not marked by a central goal of a legislative change in the way that the previous two waves were (Grady, 2018). Instead, the third wave was largely a response to second wave feminism coupled with a recognition of the complexity of human identity.

The beginning of the third wave is tied to the 1991 Anita Hill case. Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee that the then nominee to the Supreme Court, Clarence Thomas, had sexually harassed her in the workplace. Though Thomas was ultimately confirmed on the Supreme Court, the case and surrounding publicity sparked a mass of sexual harassment complaints. Further, national conversation about sexual harassment in the workplace became normalized. In many ways, the Anita Hill case set the stage for, and ultimately was mirrored in the rash of sexual assault complaints against Harvey Weinstein and other powerful men and the subsequent outpouring of support for sexual assault survivors, as well as the 2018 appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court (Grady, 2018). Responses to Thomas' acceptance in the Supreme Court spurred conversations about the overrepresentation of men in leadership roles and resulted in 1992 being labeled "the Year of the Woman," following a record number of women being elected to both the House and the Senate (Grady, 2018).

The period following 1991 saw a shift away from focusing solely on White, upper-middle class women, to consider the multiplicity of identities, including both race and gender, as needing protection. As part of the response to the second wave, third wave feminists took a post-structuralist view of gender as existing outside the binary of male and female. They disagreed with idea of heteronormativity and the notion that there was only one approach to body, gender, and sexuality (Grady, 2018). Kimberle Crenshaw introduced intersectional theory, emphasizing the ways in which multiple social identities and locations related to systems and structures of oppression and power (1991). At the same time, Judith Butler challenged the notion that gender and sex were separate entities, and developed a theory of gender performativity that has continued to influence feminist and queer discourses since that time (Butler, 1993). During this period, third wave feminists rallied the young, and some embraced girliness in a way that had

been largely rejected by second wave feminists. Third wave feminists focused on female empowerment and began to embrace not only heteronormative rights, but also trans and queer rights.

4th Wave (Present day)

In an interview with the *New York Times Magazine,* feminist writer Jessica Valenti (2009) posited that "maybe the fourth wave is online" (Solomon, 2009). The online world has been positioned as a place where activists meet to plan and engage in feminist discourse and action, which may then either take place online or in the streets (Grady, 2018; Valenti, 2009). Given the online nature of fourth wave feminism, it is skewed towards a younger demographic. Some scholars credit the creation of Twitter, the social network that is most popular with emerging adults, aged 18-29, as the start of fourth wave feminism (Baumgardner, 2011). Through feminist blogs such as Jezebel and Feministing, feminists are connecting through technology (Cochrane, 2013). Further, women, as well as men, are able to engage in activism online through #MeToo and Times Up movements as a way of holding (powerful) men accountable for their behavior (Grady, 2018). Online social movements, like #MeToo and #TimesUp are highly emblematic of the online nature of fourth wave feminism, and speak to some of the ways that equality under the law is not the same thing as equality in practice.

In addition to online spaces where women meet to discuss their rights and needs, the internet has also been a place to encourage in-person activism. The Women's March on Washington, first held on January 21, 2017 as a way to protest the inauguration of Donald Trump and statements he made about women, has become an annual day of activism across many states to advocate for legislation and policies supporting human rights. According to their mission and principles:

The Women's March on Washington is a women-led movement bringing together people of all genders, ages, races, cultures, political affiliations, disabilities and backgrounds…to affirm our shared humanity and pronounce our bold message of resistance and self-determination. Recognizing that women have intersecting identities and are therefore impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues… Our liberation is bound to each other's… We welcome vibrant collaboration and honor the legacy of the movements before us – the suffragists and abolitionists, the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movement, the American Indian Movement, Occupy Wall Street, Marriage Equality, Black Lives Matter, and more – be employing a decentralized, leader-full structure and focusing on an ambitious, fundamental and comprehensive agenda. (Women's March, n.d.)

As is evident from the Women's March's mission, this fourth wave of feminism is rooted in critique of systems of power that allow for the targeting of women without recourse or action. Further, the dominant discourse of the fourth wave is rooted in intersectionality, with the idea that women's experiences can only be understood as part of a larger context of identity, including marginalization along a number of other axes. Race, age, ability, sexual orientation, and class are some of the additional foci of fourth wave feminism (Grady, 2018). Fourth wave feminists have sought to redefine feminism to be more inclusive, with proponents identifying feminism as queer, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, body positive, and digitally driven (Adichie, 2014; Grady, 2018).

#MeToo: Women's Empowerment in the Current Context

The work of previous generations of feminist thinkers has continued to grow and gain traction. Today, we have wider recognition of the complexity of identity as being more inclusive

than just sex, but also acknowledging the ways that gender, race, and class all contribute to determining an individual's social identity. In 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first viable female presidential candidate. Women's studies programs flourish in colleges and universities across the country (Nicholson, 2010). Women have access to education to the extent that the number of women pursuing doctoral degrees surpassed number of men, and there are, once again, record numbers of women and minorities running for political office (Grady, 2018; Nicholson, 2010; Smallwood, 2003).

While the various waves of feminism have advanced women's rights considerably, there are still many areas where women's rights continue to suffer and where more work toward equality is needed (Nicholson, 2010). Women still do a disproportionate share of the housework and care work (though less so than before) (Nicholson, 2010). A gender wage gap continues to exist (Garfield & Gal, 2018). Women still face rigid and narrow standards of beauty (Wolf, 2013) and endure a sexual double standard (Kreager & Staff, 2009). Further, the goals of the socialist feminism movements of the 1960-80's have not yet been achieved (i.e., elimination of racial and class inequality) (Nicholson, 2010).

The issue of women's rights, particularly around consent and the right to make choices around their bodies has been increasingly in the spotlight. Public outcry over the cases of important social and political figures, including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Donald Trump, and Brett Kavanaugh have engendered new discussion of women's issues. These current incidents of sexual assault and abuse of women's bodies have garnered a new type of societal response.

There has been increasing response to these events through online activism, in public spaces and demonstrations, as well as through the news, media, and entertainment industries.

The #MeToo movement is a viral movement that took flight in October 2017 as a hashtag on social media sites. Yet the birth of the Me Too movement took place nearly a decade earlier, in 2006. Tarana Burke, a Black activist, identified the power of the phrase and began the initial Me Too movement (Ohlheiser, 2017). The original movement rose from Burke's work as an activist and organizer with young girls in marginalized communities (Ohlheiser, 2017). Burke identified that the thing that helped her to process her own experiences was the empathy of other survivors, and thus, "me too" as a way of showing solidarity and survivor empathy was born (Ohlheiser, 2017). Burke's goal, to promote "empowerment through empathy," came out of her desire to have been able to share these words with a sexual assault survivor that she worked with. Me Too was conceptualized as a movement toward community healing from the pervasive social problem of sexual violence (Ohlheiser, 2017). Shortly after, Burke started a MySpace page to spread the message of Me Too, which led to increased visibility and support.

Today, #MeToo has been repurposed, and is most frequently used to highlight the pervasiveness of sexual assault and sexual harassment, particularly in the workplace. Despite these origins and the traction gained by Burke's Me Too movement, the terms #MeToo was not widely publicized and didn't gain national viral traction until 2017, when White actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the phrase in her social media. In 2018, months after the hashtag first went viral, #MeToo was used 1.5 million times on Instagram alone (Instagram Year in Review, 2018).

Individuals have had a wide and complicated array of responses and reactions to the increased visibility of #MeToo and public acknowledgment of personal experiences of sexual violence and harassment. Responses to #MeToo include: empowerment, exhaustion, solidarity, and trauma (Ohlheiser, 2017). This range of response highlights the fact that there is no singular way to respond to sexual violence, or one way to do social activism and normalizes differences

in how individuals respond to and interact with their world and surroundings. The present study aims to explore how women engage with conceptualizations of gender, sexuality, and activism and their motivations underlying when, where, how, and why they use social networking sites to communicate about the various aspects of their identities.

Construction and Contradiction: Messages about Gender and Sexuality

Historically, the terms sex and gender have been used interchangeably. However, the two terms are becoming increasingly distinct. Sex is defined by biological determinates like genes and genitalia (Newman, 2018). The term gender refers to a socially and culturally constructed role that falls on spectrum of identities related to masculinity and femininity (Newman, 2018). A person's biological sex and their gender identity may or may not be related to one another (Newman, 2018). Historically, U.S. society has identified a gender binary of male versus female, with behaviors and expectations associated with each. Recent research and social trends have increasingly questioned the idea of a binary in favor of a more fluid scale of masculine to feminine traits (Newman, 2018). While this author firmly believes in the fluidity of gender identity, I must acknowledge the use of gender binaries in the present work, with a focus on participants and research related to those who identify as female.

In American society, women and men receive messages about the influence of gender and the expectations about the behaviors associated with it in order to comply with social norms. Social norms are a set of societal rules that shape our expectations of individuals' behavior. Gender norms are a subset of social norms that set expectations of an individuals' behavior based on gender differences – they are a set of informal rules and social expectations of behavior based on gender (Marcus et al., 2015).

Gender stereotypes (e.g., women are nurturing, men are unemotional) are commonly held beliefs about gender expectations, though they are not necessarily true.

> Many gender differences have little to do with the biological body, and much more to do
>
> with the differential socialization of boys and girls, and perhaps even more profoundly,
>
> with the different social status and power held by women and men in society.
>
> (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174)

From this perspective, the body is more than just biology, but exists and is constructed within social and cultural contexts (Butler, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Judith Butler conceptualizes gender as being performatively constructed, identifying it as a process, rather than a predetermined identity (Butler, 1990). The idea of identity performance, initially theorized by Goffman (1959), refers to all the activity and behaviors that an individual engages in interaction with others. These performances allow an individual to draw meaning about the self and communicate to others information about one's identity. Social roles – such as gender, race, and class – are performed through repetitive behaviors (Papacharissi, 2012). Gender performance, specifically, is constructed through the repetitive enactment of dominant social conventions of gender (Butler, 1990).

Intersectionality

Gender and sexuality are not the only components of identity, instead, they are part of a complex matrix of different aspects of individual identity that affect one another and a person's interactions with their world and their surroundings. Individuals do not experience their different social locations one at a time in a vacuum, but rather they embody, experience, and perform all of their various components of identity simultaneously. The performance of gender has a reciprocal influence on other aspects of identities. This means that women not only identify with

gender, but also with class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other aspects of identity (Collins, 2015). Patricia Hill Collins argued that "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (2015, p. 32). From an intersectional perspective, each individuals' unique context affects the ways that they perceive of and engage with the world, thus shaping all interactions.

Gender Roles, Expectations, and Experiences

Within this socially determined definition of gender, men and women traditionally have different rules and expectations for their behavior, whether it be sexual and otherwise (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Traditional ideas of gender norms suggest that women are relational, caretakers, home makers, vulnerable, and emotional, while men are masculine, dominant, and providers who should not exhibit emotions. Evidence suggests that men spend more time on traditionally "masculine" tasks like yard work or car repair while women spend more time on "feminine" tasks like house work and childcare (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). In the United States, women are sexually objectified regularly, and their bodies are sexualized across a variety of contexts (e.g. media) (Swim et al., 2001; Szymanski et al., 2011a; Szymanski et al., 2011b). Furthermore, it is well established that compared to men, women's bodies are evaluated and sexualized with far greater frequency (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill & Fischer, 2008).

Part of the social context of being a woman in the U.S. is the experience of "being treated as a sexual object, or as a body that exists for the pleasure of others" (Hill & Fischer, 2008, p. 745). This cultural acceptance of the sexualization of female bodies is deeply ingrained in American society, and ranges from more overt forms, like sexual violence, to less obvious forms, like sexual evaluation (e.g. visual appraisal of the body, sexually evaluative commentary)

(Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill & Fischer, 2008). These gendered notions of body image affect not only the ways that society treats individuals, but also individuals' self-perceptions and conceptualizations of their lived experiences.

Despite these gender stereotypes, emerging adults appear to reject these traditional gender norms, and instead aspire to more egalitarian division of labor in a marriage (Willoughby & James, 2017). At the same time, researchers note that traditional values lurk under the surface in how young adults choose to distribute labor in marriage relationships. As a counter point, they also argue that young adults do not follow traditional gender roles, but instead believe in the idea of specialization of skills, which may or may not be related to gender (Willoughby & James, 2017). In a study of emerging adults' views on marriage, Willoughby and James (2017) note that emerging adults today do not reach consensus about the connection between gender and marriage, and argue that this lack of consensus may reflect the current cultural shift away from a belief in gender differences, and toward the notion of gender neutrality. While these studies have begun to explore the current context of gender role expectations, they have not examined how conceptualizations of femininity and masculinity affect individuals' beliefs and behaviors in a variety of contexts. The present study will explore specifically performance of gender and femininity, and the way that women approach cultural expectations of femininity in the context of social media to add to a broader understanding of how gender is performed by women.

Contradictory Messages about Gender and Sexuality

Learning how to perform gender and sexuality is complicated, particularly considering conflicting messages about what is acceptable and expected in different contexts. Women, then, have the power to determine whether and how they will accept dominant messages about their gender, bodies, and sexuality, and to what extent they want to either abide by those messages.

The messages that women receive about their bodies and sexuality are confusing and often contradictory. For example, the Madonna-whore dichotomy requires women to be either pure and virginal or easy and sexually promiscuous (Cook & Hasmath, 2014; Crawford & Popp, 2003).

> Girls learn to look sexy but say no, to be feminine but not sexual, and to attract boys' desire but not to satisfy their own. They experience dissonance when they are depicted as sexual objects yet defined in terms of sluts and whores when they express their sexuality. (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 24)

These complicated and often contradictory messages make it challenging for women to navigate their gender performance and call into question when and where women choose to align themselves with various parts of the dichotomy.

Double Standards of Sexuality. Women and men face different expectations about their behaviors and their sexuality. The sexual double standard means that men and women are judged differently for the same behaviors (Kreager & Staff, 2009; Marks & Fraley, 2005; Penhollow et al., 2017). U.S. Cultural and social expectations hold different standards for what constitutes appropriate behavior for women versus for men. In the United States, it is commonly held that men are lauded for heterosexual sexual contact while women are stigmatized for the same behaviors (Kraeger & Staff, 2009). In a study of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Kraeger and Staff (2009) found a relationship between the number of sexual partners an adolescent had and peer acceptance. They found that the association between number of sexual partners and peer status varied based on gender. Boys with greater sexual partners had more positive peer acceptance while a greater number of sexual partners was negatively associated with peer acceptance for girls. Further, socioeconomic status moderated acceptance, where

sexually permissive boys from financially disadvantaged backgrounds were predicted to have more friendships than sexually permissive boys from more advantaged backgrounds. While this study indicates double standards in beliefs that vary both by gender and socioeconomic origins (Kraeger & Staff, 2009), it fails to look at other factors that contribute to differing expectations/acceptance of gender and sexual norms.

Not only does this double standard affect individual behaviors, but it also has negative effects on attitudes and health behaviors of men and women (Penhollow et al., 2017). The norm that men are allowed, and even rewarded for greater sexual freedom and agency while women are not allowed the same freedom impacts women's development and experiences (Kreager & Staff, 2009). Further, American hookup culture has different effects on women than men. Some research identifies the positive effects of hookup culture, resulting in feelings of empowerment and allowing women freedom of sexual expression and agency over their sexual experiences (Lewis et al., 2012; Meenagh, 2017) and allowing individuals to feel attractive and excited (Fielder et al., 2013). In contrast, other research identifies that women experience increased negative responses to hooking up, including emotional shame and regret, as well as health and social consequences (Lewis et al., 2012; Owen et al., 2010). Given the contradictory demands around female sexuality, it is important to better understand the factors that influence when and how women choose to portray themselves as sexual, gendered beings. Regardless of the effect of this sexual double standard, researchers agree that there is a potential mental health consequence (whether positive or negative) of receiving gendered messages (e.g. Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Priess et al., 2014; Saewyc, 2017).

Gendered Messages and Mental Health

Contradictory gendered messages affect not only how individuals behave in society, but also their emotional experiences. The messages that people receive about their bodies, gender, and sexuality all have the potential to impact mental health outcomes. There is a substantial body of literature that suggests that there are gender differences in mental health rates and diagnoses (e.g. Capodilupo et al., 2010; Saewyc, 2017; Nadal, 2008; Nadal et al., 2013; World Health Organization, n.d.). Women and men have different propensities for certain mental illnesses. Both biological and cultural factors contribute to these varying occurrences of mental illness. Women are diagnosed at higher rates in disorders like depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints (World Health Organization, n.d.). These disorders are thought to be linked to risk factors including gender based roles, stressors, and negative life experiences and events (World Health Organization, n.d.). Of these risk factors for depression, anxiety, and somatic disorders, many disproportionately affect women, including gender based violence, socioeconomic disadvantage, income inequality, low social status, and having caretaking responsibilities for others (World Health Organization, n.d.). Thus, many of the risk factors for mental health concerns are directly tied to the gendered messages and role expectations that women experience in American society.

Chronically experiencing discrimination such as sexism and toxic masculinity may be a cause of mental health issues for women. Identity-based mistreatment, such as the type women experience based on their bodies and sexuality, is particularly harmful. There is a link between experiencing gender-based discrimination and poor mental health outcomes among women in the U.S. (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Nadal, 2008; Nadal et al., 2013). There is considerable empirical

support for a connection between experiencing sexism, abuse, and discrimination and having psychological distress (Hurst & Beesley, 2013; Hwang & Goto, 2008; Lewis et al., 2013; Moore, 2012; Nadal, 2008).

Women, and their bodies, are often objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011a; Szymanski et al., 2011b). Women who experience objectification have increased instances of anxiety and depression, particularly women who also identify as coming from a minority background (Hains et al., 2008; Szymanski et al., 2011b). Other studies have also shown that self-objectification is associated with decreased performance across a variety of tasks (e.g. Quinn et al., 2006). In a series of two experiments about the effects of self-objectification, Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge (1998) identified that self-objectification in women increases body shame, which correlated to restricted eating. They further found that self-objectification was associated with decreased math performance (Fredrickson et al., 1998). In a response to limitations in racial diversity in Frederickson and colleagues' original methodology, Hebl, King, and Lin (2004) conducted a follow up study to determine whether theories of self-objectification affect a more diverse population. This study found that men and women across races (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American) all experience negative outcomes when in self-objectification situations (Hebl et al., 2004). This suggests the relevance of exploration of the effects of self-objectification across cultures.

Furthermore, internalized objectification may intersect with other forms of oppression having to do with both sexual orientation and race. Multiple researchers have found that internalized heterosexism and self-objectification are related in samples of lesbian women, leading them to devalue homosexuality (e.g., Haines et al., 2008; Szymanski & Chung, 2001). Among women of color, internalization of messages about racialized self-objectification may

lead women who identify as coming from a racial and ethnic minority to idealize a White beauty standard or to view their sexuality as one of their few assets in life (Szymanski et al., 2011b; Thomas et al., 2004). Other studies have also found that self-objectification may be culture specific. One example of this is that in a sample of African American women, higher levels of skin tone monitoring were associated with higher levels of body shame and skin tone dissatisfaction (Buchannan et al., 2008; Moradi, 2010). Taken together, these studies highlight a need to examine the ways that individual sociocultural factors influence self-objectification, and to further explore the ways that self-perceptions affect mental health and relationships.

Objectification affects the ways that women use their bodies and think about themselves as gendered, sexed beings (Johnson, 2014). Negative messages about the self are also associated with several other negative health outcomes, including self-harm, changes in physical and sexual functioning, and disordered eating (Impett et al., 2006; Johnson, 2014; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005). Sexual objectification is linked to decreased sexual activity in women and to higher levels of self-consciousness, body shame, and anxiety during sexual encounters (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012). These studies highlight the effect that gendered messages about objectification have on women's mental health outcomes and suggest a complex interplay between being seen as a sexual body and subsequent experience of and monitoring of one's own body.

Body monitoring and self-objectification is associated with increased risk for mental health outcomes like shame, anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction (Johnson, 2014; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005; Quinn et al., 2006; Szymanski et al., 2011a; Szymanski et al., 2011b; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; Winter, 2017). Objectification leads to mental health consequences that disproportionately affect women such as depression, eating

disorders, and sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2011b). Studies find that objectification correlates to negative outcomes around body image and eating-related behaviors, and performance consequences (Moradi & Huang, 2008). The abovementioned studies begin to highlight a cycle whereby women are more susceptible to certain mental health concerns due to gendered societal experiences, and the mental health consequences may lead them to feel and act different sexually, which then affect their self-esteem as well as public perception of their character. This cycle then can contribute to mental health distress (Johnson, 2014; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012).

Beliefs about gender roles are also related to risk for certain mental health outcomes. Attitudes about gender roles, or the extent to which individuals ascribe to the idea of traditional gender-based differences are also associated with poorer mental health outcomes for adults and adolescents (King et al., 2019). This means that ascription to gendered beliefs and expectation places women at higher risk for certain disorders. Beliefs in gender norms affect adolescents of all genders, but can be particularly limiting to girls' ambitions and opportunities (Kapungu & Petroni, 2017).

The psychological distress caused by experiencing and responding to the confusing demands of performing femininity in our society may affect relational health as well as mental health. Rehman and colleagues (2015) note that people with mental health issues, like depression, may inadvertently increase their interpersonal stress and alter the quality of their relationships due to their mental anguish. In this way, gendered messages affect how people experience themselves, how they feel about themselves, and how they relate to others.

Emerging Adult Women and Mental Health

The transition to college marks a time of significant change for emerging adults. Their daily life drastically changes as do the responsibilities they have in the world. It is not surprising that this period is marked with stress, anxiety, and depression for emerging adult individuals (Goodman, 2017). Rates of anxiety and depression have been increasing over the past four years (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018), and studies have repeatedly found that mental health on college campuses is a critical concern. Research suggests that a majority of college students experience mental health challenges (Goodman, 2017) and mental illness is highest among emerging adults ages 18-24 years old (Goodman, 2017). Eighty six percent of college students report feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities (American College Health Association, 2016). Fifty seven percent of students report experiencing substantial anxiety (American College Health Association, 2016). And around 35% of college students report feeling so depressed that it is difficult to function (American College Health Association, 2016).

The number of college students seeking mental health services is rapidly increasing (Auerbach et al., 2018; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018). A collaboration of more than 340 university and college counseling centers found that suggests that this number increased by an average of 30% in the six year period between 2009 and 2015 (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018). There is more mental health need among emerging adults than there are services to provide them. As a result, college counseling centers are in a time of crisis. They have increasingly long wait lists lack the resources to provide services for many students who seek treatment (American College Health Association, 2016).

This mental health trend among young adults is a more profound problem for women than for men. Nearly 63% of college students seeking services identify as female (Center for

Collegiate Mental Health, 2018). Other studies confirm this trend: An international study of 19 colleges across eight difference countries, including the U.S. found that some of the strongest correlates for screening positive for common mental disorders among first-year college students included being female, and being of older age (19 and 20+ years old) (Auerbach et al., 2018). These studies consistently show a need for specialized attention to the mental health and well-being of emerging adult women and suggest the necessity of researching factors that contribute to the differential rates of mental illness in emerging adult women, among which may be differences in response to social media use.

Theoretical Framework

The present study seeks to explore how women internalize gendered messages and the ways that these messages affect women's relational and social experiences in an online context. As such, the present study has been conceptualized through two distinct, though complimentary lenses; Objectification Theory and Relational Cultural Theory. Taken together, these theories help to frame how socialization practices affect women's self-concepts around gender and sexuality, which then contribute to how they relate to others.

Objectification Theory

Researchers commonly argue that women who are raised in cultures that sexually objectify female bodies treat themselves as sexual objects. As such, women are socialized to internalize cultural standards of attractiveness as part of their self-concept (Moradi, 2010). Objectification is the experience of being treated as a body or a collection of body parts that is values for its ability to be used or consumed by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Objectification Theory ("OT") provides a framework to understand how women's socialization and experiences of (sexual) objectification lead to mental health consequences and other

psychological effects (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Moradi & Huang, 2008). "Objectification Theory integrates many threads across theories and research on body image and represents a cohesive framework for understanding how sociocultural pressures are translated into psychological risk factors that can promote body image…problems" (Moradi, 2010 p. 138). OT posits that women are acculturated to internalize the perspective of the observer as the main view of their physical self (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and that women are socialized to treat themselves as objects to be evaluated based on physical appearance (Moradi & Huang, 2008).

OT suggests that women's bodies can always be objectified, thereby leading to a lack of control of experiences in which one could be objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Girls and women, as a result of objectifying treatment over time, adopt a view of self that treats the self as an object whose purpose is to be evaluated and consumed (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This may lead to self-consciousness and body monitoring as well as a host of mental health outcomes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill & Fischer, 2010).

Objectification Theory is a concept that can be applied across any gender and cultural groups that are subjected to dominant cultural messages. While initial research around Objectification Theory focused on the perspectives of White college women, the theory has since been expanded upon and explore in the context of a multiplicity of identities including male experiences, sexual minority women, African American women, and Deaf women (e.g. Buchannon et al., 2008; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Moradi and Rottenstein, 2007; Wiseman and Moradi, 2010). Though OT can be applied across a range of identities, it is important to also value and highlight "group-specific experiences of salience and the associated societal power dynamics that shape and are shaped by those experiences" (Moradi, 2010, p. 140).

Cultural Sexual Objectification. One way that objectification affects women is through sexual objectification. "Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into – and perhaps enables – a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialization of women's work and accomplishments" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174). Cultural sexual objectification calls attention to the effects of culturally situated modes of sexual objectification (such as exposure to objectifying images in media, sexual harassment, and sexual assault). Sexual objectification does not affect women equally across contexts. Instead, it may be that certain social contexts highlight women's awareness of perspectives of their bodies, thereby altering the degree and kind of negative consequences a woman experiences due to objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While research about the nature and effects of cultural sexual objectification helps to illuminate connections between objectification and women's mental health, it does not postulate how it is that sexual objectification experiences are translated into relational experiences for women.

Self-Objectification. Objectification Theory is predicated on the notion that the internalization of a sexually objectifying culture is what is particularly harmful to women (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Hill & Fischer, 2008). Self-objectification is the process of viewing oneself as an object to be consumed by others (Winter, 2017) and involves the internalization of observer's perspective of one's own body (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Through this process, women learn to value their bodies based on appearance instead of based on competence (i.e. appraising "how do I look?" over "What am I capable of?") (Hill & Fischer, 2008). Self-objectification contributes to shame, depression, and anxiety, among other negative mental health consequences (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Winter, 2017). It can also contribute

to habitual monitoring of body appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Hill and Fischer (2008) conducted a study that suggests that cultural sexual objectification has similar effects on the self-objectification practices across both heterosexual and lesbian women. This means that the negative effects of sexual objectification span multiple aspects of identity. Given the dearth of research in this area, future studies must examine the effects of sexual objectification across other forms of identity.

OT looks at body image specifically, and focuses on negative associations with body image (Moradi & Huang, 2008), but does not help explore protective factors against negative self-objectification. OT assumes that self-objectification is negative, but this need not be the case. Lerum & Dworkin (2009) suggest that sexualized images of the body can be empowering and lead to positive outcomes for women. In light of this approach to self-objectification, it becomes important to understand how a woman perceives herself and the potential influences on her experience of their physical bodies and sexuality.

Objectification Theory also does not consider the context in which objectification takes place, particularly the impact of interpersonal relationships on feelings about the body (Winter, 2017). Objectification results in disconnection from the body and the self. Cultural trends towards objectification may be particularly confusing for women, leading them to internalize contradictory messages about their bodies and sexuality. These beliefs may contribute to making it particularly difficult for women to report instances of sexual violence, and may be one reason that accounts for the low reporting rate of gender-based violence against women. Objectification of the self and internalization of others' objectification may also result in other responses to and consequences for women. To better understand how body image and sexuality interrelate,

Objectification Theory should also consider the interpersonal relationship context (Winter, 2017).

The state of Objectification Theory research highlights the complexity of women's lived experiences and suggests a need for future research to explore other ways that objectification may affect women's lives. While Objectification Theory takes into account the ways that socialization and cultural norms affect self-objectification practices, it does not fully explain the effects of objectification on women. What is missing from this literature is research that goes beyond the mental health consequences of cultural sexual objectification, and examines the relational impact of self-objectification and living in a sexually objectifying culture. Investigating the ways that the mental health factors of objectification affect women's approach to social interactions can help to inform psychological and community-based interventions..

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational Cultural Theory ("RCT") is based on the assumption that humans are inherently social creatures, and the theory therefore aims to understand the complexity behind how relationships are formed. RCT posits that psychological health and emotional well-being are achieved through growth-fostering relationships and connections that are mutually empathic (Miller, 1976). RCT focuses on the interplay between two concepts – relationship and culture. It acknowledges the complexity of human relationships through the concepts of connection and disconnection while at the same time highlighting the influence of broader cultural and power differentials on the nature and quality of relationships and interactions.

Jean Baker Miller argued that 'growth-fostering relationships' are embodied by five critical attributes, or the 'Five Good Things,' which include: 1) sense of zest, or energy (vitality), 2) increased sense of worth, 3) clarity, or an increased knowledge of oneself and the other person

in a relationship, 4) productivity, or the ability and motivation to take action both in the relationship and outside of it (empowerment), and 5) desire for more connection in reaction to satisfaction of relational experience (Jordan & Hartling, 2002).

In addition to exploring the benefits of growth-fostering relationships, RCT also explores the impact of disconnection in relationship. Ideally, when disconnection exists, the less powerful person is able to represent their true feelings and be responded to empathically by the other party. This results in an increased sense of relational competence and can strengthen the relationship (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). When this does not happen, the central relational paradox arises (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The central relational paradox occurs when, in response to disconnection (which is an inevitable part of relationships), the less powerful person in the relationship is unable to authentically represent their feelings, and therefore begins to keep parts of themselves out of the relationship in order to maintain the relationship (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Through experiencing disconnection, individuals may also learn to become less and less authentic in relationships. When we fail to have growth-fostering relationships, the result is decreased zest, empowerment, clarity, worth, and desire for connection.

RCT was borne out of Miller's (1976) observation that women, people of color, and marginalized individuals were pathologized by mainstream psychology because their unique set of experiences with the world lead them to be misunderstood and devalued by society. RCT aims to identify how contextual and sociocultural experiences affect the way that individuals create, sustain, and participate in growth-fostering relationships. It assumes that movement toward relational connection occurs in contexts that are "raced, engendered, sexualized, and situated along dimensions of class, physical ability, religion or whatever constructions carry ontological

significance in the culture" (Walker, 2010, p. 2). RCT highly values the role of culture and context on individuals' experiences or connection with others.

A key component of RCT is the understanding that opportunity for growth and disconnection occur not just on an individual level, but on a sociocultural level as well (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). This means that societal tendencies to categorize and stereotype individuals impacts connection and disconnection. According to this view, the –isms (e.g., sexism, racism, heterosexism) all affect one's ability to participate in growth-fostering relationships (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). RCT is based in the idea that it is important to give voice to marginalized populations and to name and call out systems of oppression.

A relational cultural approach identifies and deconstructs obstacles to mutuality that people encounter across relational contexts and networks (Comstock et al, 2008). It allows for a theoretical framework to engage with how issues of sex role socialization, power, dominance, marginalization, and subordination affect relational development (Comstock et al., 2008). Theorists identify that experiences of shame can lead to isolation and disconnection from both the self and others (Comstock et al., 2008; Winter, 2017).

Comstock and colleagues (2008) argue that sometimes people respond to their shame and isolation in ways that lead to continued disconnection, despite their desire for the opposite. This central relational paradox, of engaging in disconnecting behaviors that are intended to bring connection, can lead to things like risky sexual behavior (Comstock et al., 2008). In disconnecting from the self, individuals may view their bodies and their self-concept in a different light.

Disconnection from the self can contribute to poor body image (Winter, 2017). Multiple studies have found that there are associations between body dissatisfaction and poor relationship

quality (Nakash et al., 2004; Sanftner et al., 2009). Conversely, having a strong connection to the self (i.e. good body image) may correspond to having stronger connections with others. Self-empathy, is an important part of being able to form growth-fostering relationships (Nakash et al., 2004).

RCT and Women. Relational Cultural Theory promotes an understanding of how women respond to social situations. In the case of sexual violence, the ways that women report and respond to gender based violence are inherently based in social contexts. RCT helps examine the ways that social relationships may affect who women report their experiences to, who believes them, and what others' responses to women are. RCT helps to shed light on the ways that women make sense of their interactions in the world and the conflicting messages and experiences they have in navigating their gender and identity in social spaces.

RCT was developed through a feminist lens to understand women's unique set of experiences and has developed with an eye towards race, difference, and social justice. Despite this widened lens, there is no known body of literature that focuses specifically on RCT and its implications for emerging adult women. Though the concepts underlying RCT were developed out of the Stone Center at Wellesley College (Jordan, 1997), there is not a body of research that looks specifically at RCT and age. Existing research connecting age and RCT has suggested that mutuality, respect, authenticity, and active engagement are core characteristics of positive relationships between youth and important adults (Spencer et al., 2004). This study suggests the applicability of RCT to a variety of age groups, including emerging adults. Given that emerging adulthood is a time where individuals negotiate power dynamics, it stands to reason that RCT is highly applicable to the relationship dynamics between emerging adult women and other

individuals in their lives. RCT is an ideal lens for exploring the diversity of women's experiences as they define themselves in relation to others (Jordan, 1997).

RCT and Internet. Though psychologists have largely criticized Internet communities as being damaging to social relationships, other literature suggests that it is possible to foster online communities that are growth-fostering and socially beneficial (Silverman, 2001). Silverman (2001) describes the process of creating an online group for mental health professionals who are engaged in relational work and relational thinking. He speaks of the power of online community to hear and validate individuals' experiences, and the power of the internet to allow a space for members to speak and be heard. Particularly given the ubiquity of computers and online technologies, studies suggest that the internet may enhance social communication (see Bargh and McKenna, 2004).

Research and theory have not fully considered the role of social media or the impact that online social interaction has on individuals' relationships both in person and online. One limitation of RCT is that it does not have a model specifically for understanding social media use and its effect on relationships and mental health. The present study will apply the concepts of RCT, specifically the notion of strategies of connection and disconnection as well as give voice to identities that are not traditionally privileged in mainstream society, to women's online social interactions. While RCT theories have helped researchers understand how women respond to contradictory messages in society about their roles and sexuality, there have been few empirical studies that have examined how these messages manifest in relationships, and how the intersections of identities affect the ways in which women perform gender and sexuality. The present study aims to investigate these questions among emerging adult women, both within online and in-person spaces.

Social Media

Social interactions in American society are becoming increasingly computer-mediated (Korn, 2016). Facebook alone has a reported 1.52 billion daily users and 2.32 billion monthly users worldwide (Facebook Newsroom). SNS researchers define SNSs as:

> 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. (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Estimates of social media use across ages range from 68-95 percent of individuals using social media platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a; Rainie et al., 2013; Smith & Anderson, 2018). The median American uses three different social media sites (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Teens report that they are more likely to spend time with their friends online than they are in person (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). Given the pervasiveness of social media in American life, it is important to understand how individuals approach these interactions and how they affect their life and functioning. However social relations are embedded in digital technologies in ways that have not yet been thoroughly researched or fully understood.

Social Media Use

In many parts of the world, social media has a strong hold on society. Though grasp of social media is still limited to some extent internationally, with large parts of the world being excluded from digital networks (van Doorn, 2011), in Western and in most developed nations, social media use is the norm. Yet SNS use is not consistent across all subsets of the population. Certain platforms appeal to different demographics. Facebook is a platform that is used by a majority of Americans across demographic characteristics, however use of other platforms may

be influenced by identity. For example, Pinterest is more commonly used among women than men, WhatsApp is more commonly used in Latin@ communities, and LinkedIn is more common in high income and highly educated communities (Smith & Anderson, 2018). These propensities underscore the ways in which identity characteristics affect social media use.

Given that the internet, specifically social media, is the fastest growing form of communication and relationships, it is critical to consider various dimensions of identity that may intersect with gender, gender roles. The aim of this study is not to focus on the intersections of every aspect of identity, but rather to explore how particular identities, namely gender and age contribute to online social behavior. Below is a review of some of these social locations and the research that has emerged about various parts of identity and social media use.

Gender. Studies about use of SNS suggest that gender differences affect the usage and intended goals of interaction. Boys reportedly use SNSs for making new friends while girls use SNSs to maintain contact and connection with friends they already have (Barker, 2009; PEW Research 2007). In contrast, girls use SNSs more than boys for relational connection including talking with friends about romantic relationships, secret things, and deep feelings (Barker, 2009). Other research suggests that girls more likely to post about family than boys (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). Girls are also more likely to post about emotions and feelings as well as religious beliefs than boys are (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). In a study of Facebook use, women were more likely than men to spend time on the platform and to ascribe greater importance of Facebook to their lives (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). In Facebook groups, women were found to construct group identities primarily around heterosexuality (Korn, 2016). Given the different uses and intended goals of SNS use between males and females in these studies, it stands to reason that future research about social interaction via SNS will need to consider differences in identity, and

suggests that focus specific to the nature of girls' and women's interactions separately from that of boys and men, is warranted.

Emerging Adulthood. As with gender, research has consistently shown differences in social media use associated with age (Smith & Anderson, 2018). In 2018, 88 percent of 18-29 year-olds reported using social media, while that number fell to 78 percent of 30-49 year-olds, and decreased further to 64 percent use among individuals 50-64, and 37 percent use among adults 65 and older (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Eighteen to 24 year-olds are more likely to use Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter than 25-29 year-olds (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Among 18-24 year-olds, 78 percent report using Snapchat (with 71 percent of those users reporting visiting the site multiple times per day), 71 percent use Instagram, and 45 percent report using Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Among adults, 68 percent report using Facebook, and three quarters of those individuals report daily use of the platform (Rainie et al., 2013; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Teens and young adults are particularly involved in using social networking sites (PEW Research 2007). The majority of research on young people's social media usage tends to focus on adolescent use as opposed to usage patterns of emerging adults.

While age affects the frequency of use of SNS, it also may determine the content and substance of that use. In a study of SNS usage. Brandtzaeg and colleagues (2010) identified that younger people use Facebook to communicate with people they see every day to engage in behaviors like flirting, photo sharing, and general contact, whereas adults use Facebook to stay in touch with old friends from their past in communication more associated with nostalgia. Another study found that communication technology plays a large role in intimate relationships of young adults (aged 18-25 years), though young adults appraised in-person communication as being more important than communication technology in the establishment of a relationship

(Rappleyea et al., 2014). Studies have found that older teens are more likely than younger teens to post about romantic relationships (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). Similarly, while older generations (i.e. Millennials) are known for posting selfies on social media, teens report less use of social media for selfies, and report being more likely to instead use social media to post about their accomplishments or family life. Teens also report that they are more likely to post these personal updates than they are to post about personal problems of political beliefs (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). According to these studies, young adults use SNSs in qualitatively different ways than older adults, warranting studies that look specifically at SNS behaviors in different age ranges.

Intersectionality and Other Identities. Identity is not reflective of gender and age, necessitating exploration of other parts of identity as well as intersectionality as factors that influence online networking experiences. Identity constructs such as race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and many others also affect internet use.

While there is limited research that looks at the intersection of internet use with specific identity points, some scholars have begun to explore the ways that social media use is affected by racial identification. Facebook, in particular, has been shown to be used differentially by people of color. In both Black and Latin@ communities, the proportion of individuals using Facebook is higher than the proportion of individuals of each background that use the Internet in general (Rainie et al., 2013).

Not only may there be racial differences in social media use rates, but there also seems to be a difference in the posting content across racial groups. A recent Pew study identified that Black and Hispanic people report being more likely to engage with and see posts about race than White individuals on social networking sites (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Further, for Black

respondents, just over one quarter note that some or most of what they post on social media pertains to race, whereas that number is one fifth for Hispanic respondents, and under one tenth for White respondents (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Thus, there are racial differences in how people engage with social media that seem to allow more privileged identities the ability to miss out on engagement with racism and racial disparities through social media.

The influence of intersectional identities also affects social media use. Crenshaw (1991) identified that gender and race are often regarded as separate, unrelated identities, when they actually greatly impact one another. One example of this type of intersectional social media usage is the #SayHerName social media movement, designed to raise awareness about violence toward Black women following the death of Sandra Bland while in police custody (Brown et al., 2017). The movement hopes to bring individuals from the margins to the center and highlight social issues that affect Black individuals other than cis Black men, such as women, LGBTQ, trans, and disabled individuals (Brown et al., 2017).

Similarly, class and race intersect in use of social media. In a study of race and social class, boyd (2008) found that poor urban Black individuals are less likely to have internet access at home, and while they are just as likely to have social network accounts, they use social media less. Similarly, Schradie (2012) found that both class and race affect individuals' likelihood of online blogging. Schradie (2012) found that while White participants tended to have higher social class, they blogged less than Black participants, who were also more likely to be lower social class.

Each of these studies on intersectionality and social media use highlight the ways that different parts of individual identity affect one another with regard to Internet use. Collectively, they call for a thoughtful analysis of social media that does not view any one aspect of identity as

monolithic, and instead to allows space to interpret the ways that multiple aspects of identity may influence each other.

Internet and Identity

Erving Goffman's (1959) work on identity has inspired much of the current research on self-presentation on social media (Orsatti & Reimer, 2012). Research has focused on Goffman's ideas about impression management and strategies of self-presentation (e.g. Becker & Stamp, 2005; Orsatti & Reimer, 2012) as well as his notion of "performance of self" (e.g. Ellison et al., 2006; Orsatti & Reimer, 2012; Papacharissi, 2002). This early research about Internet and identity has drawn on Goffman's theories of self-presentation and performance of the self to explore the ways that identities are constructed and created in this new form of media (Orsatti & Riemer, 2012).

Studies of the Internet have largely neglected the intersectional and complex nature of human identity (Noble & Tynes, 2016). Noble and Tynes (2016) argue that culturally-situated and gendered information technologies affect the way that individuals engage with the Internet through a series of power dynamics. They argue that discourses around technology are linked to identity in a way that normalizes Whiteness and maleness (Noble & Tynes, 2016). Traditionally, early research that attempted to identify cultural praxis online was focused on the experiences, and from the perspective of White Western men (Noble & Tynes, 2016; Steele, 2016). In fact, Western internet "practices neatly recreate social dynamics online that mirror offline patterns of racial interaction by marginalizing women and people of color" (Brock, 2011, p. 1088).

The social interaction on the internet maintains ideologies and social beliefs online that exist offline (Noble & Tynes, 2016). While some scholars suggest that online spaces may avoid patterns of discrimination that exist offline (e.g. Kang, 2000), others suggest that the culture of

the internet is inherently racist and protects perpetrators of hostilities towards marginalized individuals more than it protects those who experience discrimination (e.g. Daniels, 2009; Daniels 2015; Tynes et al., 2016). Though the authors here refer explicitly to race-based forms of hatred and inequity, this researcher would argue this frame of White dominance extends to all forms of privilege, including gender. Daniels (2013) warns that racism (and theoretically all other isms) online is located more as the behavior of individuals rather than acknowledging the systemic, structural ways that the isms seep into society.

Though there have been many studies of race or gender performance online, studies of intersectional identities, including what it means to be a Black, White, Latina, or Asian American *woman* online have not been deeply explored (Korn, 2016). Some initial research identifies links between age and gender identification, noting that older teen girls are more likely to post about dating lives, family, emotions, religious and political beliefs than older boys or than younger teens of either sex (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b).

Early theories of internet behavior consistently failed to take into account the intersectional nature (i.e. gender, race, class) of online social interaction, and did not appropriately acknowledge the ways that Whiteness, maleness, and power affect social relations (Tynes et al., 2016). The present study hopes to take an intersectional and multicultural approach to help contribute to the relative dearth of literature focusing on intersectional identities and Internet studies.

Social Media Use and Mental Health

The effects of SNSs on mental health are largely unknown given the relatively new role and use of SNSs. Research has focused on the potential relationships between SNS use as it relates to depression, body image, and self-esteem, and has found that SNS use has both positive

and negative influences on mental health (Chou & Edge, 2012; Gonzalez & Hancock, 2011; Jelenchick et al., 2013; Manago et al., 2015; Meier & Gray, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Pantic, 2014; Pantic et al., 2012). Studies about the effects of social media use and mental health highlight the importance of continuing to conduct research to explore the complicated and extensive ways that social media use might affect emerging adult women's sense of self and experiences with the world.

      Depression. Scholars do not agree about the directionality of a connection between depression and social media use, though they do typically agree that depression and SNS use may be linked. SNS users may become depressed and also depressed individuals may gravitate towards SNSs (Pantic, 2014). Some studies show a positive correlation between the amount of time high school students spent on SNSs and depressive symptoms (e.g. Pantic et al., 2012), while other studies have found no correlation between SNS use and depressive symptoms in older adolescent college students (Jelenchick et al., 2013).

      One way that SNS use might be related to depression is that increased time spent on Facebook is associated in undergraduate college students with the (potentially false) belief that others have better, happier lives (Chou & Edge, 2012). These studies indicate complicated connection between SNS use and mental health, thus highlighting a need to better understand how use of SNSs affects individuals' thoughts and feelings, and also to better understand the underlying motivator behind SNS posting.

      While these studies tend to identify connection between SNS use and depressive symptoms, they do not take into account intersectionality or identity of the users. The studies mentioned above all limited the age range of the participants, but none of the studies examine the effects of gender roles on social media and depression.

Body Image. Body image is related to the thoughts and feelings that individuals have about their body and the way they look (Center for Young Women's Health, 2019). Use of social media has been repeatedly been studied to identify its effect on body image, with varying results.

In a study of 112 female university students (ages 18-25) in the United Kingdom, Facebook viewing did not affect women's body dissatisfaction or interest in changing their weight or shape, but it did affect their interest in changing their face, hair, and skin-related features (Fardouly et al., 2015). This study found that women who had greater tendency to make appearance comparisons to others were most likely to have their self-image altered by viewing Facebook (Fardouly et al., 2015). Another study that explored the relationship between Instagram use and body image and self-objectification in a sample of 18-25 year old women found that greater Instagram use was associated with increased self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018). This relationship was mediated by internalization and by appearance comparison to celebrities (Fardouly et al., 2018). Another study, of 742 females between the ages of 19 and 25, found that women who were exposed to Facebook, Instagram, and fashion magazines had a greater increase in body dissatisfaction than did women exposed to other types of media like YouTube and Pinterest (Markova & Azocar, 2018). This study further identifies that cultural and racial identity may also be related to body image, with African-American and Arab-American females having more positive body image than Euro-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-American women (Markova & Azocar, 2018). Another study of male and female university students in the UK found that gender, but not social media intensity and use was a significant predictor of body esteem (Ormsby et al., 2019). This study contradicts many previous studies that suggest a link between social media use and body esteem. Given conflicting evidence about the relationship between social media use and body image, it is important to explore further the

relationship that women themselves ascribe between their use of social networking sites and their beliefs about the value of their bodies.

The ways in which individuals use social media also appears to affect their body image. Passive social media use (viewing content posted by others) appears to influence body image. In a study of the effect of the relationship between number of likes that a photo had received on Instagram and women's body dissatisfaction, researchers found that undergraduate women experienced greater body and facial dissatisfaction after viewing thin-ideal images than average images (Tiggemann et al., 2018). The researchers also found that participants who were invested in the number of likes an image received were more likely to experience appearance comparison and facial dissatisfaction. Collectively, these studies suggest that passive social media use has the ability to influence how women think about their bodies and their physical appearance.

Active social media use (posting content to social networking sites) has also been demonstrated to affect mood and body image in young women. A study of 110 undergraduate college women found that both mood and feelings of physical attractiveness were affected by posting selfies on social media (Mills et al., 2018). Participants who posted their selfies on social media were more anxious, less confident, and felt less physically attractive after posting compared to participants in a control group (Mills at el., 2018). Participants experienced harmful effects to their mental health even when they were allowed to retake or retouch the selfies that they posted (Mills et al., 2018). This study suggests the potentially harmful impact of social media use on body image. However, the study did not explore social media factors that could contribute to positive body image.

Body image and self-esteem are closely related concepts. Body image is a major contributing factor to self-esteem, with differences between one's perceived body image and ideal body image predicting lower levels of self-esteem (Szabó, 2015).

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem is associated with how much individuals like themselves and how they appraise their character, qualities, skills, and accomplishments (Center for Young Women's Health, 2019). Having self-esteem is linked to having more positive and enjoyable relationships with others (Center for Young Women's Health, 2019). There is inconclusive evidence about the relationship between SNS use and self-esteem (see Gonzalez & Hancock, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Regardless of the mechanisms by which SNS use affects self-esteem, research suggests that the body consciousness and monitoring that individuals who engage with SNSs may affect how they view themselves.

Social media websites are built off of individuals attending to self-presentation and visual impression management (Manago et al., 2015; Pantic, 2014). "By shaping how they are seen they are at the same time able to shape how they see themselves" (Davis, 2010, p. 1115). Using social media encourages hyper-preoccupation with the self in allowing for constant distribution of thoughts, feelings, needs, preferences, desires, life events (Gentile et al., 2012; Manago, 2014). Social networking sites are a place where media use, gender, sexuality, and peer interaction dovetail, leading to objectified body consciousness (Manago et al., 2015). There is an association between using Facebook and objectified body consciousness in girls and women in the U.S. (Meier & Gray, 2013). The psychological consequences of this body consciousness include: shame, anxiety, decreased awareness of bodily needs, and sexual dysfunction (Moradi & Huang, 2008).

More than other forms of Internet use, social media sites heighten the internalization of culturally dominant appraisals of attractiveness, body surveillance, and valuing the self-based on appearance (Manago et al., 2015). In a study of adolescent girls in Australia, time spent engaging with MySpace and Facebook (as opposed to Google or YouTube) was associated with belief in a thin ideal and appearance comparisons in adolescent girls (Tiggemann and Miller, 2010). Other studies of adolescent girls in the U.S. found that girls who engaged in more photo sharing through SNSs endorsed higher levels of appearance self-worth and endorsement of a thin ideal (Meier & Gray, 2012).

In a study of 467 college students in the Midwest U.S., Facebook use predicted objectified body consciousness (Manago et al., 2015). Further, objectified body consciousness predicted increased body shame and decreased levels of sexual assertiveness (Manago et al., 2015). Based on this study, Manago and colleagues (2015) argue that social media use contributes to college students experiencing themselves from the point of view of an observer (self-objectification), which, in turn, is associated with poorer body image and decreased sexual agency across genders. Constructing oneself as a sexual object has negative mental and sexual health consequences (Manago et al., 2015).

In a study of SNS use, those with higher collective self-esteem used SNS to communicate with peer group members (Barker, 2009). This was more common in female participants than males (Barker, 2009). Respondents with negative collective self-esteem reportedly used SNS for more instrumental purposes like social compensation, learning, and social identity gratification (Barker, 2009). Another study found that individuals who are more extroverted benefit more from SNS use (Blachnio et al., 2013). In contrast, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found participants who had low self-esteem particularly benefitted by Facebook use. These studies

suggest a need to further understand how use of SNSs affects mental health as well as the ways that individuals engage and interact via that medium.

Despite inconclusive and often contradictory findings about the effects of social media use, it is clear that SNS usage affects how individuals see themselves and how they interact with the world. A recent study of 113 college students' social media and smartphone usage suggests that it is the context of social media interactions, rather than the frequency of communication that affect mood and wellbeing (Sacco, 2018). All of these studies point to a need to contextualize SNS use as a means to better understand the implications for psychological well-being.

With the exception of a few, most of these studies included college students, and did not explore differences between sexes in terms of responses. Given that cisgender males and females have differing rates of mental illness and that objectification has been shown to affect women and their self-perceptions differently than men, it would be important for studies to explore specifically the effects of internet use on women's self-esteem.

Social Activism and Social Media

Social media has become a corrective and healing space, allowing for self-care from dealing with oppression and discrimination (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Tynes et al., 2016). The Internet has allowed communications to take on a speed otherwise unknown to social organization or mainstream media (Sharma, 2013; Tynes at el., 2016). Social media allows a unique way for individuals to access the conversation in times of protest, including allowing for ways to share information, plan protests and other events, discuss beliefs, and share personal experiences (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Tynes at al., 2016). "The interactivity, speed at which messages can be transmitted, and virality (coupled with video, text, and images) enhance creative power and potential to affect social change" (Tynes et al., 2016, p. 36). Social media has been

used to increase the visibility of events, for example highlighting the death of Trayvon Martin

and concerns over systemic brutality against Black bodies, and to highlight the potential for

individuals to take action toward social change through digital technologies (Tynes et al, 2016),

Social media is a space for empowerment as well as a space to embrace one's multiple

social locations (Lindsey, 2013). Through social media, social justice organizers and advocates

often use their own intersectionality to highlight the multiplicity of oppression (Crenshaw et al.,

2015). This "digital intersectionality" (Tynes et al., 2016) allows for

> countering dominant discourses [to] occur [] on social media as conversation is
>
> intersectional, multidimensional, and less restricted. This enables users to effectively
>
> "talk back" and mobilize around topics outside of the view of the mainstream, until they
>
> go viral, at which point they gain the desired attention of the media (Tynes et al., 2016, p.
>
> 33).

Through Twitter and other online movements, popularization of phrases dedicated to improving

the condition of oppressed groups have proliferated, including #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and

#SayHerName.

> The use of hashtags is performative in nature (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Tynes et al., 2016).
>
> In addition to providing a filing system, hashtags simultaneously function semiotically by
>
> marking the intended significance of the utterance. Similar to the coding systems
>
> employed by anthropologists, hashtags allow users to not simply 'file' their comments
>
> but to performatively frame what these comments are 'really about,' thereby enabling
>
> users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015,
>
> p. 5).

Tynes and colleagues (2016) argue that not only can hashtags bring people together around an issue, but they can also group perspectives that are dissimilar to one another within one stream of conversation.

It was through the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, that the Black Lives Matter Movement gained popularity and attention. The movement was founded by three queer-identifying Black women; Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Each of these women was positioned through their unique identity to highlight areas of intersectionality and multiple identities as they fought to eradicate violence and racism towards Black individuals. While this movement is critically important in highlighting systemic injustice against Black bodies, it is also necessary to remain cognizant of the ways that the movement, which has shifted to be largely about placing Black men as the subject of care, has all but erased the roles of these women in organizing, rallying, and building the movement (Tynes et al., 2016). Similarly, the role of White actress Alyssa Milano as the face of #MeToo, rather than Tarana Burke, the civil rights activist who initially coined the term, speaks to the ways that marginalized individuals often continue to be marginalized, even in in cases where their ideas proliferate and take hold of public space.

Much of the information about intersectionality and the internet is focused on race, and there is little critical scholarship about feminism online (Daniels, 2015), despite the fact that the Internet has been used as a space for feminist organizing since the mid 1990's (Veronica Arreola cited in Daniels, 2015). Daniels (2015) argued that online feminism has often been limited to White liberal feminism, and warns about the lack of space for race and other types of identities in online feminism. When online feminism does bring the views of individuals on margins into the center, it is often feminists of color who create the hashtags that highlight intersectional themes (Daniels, 2015; Loza, 2014). The history of activism on the internet has shown the propensity to

erase individual stories and experiences while at the same time fighting for broader social change. Given the ease with which individual stories have been removed from the narrative, future studies of online activism have an unspoken duty to explore and bring individual stories and experiences to light.

Identity and Social Media

Social Media and Identity Construction

Technology has altered the way we interact and communicate with one another by critically changing the ways in which people present themselves online, thereby allowing a way to create a new version of the self (Davis, 2010). Technology has forced us to expand and redefine what it means to be a human and how we represent this humanity to others (van Doorn, 2011). SNSs function as an erasure of the boundary between private and public, between the offline and online self (van Doorn, 2010). Boyd (2008) argued that individuals on social networking sites "write [themselves] into being." This process is begun through the construction of a profile including, depending on the site, a profile picture, expression of likes, preferences, and friendships. The process of "writing oneself into being" is perpetuated through status updates, sharing of links and news stories, uploaded photos, and "liking" or commenting on others' profiles (boyd, 2008). This new social space allows for the assertion of individuals' own voice and point of view, while at the same time, complying with social convention in that space.

SNSs are "nonymous" spaces, or non-anonymous, personalized spaces, where individuals can socialize with and maintain connection to people they know in an offline setting (Manago, 2014; Zhao et al., 2008). In other words, people do not typically just invent an entirely new self online. What they can do is curate the version of the self that they choose to present to the world. Most SNSs enable participants to tell digital stories of the self, using written text, visual images

like photos and artwork, and inclusion of music and videos to share their lives (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). SNSs allow users to share many aspects of themselves, including, but not limited to: name, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, income, sexual orientation, relationship status, personal preferences (e.g. movies, music, books), political affiliation, physical characteristics (e.g. height, weight, body size and type), place of birth, residence, education, mood, occupation, employer, daily habits and routines (e.g. drinking/smoking behaviors, regularly frequented shops or restaurants), heroes, and friends (not just numbers and identities, but also rank order) (Davis, 2010).

In addition, SNSs allow users to share a profile picture of themselves as well as a series of other photos and digital images. Profile pictures are one of the immediately visible performances of self in SNSs, and typically represent individual identity in a visual way (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

> Multimedia bodies consist of an amalgamation of (hyper)text, digital photos and appropriated webcam images, making the link to their physical counterparts more visually explicit. Yet… the multimedia body…conjures up an 'iconic presence' that is not just a copy of the absent 'real' physical self but exerts a sense of differential agency within the network. (van Doorn, 2011, p. 535)

In an analysis of the SNS MySpace, Davis (2010) found that self-presentation is predominately overt as opposed to covert – it is an intentional way of portraying the self and bringing to life an image and a virtual body that represents an individual.

Due to the very nature of SNSs, the self and the social environment are inextricably linked (boyd, 2004; van Doorn, 2011). Social media allows individuals to have more control over the ways that self-presentation is received, negotiated, and understood by others (Davis,

2010). Virtual spaces do not mean that things are unreal, but rather that they are not concrete (van Doorn, 2011). "The virtual world is permeated by the (raced, classed, and gendered) offline reality of its occupants" (Davis, 2010, p. 1107). This means that people do not typically transcend bounded identity categories online that they inhabit in offline contexts. While identities are crafted for social media, they do not exist in a vacuum. People do not tend to invent entirely new versions of the self for social media. Wilson, Gosling, & Graham (2012) found a high correspondence between personality traits of Facebook users between both their online and offline personalities.

The process of writing the self into existence is not done alone, but rather, is created through public conversations with others on the sites and through feedback of one's network (boyd & Heer, 2006; Manago, 2014). Identity construction is an interactive performance – a process negotiated between the user (actor) and their network (audience) (Davis, 2010). The actor gives meaning to the self in relation to an audience (Papacharissi, 2012). People perform their identities by using repetitive behaviors associated with their social roles to "claim agency and negotiate power within social structures and imaginaries" (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 1990). In a study of identity performance on the SNS Friendster, boyd and Heer (2006) found that individuals engage in an iterative and interactive process of constructing themselves and others through their profiles and interaction with their social environment. The researchers further argued that through social media, people learn norms not through physical presence, but through interpretation of text, images, and videos that make up individual profiles. Van Doorn (2010) argued that the meaning derived from these profiles then is not created solely through individual performance, but is the result of the social interaction between participants of a given platform, where participants are able to add value and meaning to others' profiles and pages by

commenting or adding other images, texts, or videos to each other's profiles, thus altering each individuals' "digital body."

People also learn how to perform their identities through online social conventions. Social networking sites allow for a different type of stage for identity performance through their ability to connect individuals to larger networks of people and situations, and providing a new venue for audiences to witness self-performance (Papacharissi, 2012). In a study of Facebook behaviors, Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais (2009) found that individuals' levels of self-disclosure via SNSs was influenced by their connections' levels of disclosure, with people disclosing more when their contacts also trended toward disclosure. Construction of a profile or page allows individuals to both craft and share their identity and relationships. Conversely, social media allows individuals to learn a lot about people that they don't know very well (Manago, 2014). In this way, SNSs build the foundation for not only individual identity development, but also social interaction.

The proliferation and popularity of social media sites positions each individual at the center of their social networks (Manago, 2014), and positions SNS as a relevant place to explore performance of self, particularly body representation and sexuality in digital culture (Van Doorn, 2010). De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) hypothesize that "networked publics could change the way youth cultures experience and act on intimacies, gender, and sexuality" (p. 569). "The everyday performative practices that take place in the various [SNS] platforms featuring user-generated content ask us to reassess the boundaries between…the increasingly porous borders between gendered bodies and media technologies which mutually shape each other's formations" (van Door, 2011, p. 538). Given the possibility for reorganizing the ways that youth both

understand their own identities and engage with the world, it is important to study how they perform relationships, gender, and sexuality in their SNS use.

While there has been an increase in scholarship about how people perform their identity through social media, important gaps remain in the research. Typically, studies of identity construction on social media are textual analysis of content that do not incorporate exploration or analysis of subjective experience of participants.

Constructions of Gender in an Online Context

Butler argued that gender is produced and performed through repetitions and reenactments of gender norms (Butler, 1993). Further, these norms are not arbitrarily selected, but are created as part of a cultural set of expectations that allows for a limited range of acceptable gender performance. She defines the 'heterosexual matrix' as "a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender… that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler, 1999, p. 194 as cited in van Doorn, 2010). One area in which individuals perform their identity, particularly in relation to their gender, is on SNSs. Despite the fact that gendered identity formation is a large part of overall identity creation on SNSs, there is a limited, though expanding subset of research on gendered SNS use.

Noble and Tynes (2016) suggest that "culturally situated and gendered information technologies are affecting the possibilities of participation with (or purposeful abstinence from) the Internet" (p. 4), thereby affecting the very way with which gendered individuals engage with online spaces. Van Doorn (2011) explained "it presently makes sense to conceive of gender and sexuality as partly 'virtual' phenomena; they are not concrete, materially existing entities, but

rather constitute a variety of events, affects, ideals, and regulatory norms that are repeatedly *actualized* in material-discursive practices" (p. 534). Van Doorn's (2011) research suggested that most interaction with SNSs enabled users to reinforce, rather than challenge, preexisting boundaries that determine what is appropriate for gendered and sexualized behavior. Cook and Hasmath (2014) explored the difficulty that women face navigating performance of the self with socially accepted ideals of gender. In their study of the construction and performance of gendered identity through Facebook use among women who were engaged in a social activist movement, they identified that women are forced to negotiate between undesirable positions of identity between hyper-sexualization and complete abstinence from sexuality (Cook & Hasmath, 2014). In each of these studies, researchers have found that gendered identity on the Internet tends to comply with social standards and expectations around gendered behavior.

While the Internet is often a platform in which women conform to expected depictions of their gender and identity, it can also be used to resist dominant constructions of gender (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Renold & Ringrose, 2012). In a case study of one group of Dutch friends' MySpace accounts, van Doorn (2010) found that traditional masculine/feminine dichotomies were not present and that affection performance changed over time and between participants. Yet, other studies have found that gender roles and norms tend to be traditionally followed and that heterosexual practices are typically upheld through SNS use. Due to these contradictory theories about how use of SNSs relates to the performance of gender and identity, more research is needed to determine how women think about the decisions that go into their activity on these sites.

Not only might gender influence identity construction on the Internet, it also may determine how one interacts through SNSs. Individuals engage differently with social media

based on their gender identification. In a textual analysis of teen social media commenting

behavior, researchers found that teen commenting on social media content is a gendered practice,

where teens adhere to their biological sex and performative gender (De Ridder & Van Bauwel,

2013).

Taken together, these studies suggest that gendered messages affect not only the *what* of

social media posting, but also the *how*. This speaks to a need to better understand how

individuals engage with and think about their gender expression in social media.

Interpersonal Relationships in an Online Context

The performance of identity, including bodies and sexuality is a large part of self-

presentation for people in all social interactions, including through online interaction. One space

where people are increasingly engaging in relational interactions is through social media

platforms. Through their participation in social media, individuals have access to a relatively

new space for social interaction and social connection – a space that requires constant thought

about presentation of and performance of bodies and sexuality. Studies indicate that having

interactions on social networking sites may also lead to positive associations among supportive

interactions, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction (Oh et al.,

2014). This study suggested that online interaction can have a profound impact on social

functioning and highlights a need to better understand how online presentation can affect

relationships, self-concept, and self-esteem.

Social changes in U.S. are occurring due to the prevalent use of social media. People are

engaging in relationships differently than they ever have before because SNSs have redefined

and re-conceptualized how people practice interpersonal relatedness (Manago, 2014). The use of

SNSs has simultaneously reduced the amount of interpersonal communication in the home while

increasing access to a wider array of social environments (Pantic, 2014). One way social media achieves this is allowing for constant, 24/7 access to social connection that is impossible in an offline world. Another way social media does this is because it has increased the size of people's networks (or at least the capacity for network), and allows individuals to identify as part of different groups with a variety of identities (Davis, 2010). SNS sites typically allow individuals to connect through friend or connection lists, and allow people to comment both publicly and privately on others' stories as well as share their own updates (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013) – they are involved in each other's lives in a way that was previously impossible. Through this increased possibility for interaction, SNSs have organized people into networks of connection and sharing (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013) while at the same time increasing individual reliance on others to validate identity, affirm value, and increase feelings of self-worth (Manago, 2014)

SNS may have less relevance about group membership with SNS community than personalizing connection with others (Manago, 2014). People may have larger friend networks through SNSs than in offline contexts, but often these relationships are anchored in offline friendship or affiliation, thereby extending every day in-person experiences into digital settings (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Manago, 2014; van Doorn, 2011). Often, online socialization is rooted in and an extension of offline shared experiences and in-person interaction (van Doorn, 2010). Studies repeatedly have found that for college students, motivation for SNS use is rooted in maintaining connection with offline friendships as opposed to meeting new people (e.g. Reich et al., 2012). Facebook use was predicted by desire for popularity more than by need for social stimulation, belonging, or interest in knowing what friends were doing (Utz et al., 2012). Individuals who reported using SNSs to enhance offline relationships rather than replace them

were associated with positive outcomes like decreased loneliness and increased social support

(Blais et al., 2008; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010, Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

SNSs allow for different types of social relationships and connection than previously

existed. They allow for connection of one-to-one, many-to-many, and one-to-many (Davis,

2010).

> While previously, we were limited by interacting only with those with whom we could
>
> have physical contact with, now youth in the digital age are learning to nurture and tend
>
> their relationships through a one-to-many style of interaction that emphasizes individual
>
> expressions, as they broadcast self-expressions on social networking sites, they are
>
> experiencing themselves as a public brand or image that is appropriate for, and appealing
>
> to, large online networks. (Manago, 2014. P 4-5)

SNSs allow for constant human contact but paradoxically may also be associated with more

fleeting social contact (Manago, 2014).

In many regards, interaction via social media is very different than in offline connections.

One such way is that rather than immediate response, SNSs allow for asynchronous

communication, where people have time to edit, reflect, and craft the messages they post to their

networks and to increase control over self-expression in a way that doesn't exist in real-time

face-to-face interaction and, at least in theory, allows people be less vulnerable to being

incorrectly interpreted or understood (Davis, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This gives

individuals increased control over self-presentation in social settings (Davis, 2010). There is a

back and forth and interaction between individuals through social media that is both similar to

and very different from in-person interactions.

With social grooming on social networking sites, the individual independently traverses through the announcements and photos broadcast by people in their personalized networks. This involves observing others' activities for entertainment or information, posting announcements or offering commentaries in response to others' broadcast activities, and generally maintaining a reputation to friends by way of the self-expressions posted on these network excursions. (Manago, 2014, p. 4)

Studies have also suggested that there is a difference in the goals and use of social media among individuals depending on their mental health and feelings of belonging. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) studied college students' perceptions of social presence in Internet use. They found that students who identified the Internet to be a social environment that was warm and friendly used the Internet for different purposes than students who felt less secure in face-to-face social contexts. This suggests that the Internet is one way for college-aged individuals to engage in social interaction that they might not otherwise do in an in-person interaction.

College students and young people also use social media to share and tell stories about their relationships and sexuality (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Ito et al., 2010; Manago et al., 2015). SNSs allow an increased focus on peer relationships (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011) and allow for individuals to express intimate stories of friendship and romance in ways that are increasingly public and performative (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Adolescents and college students use online displays of affection in the context of romantic relationships to portray themselves as loving individuals who are worthy of affection (e.g. Manago, 2014).

SNSs are a space to perform relationships, but relationship quality may also be affected by how individuals choose to interact via SNSs. In a study of adolescents' Internet use, individuals who used Internet for messaging and social connection had more positive intimate

relationships than those who used the Internet for gaming or entertainment (Blais et al., 2008). College students also use social media to express sexuality (Manago et al., 2008). "Social networking sites are popular venues for adolescents and young adults to curate flattering images of themselves and post sexually provocative photographs to garner attention and validation" (Manago et al., 2015, p. 1).

SNSs may be a particularly valuable place for individuals from sexual, ethnic, or other minority groups to learn more about others with similar identities as themselves and gain social access to others with similar identities (Manago, 2014). SNS use allows individuals to customize their social environments based on their individual needs (Manago, 2014).

Involvement in social media not only affects online relationships, but can also affect offline relationships and functioning. Conclusions about the effects of spending time on SNSs are mixed. One study found a negative correlation between time adolescents spent with peers online and time spent with parents (Lee, 2008). In contrast, other studies have shown that the amount of time that an individual spends using Facebook is correlated to their involvement in college life as well as increased sense of connection to pre-college friends and networks from home (Manago, 2014). Additionally, SNSs may facilitate social interaction. Barkhuus & Tashiro (2010) found that Facebook allowed for a noninvasive way to extend invitations to offline social gatherings, thereby increasing connection to new acquaintances (Manago, 2014). Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen (2012) found that college students who reported feeling socially rejected, depressed, and anxious exhibited fewer anxious-depressive symptoms a year later when they had a higher volume of comments on their Facebook profile pages. Each of these studies suggest that what individuals do online affects their offline lives in multiple ways. However, these studies fail to take into account the user's intent in involving themselves in social media, and what they hope

to get out of it. Future studies would benefit from exploring the intent behind social media use and explicit hopes associated with choosing to post on social media.

Any discussion of relationships between individuals must necessarily explore how power is experienced between those individuals. Social media is a place to evaluate social standing relative to peers (Livingstone, 2008; Manago et al., 2015), where power is created based on the number of friendships that an individual has (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Yet studies that question power differentials in social networking are lacking, particularly any inquiry into what identities other than number of friendships equate to power. Indeed, there is very little research about power and difference or gender and sexuality in SNS use, and those studies that do explore these issues tend to be textual analyses and observational case studies as opposed to including actors' own perception and interpretation of their and others' behaviors (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

Online identity formation, through the expression of gender, sexuality, and relationships, is a relatively new area of exploration that has the potential to impact individuals in both online and offline contexts. "As they observe and post photos on social media, young people are forging a sense of self through social constructions of visual standards of self-worth" (Manago et al., 2015, p. 3). Studies to explore this type of identity construction are still in their infancy, and there is a relative dearth of literature that explores individuals' intent and perception of their own online behaviors as they relate to relationship formation, and identity development and expression.

Present Study

We are at a critical moment in U.S. history around visibility of women's rights. This increased attention on the experiences of women is heightened, and often highlighted by the

relatively new space that the Internet and social media provide with regard to initiating and mobilizing social movements. Fourth wave feminism, with its focus on equality for all and its presence in an online setting as the loci of change and mobilization (Solomon, 2009), has opened up new ways to communicate around topics that affect women, including sexual harassment, violence, and violations of rights. This area is of particular interest not only because of the frequency of social media use in general, but also because of the potential effects of online communications in real world functioning. "As new media technology expands, it is increasingly important that research takes into account the perspectives of the media users/producers being studied and the interconnectedness between online and offline spaces" (Steele, 2016, p. 74).

Social media as a means of communication and relating is relatively new. As such, research about various aspects of social media is still in its infancy. There are many gaps in the literature about the nature and effects of social media use. While many studies explore messages about women's gender and sexuality, few use qualitative methodology to identify the ways that contradictory messages are understood and acted upon through social media use. The paucity of studies documenting women's online experiences results in inadequate understanding of the nuances of how these contradictions are experienced and how women approach and negotiate their online social worlds, particularly concerning issues of gender, sexuality, and bodies. Previous internet studies have not focused on intersectionality as it relates to social media use. The limited research that has taken an intersectional perspective to explore women and age is typically observational in nature, and does not allow for women's own voices and interpretations to help inform the knowledge being developed in this area.

This present study aims to fill these gaps in the existing research by exploring how emerging adult women make meaning of the messages that they receive about their gender, their

bodies, and their sexuality, and how these messages influence their online relationships and their performance of body and sexuality on social networking sites.

This study bears in mind that emerging adult women are uniquely situated to be the subject of inquiry in this study. There is a documented history of women using internet in different ways and for different end goals than men (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b; Barker, 2009; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Korn, 2016). For example, research indicates that age is a factor in when, how, and why individuals use social networking sites (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a; Rainie et al., 2013; Smith & Anderson, 2018).

This cohort of emerging adult women has come of age at a time when messages about women's bodies are changing. Social media activism is at an all-time peak, with many movements centered around giving voices to marginalized and sexualized women and with new media attention around respecting women's bodies in a way that has not been previously demanded in dominant U.S. culture. Women in this age group are coming of age in a time where debate about how to treat women's bodies has reached a national stage largely due to the 2016 presidential election, and recent endeavors to hold men accountable for inappropriate behaviors towards women. Furthermore, exploring how women engage with these messages and choose to represent themselves (either because of or in spite of them) takes on a new significance as online communication and social media use re-imagines the ways that individuals communicate with one another and engage with the ever expanding social world (van Doorn, 2011).

Frederickson and Roberts' (1997) model for Objectification Theory and Miller's (1976) Relational Cultural Theory provide the overarching framework that situates the present research in current social and political context. These theoretical frameworks are especially well suited to explore how self-concept and social relationships may be interrelated in women's use of social

networking sites. Utilizing OT helps with understanding how cultural trends around beauty, evaluation, and objectification of women's bodies influences how women view and interpret their own behaviors and actions. Using RCT helps with understanding how women's commodified and sexualized bodies may affect their relationships and social experiences. RCT also highlights the importance of psychological health and well-being, which may be affected by social media use and experiences of connection and disconnection through the internet. The present study will contribute to the scarce literature that explores women's perspectives and gives space for women's own narratives in understanding how current context and socialization patterns affect their social relationships in an online context.

In this study, I used qualitative inquiry to examine the following research questions: 1) How do emerging adult women understand the messages they receive about their bodies and 2) How do these messages influence their relational behaviors in social media?

The convergence between increased visibility of women's issues and the creation of an entirely new communication and socialization technology makes this particular moment in time ripe to study how emerging adult women implement the messages that they receive about their gender, their physical bodies, and their sexuality in the use of social networking sites. The completion of this in-depth analysis of women's social networking use around their bodies, gender, and sexuality has significant implications not only for gender and social media studies, but also may hold a key to understanding nuances about the mental health effects of social media use among emerging adult women.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative research is a form of naturalistic inquiry that is best suited when researchers want to get detailed description of a phenomenon. The aim of qualitative research is to answer questions of how, when, and why, rather than identify specific numbers or counts. Studies that are qualitative in nature are preferred when working with underrepresented individuals, as they allow for exploration into naturally occurring phenomenon without manipulation (Sandelowski, 2000).

The present study utilized qualitative descriptive methodology to explore social media use in emerging adult women. Using qualitative methodology allowed space to explore participants' subjective knowledge, allowing inquiry to help to understand women's experiences with a view toward social change (Westmarland, 2001). The use of individual narrative enabled the research to focus on the meaning that women ascribed to their worlds, valuing the varied and unique perspectives of each participant. This methodology simultaneously allowed the research to gain an in depth understanding of the phenomena associated with women's self-representation and social interactions on social media as well as left space for each participant's individual narrative and truth to come to light (Westmarland, 2001).

Paradigmatic Underpinnings – Constructivist/Interpretivist Paradigm

A paradigm is a basic set of beliefs that guide research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Paradigms are important because they identify and describe a researchers' worldview and how they interpret and act within the world, thereby informing how they see meaning and interpret their research data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Paradigms define a researcher's philosophical orientation and influence what is studied, how it is studied, and the ways that it is interpreted (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that a paradigm is made up of four elements: epistemology (i.e. how we come to know something), ontology (i.e. the nature of reality), methodology (i.e. the process of research), and axiology (i.e. the role of ethics and values in research) (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The way that a researcher thinks about these four elements determines their research paradigm.

Qualitative research is often conceptualized through a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. This is because qualitative research attempts to understand the subjective human experience, or the way that reality is socially constructed. The goal of this paradigm is to understand what subjects are thinking and the meaning they make of their lived experiences (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This approach places an emphasis on understanding the viewpoint of the subject rather than the observer/researcher (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Within the constructivist/interpretivist framework, research is conducted under the assumption of a subjectivist epistemology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This means that the researcher constructs knowledge through their own thinking as they process the data from their interactions with participants and text (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). It assumes that researchers own personal experiences shape the way that they construct knowledge and interpret the results (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Punch, 2005) and that the creation of data comes from an interactive process between the researcher and the research participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

The constructivist/interpretivist perspective assumes a relativist ontology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This means that the researcher believes in multiple realities of the phenomenon being studied, and that the meaning that is made of the social reality happens through the process of interaction between the participants and the researcher (Chalmers et al., 2005; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The goal of researchers within this framework is to retain a rich understanding of

the subjective meanings and realities of the subjects, and to identify patterns of meaning from within those subjective realities (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The constructivist/interpretivist paradigm assumes a naturalist methodology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This means that the researcher gathers data through a combination of interviews, discourses, messages, and reflections (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Researchers who embrace a naturalist methodology situate themselves within the research in order to acknowledge how their own personal experiences and histories influence the interpretations they make in their research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Finally, the constructivist/interpretivist framework assumes a balanced axiology. This means that the outcome of the research will necessarily reflect the values of the researcher, whose goal is to present a balanced interpretation of the findings (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). According to this framework, it is unreasonable to expect that a researcher has no influence on the findings. Instead, researchers in this framework should leave space to identify the ways that their own personal histories influence both the data collection and analysis process.

Research that is conducted under this paradigm is characterized by the following:

- The admission that the social world cannot be understood from the standpoint of an individual.
- The belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed
- The acceptance that there is inevitable interaction between the researcher and his or her research participants
- The acceptance that context is vital for knowledge and knowing.
- The belief that knowledge is created by the findings, can be value laden and the values need to be made explicit

- The need to understand the individual rather than universal laws.

- The belief that causes and effects are mutually interdependent.

- The belief that contextual factors need to be taken into consideration in any systematic pursuit of understanding. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morgan, 2007, as cited in Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 34)

The constructivist/interpretivist paradigm is most appropriate for the present study. This approach allows for the generation of a rich understanding of meaning from the participants. It gives voice to participants' points of view and the meaning that they make of their experiences, which is an important part of the feminist theoretical frameworks that informed this research. The belief in multiple realities allows for different perspectives to come across and does not force the final interpretation to take only one view on the meaning being made of the online experiences. Additionally, this approach allows me, as the researcher, to acknowledge how my own thinking and experiences shape the course of research.

The constructivist/interpretivist approach also allows for a methodology that uses multiple types of data. For this particular study, the ability to use both one-on-one interviews with participants as well as analyze photos and visual data of the actual pictures and texts of participants allowed for a richer interpretation of the findings. For each of these reasons, the constructivist/interpretivist framework guided this particular study and research process.

Qualitative Description and Content Analysis

Within a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, there are a number of ways to approach data analysis that would be suitable to the research questions. There are multiple ways to analyze text, among the most common are grounded theory and content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

Grounded theory is based in constant comparative analysis, or an iterative process of simultaneous data collection and analysis, and theoretical sampling, or the process of recruiting participants for comparative analysis that allows one to explore multiple dimensions of the processes of study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is best suited for situations when the research goal is to generate new theory to explain a specific context (Cho & Lee, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory has a clearly defined coding process, but this process does not guarantee that researchers will find any substantial theory at the end of their exploration (Cho & Lee, 2014).

While grounded theory would be one possible way to approach this research, using a content analysis approach to analyzing the data is better suited for this study. Content analysis' primary focus is on the content and contextual meaning of the language that is communicated by participants (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). The end goal of qualitative content analysis is to identify major content areas identified by participants to develop a more comprehensive theory. This general approach allows for the privileging of participants own words and narratives in the understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, content analysis provides a way to explore multiple types of text, including interviews, observation of printed materials, and narrative responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The approach allows a researcher to process large quantities of data and to be flexible in what is considered data (Cho & Lee, 2014; Schreier, 2012).

Content analysis is a flexible method for analyzing data. There are a variety of approaches to content analysis, including: directed, summative, and conventional content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005).

Directed content analysis is used when there is already existing theory and prior research about a phenomenon, but that research would benefit from additional description and clarity

(Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, this approach aims to validate and/or extend a preexisting theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Summative content analysis is rooted in interpretation of the content and exploration of the usage of particular language or text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It does this by identifying and counting specific words in the text so as to better identify the contextual use of the words. The findings of this type of analysis focus more specifically on words and less on the broader meaning of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Conventional content analysis is reserved for instances when the aim of the study is to describe a phenomenon when existing theory or relevant literature is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). "The advantage of the conventional approach to content analysis is gaining direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279-1280).

Of these three approaches to content analysis, conventional content analysis is best suited for this particular study because it allows the use of participant words to give richer understanding of an understudied phenomenon that is not well understood. Furthermore, because research has not previously looked at use of social media in regard to the intersection of gender and age, there is not a body of literature about this particular phenomenon. Given the dearth of studies that explore this area, conventional content analysis is the approach that is best suited to illuminate these new phenomena.

The objective of qualitative research is to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the area of interest through a textual analysis. Furthermore, qualitative approaches to research allow for the infusion of social justice into the research. The present study calls for qualitative analysis because the research is rooted in an interest in participant narrative around the question of social

media use in order to get a more in depth understanding of the phenomenon of emerging adult women's socialization through social media sites. In giving young women the space to speak their narratives about their behaviors the study falls within a tradition of storytelling. This study allows women's stories to be told and places values on the unique contributions and experiences of each participant. Conventional content analysis allows for the possibility of diverse responses and to make room for a set of perspectives that may otherwise not have a voice.

Sample

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through outreach to local New England area colleges and universities. Recruitment targeted local colleges and universities across the public, private, and community college settings. Outreach consisted of emails with attached flyers (see appendix A) to people in leadership positions (e.g. undergraduate deans, heads of psychology departments, leadership of women's clubs and organizations) at these universities and colleges. In addition to email invitations to schools and organizations, I created posts for local area women's groups on Facebook and in my private Facebook account, as well as solicited recommendations for participants from my network of friends and colleagues. Due to the social disruption caused by COVID-19 and the subsequent shutting down of in-person college classrooms and social spaces, I also drew upon my own personal network for access to college students they knew or worked with. Solicitation emails outlined the details and inclusion criteria of the study, as well as invited interested parties to complete a brief social media and demographic questionnaire.

Participants who responded to initial solicitation for participation were asked to complete a brief social media usage and demographic questionnaire before being considered for inclusion in this study. Choice of participants was determined based on the following factors: 1) met

inclusion criteria; and 2) reported their willingness to discuss and share their social media posts and online behavior.

Participants who would represent a range of responses to the initial social media usage questionnaire were contacted by the researcher. Interview participants were provided a $5 gift card to either Starbucks or Dunkin as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Participants

Participants in this study included 14 women who identified themselves as social media users. The inclusion criteria included the following: identify as female, be between 18 and 25 years of age, use social networking sites daily, engage in active posting at least once per week, and have actively posted about women's bodies and/or sexuality at least once in the past six months. Given that messages about bodies and sexuality are culturally situated and vary based on cultures and context, this study focused specifically on the experiences of women who were raised and socialized in the U.S. In total, 31 women completed the initial social media use form. Twenty-nine met criterion for the study and were contacted regarding their interest in participating in an interview. Of those, 14 women responded, and then completed, videoconference interviews. I conducted and recorded each interview. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, participants are referred to by an identification number.

Participants were a diverse group of women whose age ranged from 19-25, with a mean age of 21.07 years (see Table 1 for a summary of participants' demographic characteristics). A vast majority (n=11) identified as heterosexual or straight. Among the other three participants, two identified as bisexual, and the third identified as straight at the time of the interview, but has since come out as bisexual. Participants were primarily White (n=10), while two identified as Asian, one as Black, and one as biracial African American Pacific Islander. In terms of ethnicity,

six participants identified as White/Caucasian. The remaining participants identified as German

(n=1), White Jew (n=1), Russian Israeli (n=1), African American (n=1), Ghanaian-American

(n=1), Asian (n=1), Indian (n=1), and Hispanic/Latino (n=1). All of the participants had

completed at least part of a college degree. Nine participants were in the midst of their college

careers. The remaining participants had completed their college degree (n=4) and received a

master's degree (n=1). Participants either identified as being affiliated with Christian faith (n=8),

or being agnostic/having no religion (n=6). Women who participated in this study identified as

low income (n=1), working lower class (n=1), middle class (n=8) and upper middle class (n=4).

Participants were not specifically asked to describe their political orientation. However, most

described themselves as liberal or made statements that aligned them with liberal ideologies,

particularly concerning women's rights and the then-upcoming presidential election.

All of the participants identified as social media users (see Table 2 for a summary of

participants' social media habits). Two participants claimed that social networking sites were

absolutely essential in their everyday life, 11 stated that SNS' are very important, and one

claimed that SNS' are of little importance in her everyday life (See Table 3). Participants report

using Instagram (n=14), Snapchat (n=13), Facebook (n=11), Twitter (n=8), and other social

networking sites (n=6). Participants report a wide variety of uses for social networking sites,

including posting pictures (n=14), staying in touch with friends/family (n=13), engaging in social

activism (n=12), updating people on their lives (n=10), networking (n=9), reading the news,

(n=9), and making new friends (n=4) (see Table 4 for a summary of social media use habits).

Thirteen participants report that they have used social networking sites to post about women's

bodies or sexuality in the past six months.

Data Collection

Protection of the Rights and Welfare of Human Subjects

This research was conducted with the approval of the Boston College Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to implementation of the study. All aspects of this study were completed with the intent to protect the rights and welfare of the research participants.

Prior to designing the study and carrying out interviews, I completed an online research ethics and compliance training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative ("CITI"). I obtained a CITI human subjects training certificate to indicate familiarity with interview and study ethics. The co-coder and transcribers in the study also completed CITI training modules for human subjects preceding any review of materials.

Participants were informed of the nature of the study and the expectations of them prior to participation in interviews. Participants were provided the informed consent form via email before the interview and were required to return a signed copy of the form before the interview. The consent form explained that the entirety of the zoom interview would be recorded, including their image and any screen sharing they agreed to do. The informed consent process highlighted that no screenshots or identifying information would appear in the final report, and would only be used for analysis.

At the onset of each interview, I reviewed the information from the informed consent form with each participant and solicited any questions or concerns the participants had. In addition to clarifying the procedure for the interview, the informed consent form and verbal review included a discussion of the risks and benefits associated with participation in the study. Participants were informed that potential benefits included helping to get a better understanding of their own social media use including the motivations that go into their engagement with SNSs.

Participants were notified that there were minimal physical, social, and economic risks associated with participation in this study and that participants were allowed to decline answering any questions at any time and could terminate their participation at any time throughout the interview. I highlighted discomfort associated with answering certain questions about their behaviors and beliefs as being the main potential risk of participation. I informed all participants that I could provide a list of support and referrals for counseling services should they wish to have additional support following the interview.

Throughout the study, I took all measures possible to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Methods to maintain confidentiality included keeping records secure in online password protected files. Only the primary investigator had access to the consent forms and background information forms, which were stored as password protected electronic files. Any video recordings were accessible only to myself, and transcribers only had access to audio files during the transcription process. Final transcriptions of interviews did not include any names or places that were mentioned in the interviews. Participants were informed that only the researcher and the co-coder will have access to any transcripts or screen shots. No participant will be individually identified in publications or in any other documents related to this study, and participants were informed that the only personal information used in the final report was information that was included in the initial social media use and demographic information form.

Procedure

Safety precautions for COVID-19 necessitated that all interviews take place online through Zoom video teleconference. These meeting each lasted approximately one hour, and were scheduled at a time that was convenient for each participant. Each interview was conducted in English and digitally recorded. Through Zoom screen sharing, participants were able to share

their social media profiles with the interviewer and scroll through past SNS posts. No duplication of social media images was replicated in the final study. Quotes of participants' social media posts are used for illustrative purposes, but have been de-identified.

Prior to the interview, participants completed a brief social media use form (See appendix C) and a demographic background form (see appendix D). The social media use form was created using standards set by Manago and colleagues (2014) which are based in amount of time spend on the SNSs, the importance that participants ascribe of the website to their social life, and their level of active (i.e. posting) and passive (i.e. observing) engagement with social media.

Participants who completed the social media use form and met other research inclusion criteria were notified via email. An interview was arranged at a time that was convenient to the participant. Prior to their scheduled interview, participants were emailed a copy of the informed consent form and asked to sign the form and return it before the meeting. Before beginning the interview, I provided a verbal explanation of the informed consent form and solicited questions from each participant.

Interviews

Interview studies are a recommended method for learning rich and detailed information from participants about the ways that they interpret their worlds (Hill et al., 2005). They are particularly suited for studies where there is not a wide range of previous research, as it allows participants to frame the dialogue about their experiences. Because there are no other known studies that have explored the convergence of age, gender, and social media use around issues of self-representation, sexuality, and body image, this study used interviews to elicit a range of data and experiences without relying on a priori assumptions.

Most systematic interview studies us a pre-established, or scripted protocol for data collection. Hill and colleagues (2005) suggest using eight to ten questions for one hour interviews, with a possibility for probing and clarification as needed. Scholars suggest the utility of asking open ended questions (e.g. how did you decided what to post) versus closed ended questions (e.g. did you post in response to the #MeToo movement) (Hill et al., 2005; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Open ended questions are particularly important for allowing participants to reflect their ideas and their own lived reality. Subsequent to the scripted questions, probes for clarity were also open-ended and reflective of the participants' initial comments (e.g. can you tell me more about that?) (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The interview protocol for the present study (See Appendix E) was developed based on extant literature on gender norms and socialization as well as internet use in emerging adult women. Together, this previous research guided the research questions: 1) What messages do women receive about their bodies and sexuality, and what are the sources of these messages? 2) Do these messages influence how participants express and perform or present their bodies and sexuality in social media spaces, and if so, how?

Interview questions were guided by Objectification Theory, as a way to understand the experiences of women in cultures that trend toward sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This lens assisted in developing interview questions related to how women see themselves and how their own self-concept affects how they then choose to represent themselves to the world. Relational Cultural Theory, which aligns with feminist and multicultural thinking, provided a second guiding lens to understand how relationships move individuals towards mental health and wellness (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Together, these organizing frameworks helped create open ended questions that elicited information about the societal,

contextual, and personal variables that contribute to social media use and participants' own experience and understanding of the motivations of their online behaviors.

Data Analysis

Conventional Qualitative Content Analysis

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The goal of content analysis is to link participants' words within the broader context of their lived experience (Downe-Wambolt, 1992). Content analysis allows researchers to interpret meaning from the content of the data being analyzed without ascribing a priori theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This process entails an inductive approach, which is best suited when prior knowledge of the phenomenon is limited or fragmented (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Content analysis allows themes to emerge directly from the interview content, allowing findings to highlight participants' experiences, meanings, and contexts in the interpretation.

Conventional content analysis, a type of qualitative content analysis, is particularly suited to research when the existing theory or literature is scarce or limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), as is the case in the present study. Because conventional content analysis does not impose preconceived categories or theories on the data being analyzed (though it may be informed by previous research and theoretical orientation), it allows for the participants description and impressions to be emphasized.

Krippendorff (2004) suggests that the findings of content analysis are increasingly reliable with at least two coders. Accordingly, I enlisted the help of a research assistant to verify codes and engage in discussion with the research assistant and the dissertation chair to contribute to the analysis of research data. The coder for this study is the daughter of immigrant parents and identifies as a South Asian American, heterosexual cisgender female.

The conventional qualitative content analysis process begins with immersion in the data, with both the researcher and the coder reading through all the transcribed interviews multiple times to get a sense of the responses as a whole (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The next step is to read the data word-for-word to derive codes (Miles & Huberman,1994) by using exact words from the text to identify major concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers then made notes of our impressions of the initial analysis to identify categories of ideas and organize the data into content-related categories of shared meaning and intent (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This initial set of codes reflected shared themes across multiple participant interviews, with "categories [that] are derived from data during data analysis" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286). To derive these codes, members of the research team identified quotes from the transcripts that illustrated the ideas in question. After independently participating in this step, the research team met to discuss their initial findings. Finally, we developed definitions for each code and category that was identified through the textual analysis of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

During this time, the team further narrowed the domains into specific themes that helped to describe each of the broader categories into greater depth and level of specificity. We created labels for the codes. Disagreements about codes were discussed at length among team members until consensus was reached for the codebook. Identifying the domains and themes involved an iterative process of analysis and revision (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Through this recursive process, the data was categorized into specific themes that described the broader domains in greater depth. Codes were determined based on their ability to answer the research questions in conjunction with how closely they fit the data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Once the initial coding scheme was created, the

research team returned to each transcript and coded each individual transcript adhering to the list of codes (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The team met again to note any impressions we had of the data and any changes that needed to be made to the coding scheme. At this time, revisions to the initial codebook were made (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This process was repeated until such time as the coding scheme accurately represented the data and no new codes emerge from the initial transcripts (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992).

The initial set of interviews was limited to 12 participants, and two additional interviews were added to reach the point of saturation. Saturation, as described by Glaser & Strauss (1967) in the context of grounded theory, is the point at which data analysis no longer yields additional information (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008). Data saturation requires that researchers continue to add additional participants to a study until new interviews fail to produce new coding categories (Bowen, 2008). This process is subjective, and lacks systematization, and is dependent on the objectives of a study to determine what the data saturation level is (Bowen, 2008; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

The final set of codes was organized into larger themes based on similarities, and then grouped into domains (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Theme and domain appropriateness were determined by the extent to which they reflected the data without the incorporation of researcher interpretation or potential bias (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This highly iterative process resulted in the final codebook of definitions of codes, themes, and domains used to represent the data. At this point, we engaged in a final read through of each of the transcripts to sort them into the final codes and to identify illustrative quotes for each of the codes.

Standards of Quality

Cho and Lee (2014) explain that there are no evaluative criteria that have been designed specifically for qualitative content analysis. Unlike quantitative research, which addresses standards of scientific quality through the concepts of validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity, qualitative research assesses quality in a set of parallel ideas, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Toma, 2011) to identify how well-crafted the qualitative methodology is. Rigor and trustworthiness, then, become the standards of good quality research. Because the nature of qualitative research is such that researchers interact with participants in a way that could affect the outcome, the practice of subjectivity and reflexivity help to situate knowledge construction in context (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). Taken together, these standards of qualitative research help to ensure quality.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has to do with the credibility of qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). The trustworthiness of data refers to a number of areas, including social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and the appropriateness of interpretation (Morrow, 2005). Trustworthiness looks different depending on the research paradigm, though there are some areas of trustworthiness that cross paradigmatic boundaries (Morrow, 2005). Quality qualitative research should map onto the ideas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The goal then, is to be as objective as possible in identifying what is real and true, with the knowledge that the tools for data collection and analysis (i.e. the researcher) are imperfect (Toma, 2011).

Credibility, which is similar to the idea of internal validity in quantitative research, is used to identify the accuracy, authenticity, and plausibility of the findings. Miles and Huberman

(1994) define credibility as "truth-value" of the research, in other words whether the findings make sense to those who are studying, reading, or participating in the research. There are a number of ways to ensure credibility in qualitative research, which are more or less applicable to any given project based on the research itself. Engagement with participants over a longer lasting set of interactions allows researchers to build trust and get to know the participants, thereby allowing them to collect rich data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morrow, 2005). Careful and persistent observation allows researchers to identify the parts of the problem that are most relevant and suggest where to focus observation (Morrow, 2005; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Triangulation, or the process of using multiple different data sources to help ensure data is accurate and full, comes in multiple forms ranging from what data is collected to how it is interpreted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Morrow, 2005). Investigator triangulation refers to the idea of using two or more researchers to analyze findings for coding and make interpretation decisions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checks, or the use of peer de-briefing allows participants to provide feedback on the interpretations and conclusions of the research to make sure that the researcher is not drawing conclusions that do not feel accurate to the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Morrow, 2005). Finally, explaining how data was assessed including the process of data saturation all supply credibility to a qualitative study (Morrow, 2005).

Transferability, which is similar to the idea of generalizability or external validity in quantitative research, is used to refer to the extent to which a reader can generalize the findings to other contexts (Morrow, 2005). Further, the use of rich description in the analysis that not only gives voice to detailed descriptions of participant experiences but also the layers of culture and context of the participant and research process help lend credence to both credibility and transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In providing sufficient information about the research

context, process, participants, relationship between researcher and participants, and the researcher as instrument, the researcher gives the reader information to enables them to decide how and when the findings may transfer (Morrow, 2005). In qualitative research, transferability does not need to be generalizable to all other contexts, but instead, should be related to the big picture in a way that allows for researchers to make recommendations that can apply to others in similar situations (Toma, 2011). Miles and Huberman (1994) note that transferability refers to the ability of conclusions to have larger significance beyond just the study participants.

Dependability, which is similar to the idea of reliability in quantitative research, is used to determine that the research be consistent across time, researchers, and techniques of analysis (Morrow, 2005). Though qualitative research does not control the conditions of the research to make it more replicable, researchers can be explicit about describing the research questions, highlight parallelism across sources, be explicit about the role and status of researchers, collect data across a range of settings, respondents, and times, and use parallel approaches among team members for data analysis (Toma, 2011). Through discussing in detail the research methodology and design, researchers contribute to the dependability of a study (Toma, 2011). For this study, the use of a co-coder increases the dependability of the results. The principle investigator and the co-coder each coded the same two transcripts before coming back together to share our experiences and understandings and check to make sure that understandings and interpretations were similar across coders. Once we had determined similar interpretations of the data and understandings of each of the codes, we continued with coding the subsequent transcripts.

Confirmability, which is similar to the idea of objectivity in quantitative research, is based in the idea that research should, to the best of its ability, present the views of the researched rather than the feelings or biases of the researcher (Gasson, 2004; Morrow, 2005).

Confirmability has to do with relative neutrality of the research and is based in audit trails or how the study was framed, data was collected and analyzed, the researcher(s) being aware of their own assumptions, values, and biases, and the ways they may have affected the study, and in the consideration of alternative conclusions fully (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Toma, 2011).

It is through applying the standards of rigor and trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, that the present qualitative research is able to make claims of research quality.

Subjectivity

While quantitative research aims to be objective, qualitative research acknowledges that the data gathering and analysis process is rooted in subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). This research employed postpositivist strategies of frequency tallies and external checks to minimize my own bias (Morrow, 2005). At the same time, this research employed constructivist strategies of positioning me as a co-constructor of meaning, highlighting the role of researcher in meaning-making throughout the process (Morrow, 2005). In focusing on subjectivity, researchers monitor themselves self by making their implicit assumptions and biases known both to themselves and to the audience throughout the research process. To monitor subjectivity in the present study, I engaged in multiple processes, including member checking, monitoring of impressions and thoughts throughout the process, and reflexivity (described in more depth below).

Member checks are a way for researchers to confirm their interpretation of meaning with participants in order to certify accuracy (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). They involve allowing the participants to give feedback throughout the process in order to ensure that their point of view and intent are accurately portrayed. Participants were provided with a copy of their individual interview transcript in order to make any corrections for accuracy and intent. During these

member checks, one participant noted a change in her sexual orientation, which was noted in the final results. All other participants either expressed active agreement with everything they had discussed in the interview or declined to respond, indicating approval of the content of their transcript.

Reflexivity

Another way that authors acknowledge the subjectivity of their research is through the practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a way for researchers to share their viewpoints with their readers (Morrow, 2005) and to help ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity allows for the researcher to think about and better understand how their own experiences in the world affect their research methods (Morrow, 2005). It is a process of remaining connected to one's own biases, values, and assumptions, and to take into account the ways that context and positionality affect the research process, from conception of the research question, to data collection and interviewing, to data analysis and interpretation.

In this study, both my co-coder and I engaged in journal writing throughout the process in order to track our beliefs, assumptions, values, and biases. Journaling throughout the research process helped us to examine our own conceptual lens, identify assumptions of our research, and made space to identify the ways that our values and preconceptions affect all phases of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The coding team held weekly meetings to discuss reactions, biases, and assumptions throughout the coding process. In being open to and aware of my beliefs throughout the study, I could better identify the impact of my personal belief systems on the process. This openness to the idea that my positionality may affect the study allowed me to be in dialogue with my own perspectives and that of the participants and to make informed decisions about when and how to incorporate different perspectives from an intentional standpoint (Morrow, 2005).

Personal Reflexivity. My path to this research was shaped by a range of personal, clinical, and research experiences. Throughout the development of this study, I examined the impact of my own personal histories and positionality on the dissertation project, from the initial phase of project conception and design through the analysis and data interpretation phases.

The questions that are centered in this study emerged in part, out of questions that I found myself navigating with regard to how to integrate the messages I was getting from media about what women should be with my own evolving understanding of myself and my own identities. Coverage of the 2016 presidential election, much of which was framed by debates about women's place and acceptable behaviors towards women dovetailed with increased media coverage of sexual harassment scandals, culminating in the rise of the #MeToo movement, and piqued my curiosity on the question of how women make sense of the conflicting messages they receive about their bodies and what they should be used for. Together with review of extant literature and theoretical frameworks, my own experiences with social media framed this study and informed the development of the interview questions asked. Conception of the research question stemmed from my personal experiences being curious about my own, as well as friends' and acquaintances', choices about what and how to share of ourselves in online spaces.

Not only have I explored women's relationship to social media in this research, but I have been aware that I am also sharing the lived experience with my participants of being a woman who uses social media. As someone who participates in social media, I engage in the dance of self-presentation and judgment on a daily basis. I have seen in my own experiences how easy it is to make both quick and painstaking decisions about self-representation online as well as the ease with which passive social media use can lead to judgment and evaluation of others. This

research attempts to give voice to the struggles that women feel and begin to understand the decision-points that inform our social media use.

As a woman who entered college soon after Facebook became public to all college students, I have seen the ways that my life and experiences have been shaped by my own interaction with social media. I can simultaneously not escape the privilege I am afforded as a White, educated researcher, and the effects that social media has had on my own life (it is through social media use that I connected with and forged the initial phases of a relationship with my now-husband), while at the same time not being able to escape the marginalization and harassment I have experienced online, at work, and in education due to my gender and religion. The ways that I make sense of my own experiences necessarily affect the ways that I made sense of the stories that participants shared throughout the process of this research.

I have continuously explored the ways that my own identities and experiences could affect the way I engage in this study. As a White woman with great economic and educational privilege, I have thought about how these identities affected the research I did. They affected my access to participants as well as the way that participants perceived me. In fact, my own trustworthiness and whether or not I felt like a safe person for participants to share their experiences with, were likely defined by the outward manifestation of my identities.

According to the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm in which this research is situated, I acknowledge the ways that my own worldview and set of experiences affected the research. As a doctoral student in counseling psychology, my experiences as a clinician shaped the way I approached participants and enabled me to listen with compassion and deep curiosity to their experiences. Through similarities and differences, I sought opportunity for connection with participants and to learn with and from participants by highlighting their voices.

In light of the impact of my own background on the research question and design, I kept a record of my personal experiences and thoughts about my experiences throughout the research process. I attempted to remain alert to the ways that my own experiences and biases might have influenced the solicitation of data and data collection as well as the interpretation and analysis of responses. I explored areas where participants experiences resonated with my own, as well as took note of places where our experiences differed. I paid particular attention to the places where I noticed myself judging the images participants shared on their social media, noting times when my own interpretations differed from their stated meaning and intent. Rather than evaluate, I remained curious and asked more questions to better understand their social media processes. I hope that this genuine curiosity enhanced the quality of our interactions and made the interviews meaningful and pleasurable for the participants as well.

To counteract some of the unintentional bias that may enter the work, I implemented a number of checks on my process. These include: including a co-coder in interpretation, checks with the dissertation committee, and continued attention and refocusing on my research questions and theoretical orientation. While I noted my own experiences and opinions for myself throughout this process, I attempted to highlight my participants' words, thoughts, and beliefs in the data analysis and to showcase their own interpretations of their experiences, even when they diverged from my own, and to represent those beliefs in full throughout the analysis and discussion.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview of the Data

Analysis of the interview data revealed four broad domains related to women's social media use. These domains include: expectations of women, social media curation, effects of social media use, and activism and advocacy.

The first domain encompassed expectations of women's bodies. These included expectations around what bodies should physically look like, as well as expectations around how women's bodies should be used for sexuality. Participants highlighted some of the tensions around what bodies "should" be and how they actually used and experienced their own bodies.

The second domain included three areas in which participants curated their social media profiles. The first area reflected how women represented themselves. This theme highlighted the ways that women saw themselves as well as how they wanted others to see them, and the ways that they attempted to achieve their desired outcome. The second area concerned how participants tailored their social media consumption to fit with their own ideals and morals. The third area participants described included the social rules they follow around online posting and behaviors.

Within the third domain, participants described the effects of social media use on their lives. Participants specifically identified effects on mood, both in ways that it positively enhanced mood, as well as ways that it detracted from their mood. They also described the effects of social media use on their interpersonal relationships and explored how online and in person interactions both contributed to relationship quality.

The fourth, and final domain reflected participants views on social activism and advocacy. Participants described their own social locations, identified the privilege and power

associated with their positions as well as some of the limitations of their identities. They further explained when and how they sought to engage in social activism and identified the ways that being women, specifically, impacted their engagement with online advocacy.

Any analysis and interpretation of participants responses must be situated in the unique and historical time in which the interviews were conducted. In this study, data was collected between May and October of 2020. There were a number of historical and unprecedented things happening in the world at that time, including COVID-19, the increased visibility of racism and discrimination against Black and Brown bodies in the US, and the run up to the 2020 presidential election. Combined, these events created a landscape of new social media engagement and unique posting behaviors around advocacy and activism. For a study that explores both social media use and activism and advocacy, it must be noted that all of these events dramatically changed in the time immediately preceding, and throughout, the course of data collection. All results and responses must be understood with that lens in mind.

Domain I: Expectations of Women

This domain included themes around expectations that are placed on women's bodies. Themes explore messages about what bodies should look like physically, as well as when and how bodies should be used sexually.

Theme I: Expectations Around Physical Bodies

This theme encompasses the messages that women receive about what their bodies should look like. Participants identified contradictions between what is idealized by society and the messages they get about acceptance and loving all bodies. They also explore the power of bodies.

Aspirational Body Positivity (N=10). Body positivity advocates the acceptance of all bodies, regardless of size, ability, gender, race, or appearance. This message contrasts from the thin ideal that participants were socialized with.

> "I've been seeing a lot more positive messages about like whatever your body looks like, that's okay."

> "What I see is people being more accepting and saying love yourself, love your skin, love how God created you. That's a motivator where it's like 'you're right I should love it.' I shouldn't try to alter it through filters, I should just post it and let it be because that's authentically who I am, that's the complexion that God has given me."

> "Although now I think there's more social media posts about accepting all bodies and there's more of that coming out which I think is really great. Definitely when I first started Instagram, especially with celebrities and whatnot, I think it's hard to not see how skinny and fit they are and not want that."

Participants discussed the contradiction between the body positivity messages and messages around thinness and beauty.

> "My explore page is a lot of fitness things and body positive things that are going on right now so it's a mix between being proud of your body but you can change it if you want to, you just have to kind of have good intentions behind it, but you should always love your body too. It's this weird paradox."

> "It's okay to be bigger, it's okay to be this, it's okay. But also like why is there also somebody saying like it's okay to as if somebody needs approval to do it? I think it's a difficult line because you want to approve of all shapes and sizes."

Participants noted the difficulty of having or sharing a body that did not fit the thin ideal, noting that while there is greater representation, larger bodies are still judged by thin standards. They highlighted the bravery and atypicality of sharing bodies that are not considered meeting typical beauty standards.

"The more overt messages like explicitly said are: more body positive thinking, there's not just one good body type. I think more subtle or maybe even unintentional messages you get through TV and movies especially, or advertisements, that doesn't really tend to line up with what people like to say they think."

"In terms of body image, definitely media, through magazines, tv shows, movies, seeing that people who are much bigger or much thicker are always put in certain roles where they are made fun of and put down but then people who kind of fit the ideal body shape were always put on a higher pedestal."

"People like love to like praise Lizzo. She's amazing and like they love that she's open about her body but she's never the one that's being praised for being beautiful like other celebrities. She's praised for loving herself for being a bigger woman versus just being beautiful."

Body Expectations and Comparisons (N=14). The idea that bodies should look or act in a particular way, and the assumptions made about what good bodies are, was a theme that came up across participants.

"So I think growing up it was a lot of you have to fit into this cookie cutter mold of what is a woman and what does a woman do with her body."

"I think it's like fashion in a way. I mean, you look at like these supermodels from like, wow, like decades ago. It's like super twiggy thin and now it's like this ridiculous Coke

bottle look. And it's just like I think that changes, but we're constantly being told of what's attractive, what is going to get you attention."

"People were very outspoken about things. For example, "oh I don't like girls who are too tall," or "I don't like girls who are too dark," …so that was definitely where I heard a lot of messages from other people and then on top of that from social media."

"I think women's bodies…for so long it's been about other people so whether it's living up to other people's expectations of what a woman's body should look like or… manipulating your body to try to please other people."

"They should be thin, White, clear skin. I happen to be like pretty tall…and pretty thin, athletic naturally – so I didn't have a lot of the negative images directed towards me."

"You have a lot more pressure I think to be a certain size or a certain type as a woman then you are as a man… you have dad bods are cute and there's no equivalent for females."

"I think often on social media, the fetishism… it's just that people are like, oh, 'you're so exotic. Like your hair is different from both sides of like your community.' Because my dad's Pacific Islander, my mom's Black. And then they're like, 'oh, you're like a mix of both and it's this weird othering exotic category that people can just kind of really latch on you. And I think the flip side of that, particularly being half Black, we've seen with being recently going on like, like the abuse kind of that women can on social media for either being not Black enough... And what they put out there on social media can come under attack for both."

Participants noted a tendency for themselves (and women in general) to compare themselves to others. They noted the ease with which that can happen through social media.

Many participants noticed themselves comparing their bodies and experiences both to people that they know in person as well as to celebrities and social media influencers.

"I don't really follow a lot of people from my high school or my college that'll do that kind of thing or like look that way just because it's like I'm not friends with them and I don't wanna see it cause it'll make me feel like lesser than cause I don't look like that."

"I think it's easy to see other people's post and feel like I wish I looked like that, or I wish I had this thing or that thing. I think it's easier to make yourself feel bad by comparing yourself to stuff on social media than it is to feel good about yourself. You don't really compare yourself as much to, you wouldn't be like "oh wow I'm so much prettier than that girl" it's more like "that girl's so pretty I wish I looked like that."

"I follow some Instagram models and people who I think are really attractive on Instagram. And that I'm always looking at them, and that after that, I'm critical of myself."

Some participants even noted the way that messaging about what bodies "should" be is harmful, noting responses like poor self-esteem, anxiety, and unhealthy habits as a consequence of consuming these harmful and sometimes unrealistic messages.

"I have recognized that I don't gain from looking at that. It doesn't benefit me in any way."

"I see that image and that really gets to my head cause I think that's how I am supposed to look, that's how I'm supposed to eat, that's how I'm supposed to maintain my health and I understand on paper that everyone should love themselves but it's very hard for myself to."

"I had to take a break from Instagram during quarantine because it was too much with the beach pictures and viewing women's bodies and I was gaining the "quarantine 15" and I was like 'I don't need this right now.'"

Bodies as Instruments (N=4). A number of participants made the distinction between what bodies look like and how they are evaluated based on appearance versus how bodies behave and the things that bodies can do. These participants described the ways that their bodies are a tool for engaging with the world and accomplishing their goals. Additionally, participants spoke of how societal expectations of what the female body should be used for impacted the ways they understand their bodies.

"A lot of the messaging that I've received about women's bodies is that you are meant to be a maker of children. And your eventual role is to get married. And whether or not your career is involved in that isn't particularly important."

"I think 'oh, that's the body that took me around New York and that's the body that is that I have and that I care about and try to take care of.'"

"Think about everything that I am capable of because of my body and I think that's something I remind myself of a lot. Like the body I have lets me do things…it's important to me to remember that the way my body looks is not the most important thing about it."

Theme II: Expectations Around Sexuality and Sexual Preference

This theme encompasses the messages that women are socialized to learn around sexuality and sexual preference. Participants made observations around social convention, expectations of sexuality, and the ways that women navigate competing demands of their bodies.

Heteronormativity (N=9). Most participants noticed a tendency toward heteronormative expectations about sexuality. They note that the default expectation is that individuals are straight, and identify that on social media the automatic assumption is that women are heterosexual.

> "Especially with our heteronormative gaze on people – if I post with girls, and I'm straight, no one will ever be like 'are you dating her?' it's always with guys…. if you post with a guy, especially if it's just you and him, then people will be like 'oh,' or if you're going out to dinner with someone then it could be perceived as a date."

Aspirational Sex Positivity (N=7). Many participants discussed the shift toward sex positivity, or the idea of agency within women's sexuality and informed consent being at the heart of sexual interactions. While participants ranged in their own attitudes toward and relationship to sex, there was an overarching belief that women should have the freedom to remove stigma and shame around all sexual choices.

> "I think there's more openness about how if a woman has a lot of partners it doesn't mean anything compared to a man who has a lot of partners. It should be held as an equal. Overall people have been expressing that a bit more."

> "We should have our own choice, honestly, we're in a society that whether or not it's accepted, we do have our own choice…So I think that that's something that me as a woman I have been empathetic towards so even if I'm not the kind of person who's showing everything on social media – if I wanted to, I could. I'm not that kind of person, but when I see another girl doing it, I'm like, 'hell yeah, power to you!' Because you can and because you have enough confidence to do so but I don't think everyone is on that page."

"Women, our bodies are just naturally sexualized is what I feel, but now as I grow up and I see this whole social media wave of obviously women's liberation and owning our bodies, especially on social media what I see."

"Obviously in college there's a hooking up culture where you want to own your sexuality but oftentimes people mistake liberation of women's sexuality with having to hook up with numerous people, where it really just means you can choose to, like the freedom of choice."

Tension Around Performance of Sexuality – Being Sexy but not Promiscuous (N= 6). Many participants noted a contradiction in the messaging around women's sexuality. They noted conflicting messaging around a desire for women to be sexy but inexperienced, to be desirable, but not promiscuous.

"There's also sex shaming, slut shaming on the other end of that. But if you're not sexual enough, then you're prude."

"Women should be sexy, but women should also be conservative. They should go out looking nice, like for red carpet…All women should want to be them and then all men should want to be with them. And in this pull and tug - but at the same time, they'd be like, 'oh but she shouldn't be putting herself out like that.'"

"Women couldn't be too much sexual but they had to be enough sexual where you are only sexual for your partner or you can't have too many sexual partners is something that…Which is just a weird thing that you can't be sexual but you have to be sexual. It just didn't make sense to me at all."

"Women's bodies should be something that are sexy and you should be fit and beautiful but in terms of sexuality, you shouldn't be over promiscuous, you shouldn't have too

high a body count. I've heard guys say 'I wouldn't hook up with that girl, she's hooked up with too many people but they're hot.' So you want us to be hot, but you don't want us to use our sexuality? It's wanting us to be very pretty objects that no one can touch basically."

"The kind of sexuality, like the standard for sexuality for women is someone who, to you is sexy, but is not experienced. So if I was thinking of it from a male experience, I would want someone who is physically sexy, but wasn't experienced. Like I personally, I always think of it as a man, because obviously we have to, we're in a patriarchy…So if I'm a, if I'm a teenage boy…I love Instagram models like I think just for my own eyes and my own pleasure, like I would love the way that certain Instagram models look and they post pictures where it's like, yes, they're butt's showing and like they're very showy and I like it for my own eyes, but as far as what I would want in a partner… I just don't think we've gone past the idea that women should have less amount of sexual partners. I would want a woman who knows what she's doing in the bedroom, but doesn't have a lot of sexual partners, which logically makes no sense, but nevertheless it being the beauty standard…I want her to be sexy to me and I want her to be able to do things I want her to do for me sexually, but it's a turnoff if she has had multiple sexual partners, even if I have had multiple sexual partners. I would want a girl who is inexperienced in that route but knows what she's doing."

Domain II: Social Media Curation

This domain encompasses three themes: careful crafting of the persona that participants represent online, choices about engaging and following content that was in keeping with personal

value systems, and general conventions and rules for social media posting. Participants emphasized their own ability to craft and shape their online universes.

Theme I: Self-Presentation

All of the participants explored the ways that they performed their own identities on social media. They explored the rationale for presenting themselves in certain ways and the types of content they choose to share with their followers.

Social Media as a Place to Control Self-Presentation (N=14). Responses about how participants chose to represent themselves on social media indicated that they used their pages to perform their identity in a way that was meaningful for them and gave off the messages they wanted to portray to the world. Each participant described their own self-curation in how they post online. (For a view of each participants own words about how they chose to present themselves and the curations they made around their self-presentation, see Table 5.)

For some participants, curating the photos they uploaded to have a sense of cohesion and a similar aesthetic feel. Was an important part of their social media behavior. They often did this through the use of filters or through using captions to maintain a personal aesthetic and feel.

"Something that I've started to do since being quarantined – I have more time to play around with is like getting like an Instagram aesthetic so like all the pictures look cohesive together."

"I think the captions give you a voice in a way, whereas a picture, just a picture doesn't."

For others, this meant choosing what not to include on their feeds. This process included limiting the depiction of aspects of their life through intentional omission as well as cleaning up their feeds by deleting or archiving old pictures so that what remained for viewers was only content they currently endorsed and felt good about.

"But a lot of my friends in high school use their social media to unpack a lot of things that aren't necessarily so glamorous; their mental health, their abuse with substances or family abuse or things like that, and they're fairly frank with a lot of these things. But it's also mixed in with things that I would post on my Instagram, like graduations and birthdays. And I feel like they really encompass a lot of what people actually experience today in their life. And I feel like with me, I don't do the same. So it's a lot of, it's a lot of high points, like trips that I have been blessed to go on or graduations that I've been to or birthdays that I've been able to celebrate, but not necessarily the pitfalls as well."

"Like I mentioned with the filters, I know that had a lot to do with just the fact that I wasn't comfortable with my colorism or well the colorism is a huge thing but I would say that was something I never felt comfortable with. I was always picked on about it and bullied from other students about how dark I was, so that was something that I just felt like I almost could fake – I don't want to say the word fake, but I didn't have to be authentic with what it is that I posted. I could post a picture with a shade that was not, nothing extreme, I could make myself look a little bit lighter and I'd be okay with it. But now I'm just like 'no, that's something that's not me,' and I'm more comfortable in my own skin. It's not something that I would do now, but definitely in middle school filters was a huge thing for me cause I was like 'I don't want to show that complexion online.'"

"I feel like you can control your image more if you're just posting top half because no one has any idea of what your body looks like. I'll never post beach photos or anything like that too."

"But I would say that I very rarely post something that is super open and honest about myself."

"A year ago, I started archiving pictures from high school that I didn't think really like fit anymore. I was on my high school soccer team and I archived those pictures after a while because they just didn't feel relevant to my life anymore. But I didn't necessarily regret them. It was more just like they didn't feel like they represented me as accurately anymore."

For others still, they described an interest in having their profile give off a particular feeling. They wanted to represent things like levity, comedy, joy, confidence, being carefree, that was an aspect of their identity they wanted to represent.

"When I look at this post, I see someone that's accepting of their body and how it's changed and I see that I'm confident in my skin. I would say that it represents a woman that won't be put down again, a woman that has grown and that has become comfortable in herself. A woman that feels very strong in her culture. Those are the things that come to mind when I see this particular picture. It represents myself, it represents my culture and feeling comfortable in my skin, feeling comfortable in my body and how it's morphed into, how I've grown as a person not only internally but physically."

"It depends what I recently posted. If I recently posted with my boyfriend, then I might post with friends, just try to mix it up a little bit so my life isn't one dimensional."

"I think things that are gonna make people laugh, make people like me more or see me as a fun approachable human being. Feedback I've gotten before is that either I'm far too intense and a little bitchy or I'm too sweet and too kind, and that I'm perceived as fake. And so I think that both in my job and on my social media page, I try to dispel some of that in that I'm just me. I don't think those things are particularly accurate descriptions of me. But I guess there's an active effort to make sure that people don't think that."

"I try to get a balance between feeling like it's cool and interesting without being like too much."

"There's no reason you can't like be feminist and also feminine. Like you can do both. You can be whatever fun, twenty-something things you want to do and still be a serious activist. But I'd say I post less pictures of myself. Or they feel less gratuitous…I try not to be as explicitly posting a picture like 'look how good I look.' I try to do less of that, and do more of, 'I did an interesting activity on this day' or, 'I saw my friends this day' or, 'I was really happy this day.' I try to make it less image focused. But the temptation to post a picture when you look really good is still very strong and I still do it. I'd say that kind of competition between feeling like no one will take you seriously if you act like a 20-year-old girl, and like wanting to act like a 20-year-old girl."

Censoring Negative Aspects of the Self (N=11). Many participants described a strong desire to present themselves in the best possible light. This meant only including posts where they looked good, and not showing any of the bad or unflattering parts of themselves. Furthermore, participants discussed the role of editing photos and using filters as a way to hide or change parts of themselves they were unhappy with.

"Anything I don't want anyone to see – because I have things like draft, which are videos that I've made that I haven't posted – not because I don't want anyone to see, but just because I think they're silly and I like won't post them. Which doesn't mean to say that there aren't videos that are silly that I have posted, but I guess they're just…a bit too embarrassing or too personal videos that I wouldn't put out on the Internet. I think I am actively thinking as far as things that are in my draft and you can keep videos in your drafts that I don't post and then things that I do post that I don't want others to see."

"I think in terms of what it says of me, I was actually scared about the little bit of cleavage that I was showing, it's not anything, but I was kind of hesitant to post anything but I was like 'it's fine, relax, you're comfortable with it.' I liked the fact that you couldn't see my whole body in it, that's why I posted it too, just the top half, which is a consistent theme that I've posted in my pictures that I haven't realized. The only full body pictures are either far away like this one or like I'm wearing a jacket and stuff, which I never realized I did until I went back to look at it. So definitely the top half part and then I remember thinking my face looks kind of skinny, let me post this and I sent it to all my friends like 'should I post this? Does this look good?' I edited it. A lot of effort again."

"This is the [version of myself] that [my] followers get to see. That the people that [I] doesn't talk to on a day to day basis, if they just went to my Instagram, what they would think, who they would think I am? It doesn't represent the full of me but it's the prettiest, shiniest part of me."

"Your posts should indicate that you have it figured out and things are going super well. I remember during my job search, I didn't want to post anything ever because it just felt like my life was a mess and I didn't know what was happening or if I was going to have a job or make any money. And to post anything saying that like 'oh, yeah, I'm having such a great time with all my friends' would feel really inauthentic. But that's what you post is something that you are doing that is good and having a grand old time with your people."

Some participants described the process of judging themselves and their appearance and the negative self-thoughts that go through their heads around making social media posts.

"I spent a long time also just scrutinizing what I looked like and making sure it didn't look weird, even if you zoomed in…. I remember if you zoom in really closely, you can see the impression of the rug off the deck like in my whole body, cause I'd just been lying on my stomach in the sun. And I remember being really bothered by that and trying to decide if people would think that was weird or not. But I ended up just posting it cause at the end of the day, I'm like nobody cares. And I just have to remind myself of that."

"Well I don't post things that I don't feel good about. So if there are things that I either don't feel like my face or like my hair, or my body doesn't look that great, it wouldn't be posted."

Body Positivity Ideals Conflict with Beliefs about Own Bodies (N=4). While participants pretty uniformly lauded the idea of body positivity, many spoke of the conflict between supporting the idea of body positivity while still holding on to their own reality of unreasonable expectations and standards for their own bodies. They noted that it was wonderful for other bodies to be shared and praised no matter how they looked, but expressed a strong desire to fit into a thin and fit beauty ideal themselves and a hesitancy to share their bodies publicly when they did not fit a thin ideal.

"I have a weird connection with women's bodies where I believe that everyone should love their bodies, except for me. I think that everyone should accept themselves and should work out for health reasons. But being a woman, I have my own body but I also want other females to accept their own bodies. It's a weird disconnect."

"You know part of me wants to be all body positive and stuff but then another part of me is like 'well I don't wanna look like that on Instagram.'"

"I think they're both very present in my mind and remain contradictory in my mind... I think…the more body positive stuff you tend to attribute to other people, 'oh she looks great just the way she is,' the more mainstream media examples you hold yourself to that standard more but others you don't… I think definitely like I want to promote the kind of body positivity ideal and I think I do that, but again more so for other people. I don't post about myself specifically in that regard...If someone were to post a body positive post and a picture of themselves and I thought it was like really well written or really inspiring, I might put that on my story…but I wouldn't be the one to take a picture of myself and post it on my account …it's just easier to accept other people for who they are and not yourself."

Authenticity, Self-Love, and Self-Acceptance (N=8). While participants could be critical of themselves, many also expressed moments of self-love and acceptance. Participants reported pride in themselves, their appearance, and living in the bodies they have.

"I would say that those are the things I see on my page, my culture, being proud to be whatever color, being proud of the skin that they're in, and how to become more involved with things outside of their world and outside of our own individual world…When I look at this post I see someone that's accepting of their body and just how it's changed. And I just see someone that's confident in my skin. I would say that it represents a woman that won't be put down again, a woman that has grown and that has become comfortable in herself. A woman that feels very strong in her culture. Those are the things that come to mind when I see this particular picture. It represents myself, it represents my culture and feeling comfortable in my skin, feeling comfortable in my body and how…I've grown as a person not only internally but physically."

"It shows that I'm confident, I'm happy in my body, it's just a picture of myself so I'm front and center."

"I'm very appreciative of my own body… I posted initially because I look good and I know that I look good and I feel good in the picture and I feel good posting the picture."

"So for me personally, I don't feel that I should look a certain way. I am who I am. And therefore, it's like, you know, that's it. And I'm happy with that. I'm very happy with that."

For some participants, this also meant being authentically themselves in their posts, even when that part of themself fell outside of beauty standards or the ideal.

"It's kind of interesting because I look at my growth in a sense of comparing my Instagram of when I first had it when I was in middle school until now, I would say that my pictures on Instagram…I really took a lot of attention with it because at the time I didn't feel as confident, and I would do a lot of picture adjusting or adding filters, but now I think that for me I post pictures that truly represent who I am without any filters. I didn't really wear makeup back then, but I don't, if I do post some makeup pictures, not very often like I said it's for something formal, I would say I post pictures that don't have filters, ones that just represent how I look as a person without any type of filters and without anything to adjust the way that people see me online. I always have this thing where I want people to see me, how I look online is how I want people to see me in person. I just want to be authentic in that sense."

"I don't use facetune or whatever. I first of all don't know how. And then I just – that also feels really inauthentic in, like I would not want – like again thinking about my siblings, like my sister follows me on Instagram, and she's 13. So I also want to be like

"you can just be you" and "you can just like post pictures of just yourself. You don't have to use – you can use the filters if you want, if you like that. But you don't have to. And you can just be [you].""

Motivation and Rationale for Posting (N=11). Participants' motivation for posting on their social media ranged between individuals. In general, participants reported motivation that spanned two different areas: for themselves and for others.

Some participants described a process of posting for themselves. They loading content that was personally meaningful, that brought them joy, and that they wanted to remember.

"If it's…an image that brings me a lot of joy, I'll share it normally. Or if it's purposely – like it has a purpose to it, I guess, I'll share it."

"I think there are times where I just post something because I think it's enjoyable and I want to go back and see it or I want like my friends to see it."

"A lot of things I post, I post because I like them. I wouldn't post something if I didn't like it. If I didn't feel like it was in some way authentic to me. I think that's the main reason I post anything. And I guess that's the voice that pushes me past criticism of like micro-flaws that I see in a picture is me. And I kind of am, like say "no one is going to look at it that closely" and "you look fine" and "you're doing something you like to do." I think those are the main requirements for me."

Other participants described a process of posting for others. They did this to keep others up to date on their lives or important moments, to make others laugh, or to share new information with others (see advocacy/activism section for additional details).

"It's a compilation of me…it's a really messy collage. But I like it. But I think it's just this shift between what I wanted people to think I was doing versus what I actually was doing."

Seeking Social Validation from Specific People (N=4). Some participants noted that while they hoped to get positive reactions on their posts from all of their followers, they sometimes posted with particular people in mind. These participants spoke of the social validation of getting views or likes from someone in particular, usually a romantic interest, and the feelings associated with getting feedback from someone special.

"Instead of numbers [of likes] I go to see who specifically viewed it, I'm like did this person see this picture of me? I wonder what they thought of it. Not necessarily numbers because stories fluctuate a lot but more so specific people. I always check to see if certain individuals saw my post or if they didn't see my posts."

"There are times, now being one of them, obviously, where you're a girl and you like a boy and that boy follows you on Instagram and you're like, hey, like if I look really good in this picture and he sees it power to me, because that's just a reminder that I am a beautiful person, like you should give me a chance romantically. And there are…aspects of posting on Instagram that I cannot lie, that that's been reasons when I posted on Instagram, like, yeah I look really good in this picture. I would say, if anything, in posting at those times and posting on Instagram for two people, like I would say usually I only post on Instagram for myself. And if I have a friend in that photo, I post on Instagram for my friend because I like showing people I'm here if I put someone on my Instagram, I'm like showing people in the world, I'm like, here's someone I care about. They're pretty awesome. So in that instance, it's that person, but there are times where I

post on Instagram, that's just for me or there are times when I am romantically interested in boy, and I'm posting on Instagram for me and for that boy to see. So there's that sort of thing I would say factors into sometimes when you post on Instagram."

Sharing Meaningful Moments (N=10). One of the main ways that participants engage with social media was through sharing important events in their lives. While what constituted importance ranged between participants, it tended to cover things like vacations, special events, or special times with loved ones.

"I posted for New Years, when my friend came to visit me, when I went on vacation, when my friend came to visit me again. My freshman year I had posts for every single football game. From what I can tell, it's really just events like graduation in High School. So it's either events or a social aspect with a friend or just a nice picture of me."

"Me going to work and doing my job every day is not necessarily out of the ordinary. That plus also I don't usually take a picture of it. Like I made my coffee this morning. It's good. But it's just coffee that I made from home. And so I wouldn't take a picture of that. But the other day, I got a latte from Starbucks. And that was good because I left the house and I used my stars. And it's not just a thing that I would just regularly do. I like to take pictures of things that I want to remember… so that's what I take pictures of, and so that's what my content is geared towards. Of course Instagram is picture based. So I think at least for me, that is also what my timeline is, is people also posting pictures of them doing things that are not typical. Or things that are out of the ordinary. Cause the ordinary doesn't feel like anything you need to tell anybody about."

"I like to think of social media as more like capturing moments."

Using Different Platforms for Different Purposes (N=14). Each of the participants used multiple different social media platforms. While the preferred sites varied between participants, they each explained that different platforms had different purposes in their lives, depending on their engagement with the site and their messages they wanted to give and receive from their connections/followers.

"I try a lot harder with Instagram. Like I try to make my page look cohesive. I'm not going to post anything that I won't look like how I want it to. Whereas on Tik Tok, if I'm making a dance and share it just to my followers and not to be shared anywhere else, I feel like I will look like a mess and just be having more fun. Whereas Instagram I try very hard to put it together cause I know I have like a thousand something followers and I'm like 'kay, it needs to like look good."

"Facebook is more for me to just communicate with people from high school, from family members all over the world, and also to see what articles might come up, but Instagram is more representative of my thought process or what it is that I want to see or see being represented more in the world."

"I think they both do in different ways. I think Instagram is more true to my personal life and my personal experiences. Whereas Facebook is more true to my political thoughts and experiences."

"I feel like Instagram is that platform that it's casual, but it's also kind of both a business and a dating profile. I feel like it's not like LinkedIn where it's very professional and business 'cause you can still be your 'self' and it's not Facebook where it's just a page of you. Instagram is very interesting in the way, where it combines that casual and professional look to get that ascetic look and…I feel like it can be very personality

centric if you choose to go that route, but for connection. I'm just always like so intrigued by Instagram, because I can connect with literally so many people on Instagram, people I don't even know, people that I um happen to see out at a party or maybe at a club and I'm like, oh, I'm going to find you on Instagram and I'm going to message you like it's just very interesting how it's a network of everything you instructed, like literally anyone, you can message a celebrity you've never met in your life and they could potentially get back to you. It's just really interesting in that way."

Permanent Versus Temporary Content (N=11). Participants discussed the idea of permanence versus transience as it related to what they chose to share of themselves on social media. They described feeling as though there was more effort and intentionality that went into content that would be permanent on their main pages versus what would be fleeting in their stories.

"A lot of energy goes into a post, whereas a story is just two clicks and I don't really think about it."

"It really depends on my mood sometimes, just like feeling silly and I'll just post things like that on my story."

Most participants described the story function as being the space where they engaged with activism and advocacy, and their main page as being the space where they shared more of their own lives and likeness.

"On my actual Instagram it's more me having a good time, where on my story it might be things that are happening in the world right now, maybe current events or less so about activities I'm doing."

"I would say before Covid, maybe if it's a quote or something I'm just like 'oh it's important people know but I'm not gonna like post this on my Instagram,' 'cause I feel like that's not what my Instagram is for. I'm not really there to tell people 'you should feel this way about yourself.' It's just something that sticks with me, so maybe if someone else sees it they can screen shot it, put it on their phone, or they can save the post, you know archive it or whatever. But I think the difference is just that if it's something the resonate with me in the moment then I'll post it on my story but if it's something that I want people to see when they go on my page then I'll post it and it'll be a permanent post."

"I think stories is used primarily as…if you see something that you like or that someone else posted you reposting it, especially around the time of BLM and everything like that, there's a lot of like influx of like posting infographics and information and stuff like that, if you see something that you just feel is worth sharing. Sometimes too, I'll go out of my way to, sometimes I just don't care. I don't care as much about the stories. Sometimes there's something that I see on Instagram that I'm like, this is really important and I'll share it."

"For stories I post a lot more frequently, especially over quarantine, there was rarely a time that I didn't have a story up, either related to activism or something interesting that I've found on the explore page."

Censoring Parts of the Self Based on Audience (N=11). The extent to which respondents felt that they could be their authentic selves on social media limited their posting behaviors.

Some participants reported thinking about their family members who had access to their social media as a factor in determining what they would post.

"My whole family follows me on social media; like extended family, so I don't post anything that's too kind of point blank, scandalous. I don't really post with any male friends, like boyfriends or otherwise. I don't post pictures like if I'm clearly going out somewhere with low cut tops or crop tops or something like that because I can see my little cousins seeing it and I don't want that. I've heard, when I scroll through social media, I'm like 'why did this person post this?' and I don't want people to think the same of me like that so I really try to evaluate pictures before I post them and think: is this good? Do I look fine?... I just personally don't want my family or family friends to see that kind of side of me. It's not anything super scandalous, it's just that I wouldn't want them to be viewing that."

"I have some more conservative parts of my family that I don't want to discuss these things with, and so I think that is partially why I decided not to share."

"I definitely wouldn't share pictures like the one I showed you in a swimsuit. I would not share that. I would feel so awkward sharing that with anyone. Like my dad or something. That would feel super weird. Even though it's not an explicit picture, by any means. It's just a picture. But I would feel super embarrassed about it."

Other participants reported using multiple sites or having multiple profiles in order to maintain different versions of themselves that were accessible to different people. For many people, this line included using a platform where they were connected to family and using another platform where they were friends only, in order to maintain their privacy.

"I think it's mostly based on who uses what platform. It's kind of like how most of my friends don't have twitter, so I don't really interact with people on twitter. I more just view things. Most of my older relatives, even my older sister…she doesn't have Instagram, so it's more – I think it mostly just works out that way. But it does kind of work out well, I guess, if you want to think about it that way, because I can be more authentic and more complete…on Instagram. I can share more sides of myself on Instagram. And then on Facebook, it's almost more formal, in a way. Like I just share big moments in my life."

"There hasn't been any picture with desire to post [a picture with my boyfriend on Instagram], but also, again I just don't want my family to know that I'm dating him yet. But I've posted stories of him on Snapchat and stuff because my Snapchat is my non-family social media."

"So I will add my employees on Facebook – that is content that my grandma sees. And so I feel fine about that. But what that means is that the things I post on Facebook are always curated for that audience. And that means that if I'm feeling like I want to post something that's a little bit more of a stronger opinion, I'm probably going to do that on Instagram. That's more my friends. That's more just people who are my age. And then on twitter is where I do a lot of my complaining into the void of 'wow, like the world is the worst today and here's why.' Because truthfully, it's random people from college that I will engage with on twitter, but is not like a direct relationship."

"I'm more likely to post my own image on this – on my finsta because it's people I trust and people that I actually want to fully know what I've been up to. And so it's not as

curated. And it's just something that I think is helpful in keeping in contact with friends that I really care about."

Nuanced Messages About What is Acceptable and Expected Based on Identity Characteristics (N=9). Participants discussed the messages they were socialized to believe about women's bodies. These messages, when coupled with participants' own identity characteristics, gave them nuanced messages about who they should be, what they should look like, and what they should share online.

"Also with hair too is another thing. It's interesting because sometimes I look at posts where I have my natural hair out or I have braids, or maybe I have my hair straightened and I notice that those pictures with curly hair have likes, but the pictures with straight hair or my hair is braided, get a lot more likes. That's something that I've also noticed on my Instagram. I think the whole thing with hair is what people find acceptable when it's not as attractive as another thing I've seen online."

"I mean I think that being White, there are a lot of things that you don't think about that you get scrutinized for. No one really comments on White women's hair that much but Black women get that more."

"Now, being in college, I think that I kind of understand that there are just different kinds of people who like different kinds of races, which is just so strange, but feeling like there's a possibility that my race and ethnicity could be something about me that's attractive is just like really, really weird concept."

"I think that is the main thing people see is I'm tall and thin and White. I think it's shielded me from a lot of negative attention on the internet that I think I could have gotten. Like every once in a while, I'll see like a viral tweet or something about some

woman who is plus sized or some kind of roast message that someone posted on some kind of plus size person's page that's just really vile and mean. And that would never happen to me. And I know that would never happen to me…I think that I'm less worried, I think that part of the reason I don't use apps like facetune and don't make the extra effort is because I'm not worried about it as much. I know that I'm close enough to what is deemed acceptable that I don't have to worry as much about what I post and I don't feel as much of a need to scrutinize it. Although I still do, of course, but I think I feel less scared. I think it is easier to feel more confident about what I post."

Portrayal of Sexuality (N=11). Participants described a range in their thinking about how they performed their own sexuality on social media. Some interpreted questions about sexuality as being in reference to demonstrations of their sexual orientation on social media. Others interpreted questions about sexuality as being in reference to eliciting sexual desire from viewers.

Many participants felt as though they didn't share about their sexuality at all in their social media posts.

"I don't think I really say much about body or sexuality messages."

"I don't think I represent my sexuality on social media. And I don't know if that's gendered or not."

"I think about, I guess…when post, I don't think like, 'oh, how am I going to show the world what it is to be like me or I guess, like, represent my sexuality.' But I think if I post anything, it would be. I guess not like in the forefront. But from the background, just like be happy, just like post what you want, I guess, like post."

Sexual Orientation. Some participants thought about representations of sexuality on social media as a method of showing or describing their sexual orientation. Responses about social media consideration and sexual orientation differed based on how participants identified.

Many heterosexual participants noted that they did not think about the fact that they were showcasing their sexuality when they posted pictures with their partners. They outlined the privilege of not needing to think about what they shared of their sexuality in posts.

> "There's a couple pictures of [my boyfriend]. I think that the main expression of I guess of my sexuality, but I don't think most people really even view it as that because since I'm straight, it's just kind of default. And to a lot of people, since it's just like another picture of a guy with a girl doing something. I don't think it sticks out to many people as really expressing my sexuality. Like me included. When you mentioned how you show your sexuality on your page, I was kind of like, 'I don't, really.' But I do. It's just that I'm straight, so it doesn't' stick out since it's kind of normalized in such a big way."

> "Again, the privilege of it is that I don't think about it. Like whether or not I post with my husband, makes a difference. I see similar posts between my friends who have same sex partners, and I think that there, of course there is privilege in the absence of thought of all of that. But then also that this is not considered brave at all. And it's just like this is who my partner is and this is who I get to be married to."

> "I don't know… I think because I…identify as a straight woman… I'm very privileged in the sense that I don't really have to think about it. Like when I post, nobodies gonna think twice, question me or judge me, so I feel like it not as active as a factor. But then when I do post pictures that demonstrate my sexuality - I'm trying to find the picture from my

formal - like it's a picture where like I look really like I think I look good. I'm cuddled up on this person and it is showing my sexuality but it's not anything too crazy."

"Yeah it [posting a picture with my boyfriend] doesn't [showcase my sexuality], I don't think about it like that I guess."

In contrast, participants who identify as being part of the LGBTQA community noted how they considered their sexual orientation when determining what to post. Participants explained that their consideration about sharing sexual orientation on social media required consideration of the audience, and whether they were aware of, and accepting of, their sexual orientation.

"When I started dating my partner, I stopped [automatically posting Instagram posts to Facebook] because she wasn't out at the time and she had family on Facebook but not on Instagram."

"I identify with the LGBTQA community. And I have family members who are extremely conservative and would not be as accepting towards me, so I'm very careful about what I post on [sites] that they're on."

Sexual Desirability. Other participants understood sexuality as referring to the ways that they used their bodies to invoke sexual desire from others by giving off the appearance of being sexual.

"I don't think that this says much about my sexuality. I think that you can see I'm comfortable with myself. I think …I don't look like someone who's very like, like not modest, but I don't look like someone who's very sheltered, but I don't think I look like someone who's very, like, out there either. And I … I couldn't tell you what I perceive about my sexuality from these photos because I think I personally look good, but I think

that…maybe this says something about myself, but I think that is more attuned to what people think when they look at my photos more than what I think what I look at my photos. Like, I don't think I'm purposefully trying to make any messages about my sexuality with these photos, but if people see something about what it says about my sexuality, I think that that's up to their own perception and less about what the perception I'm putting out is.”

“I guess it makes me think more about how guys would view the pictures I post versus how girls would view it. Like if I'm gonna post a picture in a swimsuit, then I think of it like 'oh, like I was at the beach, this was fun. Like I look good. I feel like I should post this.' But then I always think about what others will think that may see it. Like maybe like a guy who goes to my college will see it and be like 'wow, she's like slutty.' Or 'wow, she's really showing off.' Like think of it sexually automatically. Or like a girl who I'm friends with will see it and be like 'oh, she was just at the beach. Like that's great.' I think that it makes me think more about what other people think about my body in general.”

“I think the main thing sexuality related that I really express is I guess comfort in my own body. I think I try to really portray that. Because I am pretty comfortable in my body. Of course not every day, and it varies, but in general, I am. And I try to show that by wearing things that I find interesting and things that I think complement my figure. And I guess I view putting the best version of myself, or the version of myself that I think is the most attractive, as kind of expressing my sexuality.”

Many participants equated sharing skin in social media posts with expressing their sexuality.

"In like the lack thereof - I just don't post things, like again, you can see all my pictures –
I have high necked everything. You do not see any kind of things that would be described
as like a sexual post. So I'm just – I'm a nice wholesome married woman that, you don't
see like anything that would be particularly – like that would be viewed as provocative.
Like it's just silly and like regular pictures. But I also don't wear anything that would be
considered provocative. So I guess I actively avoid and don't include posts that would be
considered sexual in my posts."

"For this picture, I spent a fairly long time like debating if I actually wanted to post it or
not because it felt kind of scandalous almost in a way, cause it's more skin than I usually
show online."

Theme II: Consumption

Participants recognized that while they curated the narration they gave of their lives, there
were ways that the content they viewed was also organized and selected. This theme
encompassed management of the accounts that participants followed and the ways that they
accessed ideas online.

Echo Chamber of Similar Beliefs (N=8). Not only was the content that participants
posted in keeping with their own morals and values, but they also noted the ways that the people
and accounts they followed also tended to echo these same belief systems. Participants observed
that some of this happened intentionally, by them choosing to follow people with similar belief
structures as themselves or gravitating towards friends with similar values, but some of it
happened through the invisible algorithms that social media sites employ around gearing the
content they show to any individual user based on their likes and interactions with other social

media content. This process of curation also allowed them to actively avoid content or pages that conflict with their belief systems and values by unfollowing or disengaging with that content.

"I feel like social media is very curated to the point where you only really see things that line up with your interests and what you view."

"With the Black Lives Matter Movement I'm following a lot of like, for example, Black artists that I have not been seeing their art, I've not been seeing any of those, so making an effort but again it has to be an effort. As you may have already gathered, I feel very liberal point of view and so I do not get the more conservative side of the feed so that's something that's shunned completely."

"Social media is curated for you. It's curated for based on your interests and, for example, my best friend who is gay, him and his partner…really love drag race. So…they've been getting into drag and learning how to be drag queens themselves, so they're obviously gonna get a lot more on their feed about drag queens, about shows that are happening. And that just enforces it even further. It enforces that idea again … I'm not practicing drag, so for example, I will not be getting those messages specifically. Yeah, I think it just goes back to the curation of what, of what you look at, what you're interested in."

Diversifying Accounts (N=8). In addition to the following friends and acquaintances that participants have in everyday life, they also discussed the ways that social media allows you to connect with people you might not have the chance to meet face-to-face in the course of everyday life. These types of connections and follows are more intentional, and do not occur solely based on happenstance and geography. The act of diversifying one's account was associated with learning about others and oneself through exposure to ideas. Participants

described a purposeful and intentional effort to diversify the accounts that they follow. In some cases, this was to expose themselves to new ideas or communities they would otherwise not encounter as frequently.

"If you want to upload a photo, it's like Instagram, but then there's also the option to follow people who you don't really know well and are in totally different worlds."

"I've been making a huge effort like the past maybe six months to diversify my feed. So I follow more plus sized or people of color of trans women. And I'm trying to like expand my mind."

"I don't identify, for example, as gay, and so my feed isn't going to be LGBTQ specific. I have to make an effort to follow LGBTQ people and engage myself in those conversations, or listen to those conversations in order for them to appear."

In some other cases, it was to continue to learn new things and access news or other information they would not otherwise have access to or hear about in the course of their everyday lives.

"This one Instagram person I follow … she is a registered dietician, and so she used to be … very fat phobic, like oh, if you're obese, if you're overweight, you are unhealthy. And then a study came out earlier this year that said that that's not the case necessarily. She's like: oh my god, like I have been telling people this for years. And that's not the case. And so she's done a lot of her posts are unlearning and re-posting and trying to reframe some of those conversations. So I follow her and actively re-post a lot of her things on my story. Because I think that those sorts of posts have really helped me to reframe the ties to my fluctuating weight. And I can still be healthy and be okay if I gain weight."

"I'll look up what is going on in that current movement, maybe if there was something going on in the news or petitions. Yes, I follow up with it through articles, through YouTube videos – that's another reason why I watch YouTube, is to look at it more from a global perspective so I'll look at women's rights and sexuality outside of the U.S.. I have an interest in looking at countries that are a bit more conservative- I've looked into some African countries and also some countries in Asia, and look at documentaries on that. I definitely follow in with not just Black Lives Matter but also with Me Too, Say Her Name, abortion, and just sexuality. I look more into Trans women just because I feel like those are things that I wasn't taught, like I said no one really spoke about it to me, so I have to do my part and educate myself on it."

In still other cases, this was to follow people who shared salient identity characteristics with the respondents.

"Something that I've noticed is that throughout the years and my progression as becoming more comfortable with myself, I've been following a lot of people that, actors and influencers that look more like me, and that's kind of reassuring…On my Instagram platform, I mentioned I always follow people that look like me cause it's just nice to see people like me represented."

Theme III: Rules and Norms

Participants observations of the rules and norms around social media posting affected how they decided to navigate their own online posting. This theme encompasses general guidelines for what to post and how to post on social media. It also includes gender-specific expectations about what women should use their social media for, and caution around how women could maintain their safety and privacy when sharing parts of their lives on social media.

Guidelines for Social Media Posting (N=9). The participants spoke about guidelines for what is acceptable to post on social media. These guidelines are at times explicit rules that are determined by belonging to particular groups, like sororities or family groups.

"The [sorority] chapter's supposed to build you as a woman, and so they want to make sure you're portraying yourself in a very professional, positive light. So the guidelines are more of: don't be posting with red solo cups in your hand or a drink in your hand. They can seem annoying at some points but I know if I walk into a job interview and they check my social media, like they're not gonna see me being super trashed all the time or drinking or it's surrounds a lot more of that, not necessarily like body image."

"You can't post too much revealing, like you have to be a little bit conservative. I don't want to post anything revealing, but that is something that I've noticed a lot is that from scrolling through and seeing what people post, women specifically, they might post something a little more revealing and I'll have a family member comment 'put some clothes on' or something of that nature, so I think that being a woman means you're definitely restricted, I don't want to say it's a rule but there is also an imaginary rule that you can't post too much that's revealing or selfies because then you're too conceited and cocky. You can never win, you're either revealing too much or you're too cocky or women empowerment: all you care about is women, you hate men, there are so many different stereotypes. These are things that I've seen people comment on other people's posts and you can never win. If you do one thing, you're wrong if you do this then you're not doing enough. You can never win it feels like. Being a woman filters what you can post."

At other times, these rules are suggested conventions dictated by social or cultural norms that participants internalize and adhere to.

"I think that it's how I'm socialized. I think that what is acceptable is really determined largely by the people you surround yourself with. So my current community is mostly my college, or specifically my sorority, my group of friends, so I guess what we all have collectively decided is like okay to post is what I tend to use as a guideline. And I feel like I take my cues from what other people post."

"I think another thing too, that I kind of like my moral compass, not that I'm like, not that I kind of assign my morals to the morals of like my mother, but it's always kind of like the if your mom, is your mom okay with what you post on Instagram?... I was just kind of like the way the feel to be like, okay, maybe this is too much or maybe this is fine."

"If you're on the super woke track, that often implies a sort of fervor and consistency in posting and that you're just on all the time in your activism. I think oftentimes that can morph into your aesthetic, which then morphs in to more sort of performative activism, because not only is it then like part of your Instagram, but it's also part of your brand of social media user."

"So I definitely post more about my personal life rather than my work success. And that tracks and makes sense because to be a strong woman at work, and to recognize and be proud of and name that to other people feels braggy or feels …like an inappropriate thing to brag about. And then, I'm also in a helping field… I work with college students. So it feels weird to brag about things are going well, particularly now, when it feels like nothing is going well for at least our students. But like there are days that I feel good at my job and that's not something I really feel like appropriate about."

"There's a lot of like modesty culture engrained in guidelines on social media. It reminds me a lot of like dress code in school and like it's all to make the opposite sex feel more comfortable or policing women's bodies to do it."

Gendered Expectations Around Acceptable Social Media Behavior (N=8).
Participants noticed a difference in the rules and expectations about posting between men and women. They noted both that there are different rules for women than for men in terms of the content of their posts, but also different conventions around their general approach to social media use and engagement.

"If it's a guy and he's posting a shirtless picture, no one's gonna be like 'put some clothes on' or 'why are you posting that.' People are more accepting of it and it's normalized. I'm not going to post a picture of myself with no shirt, but I feel like when it comes to men they can post and get away with some of the things that they post. No one is being like 'you don't respect yourself' or 'you're doing too much.'"

"My own perceptions of men and women and what they post on Instagram are so completely different. I think that men just don't care as much or they don't put as much effort."

"I think, you know as a female, there are a lot of rules on social media for what you can show of your body or how you can represent yourself that don't necessarily apply to men."

"I think girls use social media, especially Instagram, differently than guys do. There's a lot more posting by girls, at least the girls I know post way more than the boys that I know. It's like, girls are posting things and attracting things and guys are just viewing them. It's almost like they can like see it to pass judgement or something, more than to

put themselves out there. So I think being female, like you feel more pressure to keep

your Instagram feed relatively consistent and be posting often – be posting pictures where

you look good. Be posting pictures by yourself. Like I think there's more pressure to

actually use your Instagram."

Importance of Maintaining Safety and Privacy (N=5). Some participants spoke about

the inherent safety and privacy concerns around sharing themselves in a public and internet-

based forum. They described the measures they took to maintain their safety and privacy on

social media, often highlighting the ways that women have to consider the ways that they are

sexualized and objectified when deciding what to post.

"I find that no matter how tightly you lock down your privacy settings, there's always

random men or random sketchy accounts trying to follow you or to send you lude

messages. So I think from a safety perspective, I try to think about not posting too much

or showing too much of myself or maybe not posting a location of something I'm doing."

"I would notice that outside of actively choosing what it is that I can and can't wear, in

real life and Instagram, for me, what it is that I wouldn't put on social media or Instagram

in terms of what I'm wearing just kind of has to do with what I feel comfortable doing, in

the sense that someone is going to look at me and think 'what is she doing?' or sexualize

the way that I look."

Domain III: Effects of Social Media Use

Domain III included themes that focused on the effects of social media use on

respondents' lived experiences. Respondents noted social media interactions having an impact on

their mood and wellbeing as well as altering the nature of all social relationships, not just online

ones.

Theme I: Effect on Mood

The effect that social media use had on participants' mood was neither linear nor uniform. Each of the participants described the ways that their social media use affected their mood and mental health, some noting that it had positive effects, and some noting negative consequences of social media use, while some recognized both the positive and negative influences of social media. Participants reported that their social interactions (getting likes and comments) had positive effects on their mood, while their internal processes (comparing themselves to others' posts) had negative effects on their mood.

Mood Enhancement Resulting from Likes and Comments (N=13). Some participants noted positive impacts of social media on their mood. They described increases in self-confidence as well as validation as a result of their social media posting and interactions. Participants noted the value of having their posts receive likes, and the effect that getting likes and comments had on their self-esteem and mood. Participants spoke of the affirmation and hype they feel from friends when they get lots of positive comments and likes.

"I guess attention is the best word for it. Positive feedback. Complements…It definitely feels like guilty pleasure. It's like makes me feel all guilty for even thinking about it. But that's definitely the truth. It's like for pictures like this, I think people, at least I post them because I want positive attention for it."

"I think it's an empowering experience to post a photo that you look good in and then it's always like the spells of comments from your friends and acquaintances, or they're like, 'oh my gosh,' they're just kind of like hyping you up for lack of a better term in the comments. So I think that that's just…a really feel good moment so it's like I posted this

picture where I look really good it and then you kind of get that second sense of validation from your friends."

"A lot of people commented on it. A lot of my friends did. And a lot of the comments were commenting on my outfit, complementing what I looked like. Complementing the place, kind of. Just complementing the picture in general. I remember feeling like really happy about it because the outfit I was wearing felt kind of bold... And it made me feel really happy that people like noticed the effort – or noticed the boldness. And liked it. I guess it gave me affirmation. Like it felt good that people liked what I did. And I feel like that's the main reaction I kind of have. Like and it's similar to the swimsuit picture. Like when people comment with that you look good, it feels good."

"I think it's more about what I feel comfortable sharing. And also what's affirmed. Whenever I post a picture of me and my partner, or anything on my wedding day, the likes are there. Like the comments are there."

"My close friends always comment, they'll comment nice things under my Instagram picture and it just makes me feel happy. It's like you're getting compliments. Compliments always feel good."

They noted that it was the responses they received that affected their feelings about a post after they'd made it.

"I definitely got the response I was hoping for from many people. Or if they weren't experiencing something similar, I got a lot of messages of support. And it definitely helped me get through that – get through the end of March. And that effect on my mental health."

"I would say specifically for the likes on any post of mine I want to get more likes, which is just a general feeling across the board for most people. Specifically for pictures of myself, if I don't get a lot of likes on them I'm like what did I do wrong with this post? Or why did I not get enough likes? Or sometimes I'll go in with the mentality of posting something, like for my birthday I knew that would get a lot more likes than my other posts because birthday posts get more likes and then singular pictures of yourself get more likes. The fact that I know that is also troubling within itself. I definitely go in with the mentality that if I'm posting a picture of myself it should get more likes than my other pictures and if I'm posting with my friend, it should still get a minimum number of likes. I have taken down pictures when they don't get enough likes because clearly people did not respond to this or I archive posts that I'm not a fan of and stuff like that so I can always bring them back if I feel like it."

Negative Changes in Mood (N=12). Other participants noted the negative effects of social media. They described feelings of self-judgment, self-consciousness, sadness, and frustration as a result of their social media interactions.

"Whereas someone being like 'wow you're really dark,' which I haven't had that happen recently with any of my photos, I've definitely had it happen before in the past with my Instagram when I was younger. If someone is commenting 'you're really dark,' 'wicked dark,' or something of that nature, I perceive it as something negative. I see it as them trying to attack an identity or trying to attack a feature that I don't want to say I can't do nothing about, but they're trying to attack me without it being blatant but then I can look into it, it's covert in a sense. Microaggression would be the best word definitely."

Some participants noted that the act of comparison and viewing others' social media led them to feel badly about themselves.

"I think a lot of what I was doing was like posts about ideal body types and like stuff like that just like the message that I don't like to see is that I feel like for me that's a factor I get like I see negatively the most or like I feel affected by the most."

"I would say for sure it does. There's very few interactions on social media that don't influence how I think about myself. Again, that's why I had to take a break from it a little bit, because seeing other people's posts was making me feel anxious about my own body. Especially the girls working out, do this to get abs, and that stuff. I have always tried again to portray a certain version of myself so if I don't get the likes then I'll definitely feel bad about myself."

"It's not really a long-term thing, I don't wake up every morning like 'thank god I got 500 likes on that photo' I feel good about myself now. I would say if anything … hearing people comment 'so pretty' on my pictures doesn't do anything for my self-esteem, whereas viewing pictures of other girls does really negative things for my self-esteem. There will be very few times, for example if I get an unusual comment from someone or if I post a selfie on Snapchat, for example, and people will comment on that - that has different connotations to me because they are taking more effort to comment so they genuinely think I look good so that'll make me feel better. On Instagram it doesn't do much. It's more the negative aspects hurt me more than the positive aspects do."

Theme II: Effect on Relationships

Within this theme, participants explained how social media affected their interpersonal relationships. They noted social media affecting the confidence in and quality of their

relationships in general. Further, they noted the effect of social media on specific friendships and relationships.

Altering Confidence and Security in Relationships (N=7). One way that participants observed social media as having an effect on their friendships was in the ways that it could affect confidence and security in friendships. They noted that sometimes viewing others' posts had the ability to affirm the importance of a friendship, by showcasing the value of the relationship. At other times, seeing friends' posts eroded confidence or caused them to doubt the strength of those relationships.

> "I think to some extent it definitely impacts your relationship with your friends if you feel like 'oh I always post with them but they never post with me.'"

> "I think then social media would sometimes play into that if I saw some friends were hanging out without me or I noticed, 'wow all of my other friends have been featured on one of my friend's Instagrams but I haven't.'"

> "I know that some of my female friends have gotten mad when their girlfriends don't post them. I personally don't even think about that. I'm not like 'oh my best friend hasn't posted me, that means she's not friends with me.' I don't think that way but I get how people could."

> "But then there's also a negative side too…if someone hasn't viewed my post I'm like were they actively avoiding clicking on my profile? Do they just not happen to be on social media? Why did they not like this picture? That type of stuff."

Participants also noted, in particular, the ways that women's interactions with one another impacted their security. Many women spoke to the impact that women have on each other's

lives, citing the importance of women supporting other women, but also a tendency for women to be in competition with one another.

> "I think that there's just such a standard among women my age where… you have to support women. There is so much going against them right now, and being against each other is not going to help us win this fight. And I think that there's a mutual understanding, but then there are also some women … for example, if she saw a girl…just showing herself on Instagram... it would be like, 'she's so gross,' 'she's probably only doing that for men's eyes.' And she would only say that around guys and stuff like that. Or…she wouldn't say it in a roomful of women, she'd say it around guys kind of to seek that sort of male validation… 'she just doesn't look, she's not holding herself to like a right thing' and it's like a girl who would say that to men and it's just kind of like, okay, we kind of get it. It's like a 'pick me' because it's like she wants to be chosen by men so she's saying things that a man would say about women being sexualized or objectified if she is in control of that sexualization."

Improves Strength of the Relationship and Connection (N=13). All of the participants reported in their initial social media use forms that their social media was used, at least in part, to support social relationships. They further articulated the importance of social media for maintaining and building relationships. Participants also described social media as a place to stay in touch with people that were more distant either physically or relationally.

> "In terms of in person social interactions, I kind of translate the in-person interactions to posts. I'll post about hanging out with my friends, or when my friend came to visit, or going on vacation with my friends. It's not like we are discussing or using social media in

our interactions, it's a way to interact if we are not in person and then showcase in person interactions."

"In terms of a positive influence, it helps me stay in touch with people that I may not talk to on a day-to-day basis and I can see what they are doing with their life. Especially with people that I haven't talked to since high school or family members who I haven't met before."

"It just feels like responsibility is what it is being a part of a generation where social media is such a front for us, for most part of your life. It's places where you interact with friends that you haven't seen in a while, it's a place where you interact with family members you haven't seen in a while…It's become a large part of our lives because it's connected us."

Alerts to Differences in Core Values and Moral Systems (N=4). Some participants noted that social media was a place where they learned about differences in values and morals between themselves and people they knew or as a place where those difference were highlighted.

"I would say with [activism I've posted] recently, I've noticed that people have unfollowed me. But it's not something that concerns me. I'm not like 'oh my gosh I'm losing followers.' It's just telling me the type of people that I may have been surrounded by. Maybe I don't have a direct relationship with them but it tells me a lot about the people that I was around in school, or in passing, or whatever. And maybe those people feel like it's not relevant to their life or it doesn't really affect them so they don't feel the need to follow me. It hasn't affected any of my personal relationships or relationships I have with acquaintances but it's telling me a lot about the people I may have been around

or maybe had two conversations with or maybe had none and what they feel about basic

human rights for women, people of color, the LGBTQ community in that sense."

"But I feel like as I've grown older or I live closer to my family, it's more stressful to

interact with them on social media. Whether that be because of differing views or

because of strained relationships. I think social media kind of highlights whatever strain

you have in those relationships."

Sometimes, this affected how they felt about pursuing relationships with people who had

different values.

"But I think with friends or people who you don't necessarily know as well, once you

look at them on social media and see that maybe they have differing views than you, it

can affect how the friendship is moving forward."

"When I see people from high school posting things that I personally don't agree with,

about social issues, that makes me pause and think about my relationship with that

person."

Face-to-Face Social Interactions Centered on Social Media (N=8). Participants

described the ways that social media use infiltrated their everyday in person interactions as well.

They noted both using in person time to create content for social media and discuss what they'd

seen or posted on social media as well as using social interactions outside of social media

platforms (either in person or via text) to discuss or plan what to post.

"I normally take photos with the intention of I want to post something and then I'll

actively take photos with the goal of posting, especially on vacation and stuff like that. It

would be really rare that a picture is taken and then I'm like 'oh that's really nice I should

post that.' I normally don't take pictures if I don't have the intent of posting."

"So for an actual post I would say that I have to look good, or I have to perceive myself as looking good, and if anyone else is in it I check with that person, I send it to them like 'yo, can I post this?' Also with selfies or anything like that, I always send it to my friends first and ask 'is this Insta worthy? Honest feedback here.' It's honestly a lot of effort, now that I think about it, to make one Instagram post, especially with editing and then there's always 30 pictures that you have to choose from."

"There are times when…I will make plans with a friend to just take photos. I like taking photos of my friends a lot, but then there are times where I'm just kind of like, well, I want pictures of me where I look nice and I want to put them on Instagram. So I will make plans to like do a photo shoot, but we call it, even though it's not like professional in that sense at all, to take pictures, like purposefully to post on Instagram. So it's like going out of my way to plan to take photos that are going to go on Instagram and I know that's where they're going to go."

"[Social media is a part of] most of my friendships or social interactions. Like social media is a part of it. Whether it's me meeting my friends in person and we talk about like 'oh, did you see what this person posted?' Or like, 'oh, did you see this person is in this city right now?'"

"Sometimes I'll send a picture to my friends and be like 'should I post this picture or this picture?'…I feel like my friends do it to me a lot more. But it's not big of a conversation or it's like ok, if my friends posted this picture of us, I'll post like a different picture of us like that kinda thing, but not too much of the actual posting."

Domain IV: Activism and Advocacy

This domain addresses themes around participants activism and advocacy efforts. These themes are comprised of how participants self-identify and relate to advocacy, the goals that underly advocacy efforts, feelings of responsibility for advocacy, and the ways that their identities as women affected their advocacy experiences.

Theme I: Recognition of Identity and Effect on Experience

Recognition of intersectional identities allowed participants to understand themselves in the context of their lived experiences. This self-awareness affected the ways that participants engaged in activism and advocacy, as it shaped their relationship to social issues. Responses in this section explore participants' acknowledgement of their intersectional identities and the ways that if affects their posting behaviors.

Intersectional Identities and Experience of the World (N=12). Each participant discussed her own identity and the ways that the multiple intersecting identities she holds affect her lived experience. Participants noted in particular the ways that their experiences affected their worldviews and the privileges and tribulations they experienced.

> "I feel like extraneous voices make it become white noise instead of just having… Black voices just needed to be just amplified during that time and I think with me being, because I'm Hispanic doesn't mean I'm not White. I am White so I think me being a White voice and adding to all that noise just would make it something that just became like very desensitizing."

> "As a White woman, I admit that I have privilege in that if I chose to work or if I chose to stay home, that would be fine and that nobody would second guess that because my skin is viewed as a neutral."

"I think as a White, middle class woman, that my race and class have the least impact on me out of any female identifying person."

"The ideal image we see from all models basically, at least up until recently, is basically my body type. So I've been very lucky in that regard. So I think that I get more positive attention for that than maybe is merited. Because it's not like I did something to achieve this body, really. So I think that that is a privilege that I've had basically my whole life."

"There's like a thousand statistics about how White women are stopped by police less than Black women and like I don't have to think about how I'm perceived by other people. Because I'm the norm."

"I'm a heterosexual woman…I'm cisgender, which I think impacts everything, but in a way that I don't recognize."

Acknowledgement of One's Body and its Effect on Posting Behaviors (N=5).
Participants were mindful of their own identity characteristics and the ways that they shaped their individual experiences. They further identified how their posting behaviors were affected by their own identities.

"Being Hispanic and Latino, I think that…we haven't gone away from Hispanic women being a very spicy Latina, like that sort of thing of Hispanic women being…really sexualized…. with Hispanic women, it's like their [spicy] attitude is very sexy, but then with Black women, their attitude is like unattractive and it's just like very terrible sort of thing…. Part of me feels like because I am a Hispanic woman, and maybe this is just kind of I don't know, this is very weird, but I think part of me thinks that because I'm a Hispanic woman, there's just kind of this overarching sense of my own sexuality as far as

not something that I kind of portray myself, but is just portrayed because of my race and

ethnicity, that it's like, 'oh, you're Hispanic.'"

Often times, these identities affected when and how participants felt comfortable

engaging in advocacy around social issues.

"I would post [about BLM] occasionally because I care about the movement, but I wasn't

someone who would be constantly posting every single day and I was very careful about

what I posted and what I said, because it was not my time to speak and it was not my

voice that mattered at that time."

Theme II: Goals of Advocacy: Making Change

Responses included in this theme highlight the areas where participants hoped to make a

substantive change in the world. They reflect the goals that participants held in their advocacy

efforts.

Amplifying Other Voices (N=3). One area where participants hoped to help make

change was in allowing space to amplify and lift up voices of the marginalized and oppressed

and to make space for those voices to share their experiences and thoughts.

"I sometimes feel like it's not my voice to talk about those experiences because I don't

want to drown out the voices that do matter and are talking about those issues. I try not to

fill my story."

"There are issues that I care about that I don't necessarily post about, like when the whole

thing happened with Black Lives Matter, I was not posting constantly about that

movement because I am not a Black woman and I think that there are more important

voices that needed to be emphasized in that time."

Sharing and Learning New Information (N=12). One area where participants felt like they could help enact change was through sharing new information with their followers. They saw their social media platforms as a place to spread information to others and learn new information from those who had more experience with topics of oppression and marginalization.

"I normally try to go for just one post picture because I know when I'm scrolling through, I'm not taking the time to go to those posts and scroll through the pictures and see what message this is trying to give me. Black Lives Matter, I posted a lot and then I started getting into, specifically for body image issues actually, I started getting into a niche thing about 'stop congratulating people when they lose weight' and more body positive stuff that wasn't as obvious as one might think."

"Yesterday was national pronouns day, and so I saw a good… phrase: 'it doesn't do anything if you're cisgender to share your pronouns, but it means the world and normalizes it for people who are trans.' So I was like, 'yeah, cool. I'll post that.' And just trying to – like if it's things that I agree with and things that I think are helpful pieces of knowledge… But just things that I either have learned recently and I'm like, 'oh, that is really cool.' And like, '… I wish somebody would have posted that earlier so I could have known that earlier.'"

"My activism is helping to educate my staff about what that looks like and help myth bust and break some pre-existing conceptions."

"I'm actually really interested in activism, and I do spend a lot of time and put a lot of effort into using my social media presence as a way to spread awareness and educate other people and myself."

"I try to share diverse things, and things that I just think are beautiful are a big part of it. But then that's – that was like my normal stuff. But now that there's this big Black Lives Matter movement happening again, I have been more shifting towards posting things that I feel like other people will see and want to actually read…I go to a private college and I think that not everyone has realized the privilege they have. So I want to like make it so people might actually look at it instead of just clicking through everyone's stories. Like sometimes we do when the story isn't interesting. I want it to be thing that will make people actually stop and look at it. Think about it."

Connection to In-Person Advocacy Efforts (N=8). Participants also noted the ways that online activism was connected to in person advocacy efforts. Some described using social networking sites to plan in person advocacy experiences. Some described using social media as a way to get resources for social movements (through linking sites for donations or petitions). Some described using social media to share with others their advocacy efforts (through sharing pictures of them engaging in in person activism at Women's Marches and other face-to-face advocacy opportunities).

"That was probably the most active role I've taken [posting pictured from Women's March] in any of the movements so posting stuff from those movements, more so specific things said about it that I agree with as opposed to 'in general you should believe this.'"

Theme III: Responsibility to Advocate

Participants described a series of thoughts and evaluations around when to engage in social media activism. The choice about when to advocate online and when to take a step back was both deeply personal and dependent on knowledge of the issues, personal experience, and value judgments.

Rationale for Participating in Advocacy Efforts (N=11). At times, participants described the reasons that they participated and outlined their rationale for posting certain advocacy opportunities or information on their social media sites.

"I just haven't opted out because I feel like…it's simply just almost inappropriate most times, to be complacent about almost all issues nowadays because everything is so closely interwoven together. Disparities are just wreaking havoc on almost every single fact of how people identify and how people go in their lives. And so I think if I have chosen to sit back… in women's related movement, it's I simply am just overwhelmed by the sheer massive force behind the movement. Because it's oftentimes so powerful. People can, in a blink of an instant, especially with social media and together, flood pages, flood the audience with calls, with texts which tagging them and posts."

"I think that one just like struck a chord and so that's why I felt more of a need to be vocal just because I think the people that follow me and the people that I follow are like because I feel it's such a pertinent issue to me in this community, I think it would matter more to them too in a sense that like they should be just more informed cause it's actively affecting them."

"George Floyd happened, I was just like, 'this is enough,' I felt like it was the perfect time to not only talk about how people like me see America but also talk about things like cultural appropriation, colorism, racism, systemic oppression. I just felt more comfortable to talk about those things, and I realized that people were actually listening. I actually had gotten a lot of messages from people, some I've never really spoken to or haven't spoken to in years, saying 'thank you for being vocal,' 'thank you for posting this,' 'I'm going to look into it more.' I was not expecting that at all because I don't post it just so I can get

those feedbacks. It was interesting that people were taking the messages that I was

putting up and really wanting to educate themselves on it and wanting to dig further and

deeper into it. I realized that it was positively received and that people are actually

grasping it and really retaining all of that information. I think that with my activism now,

it's become a lot more apparent and I am being much more vocal about things that I

wouldn't usually talk about as much and I'm seeing that it's positively received."

"I think that there are times when people need to be faced and confronted with things that

are going on in the world and we are so, so active on social media where it's like, if that's

a place where someone who would see that, who would agree with it and just needs to see

it and it's like this is something that needs to be talked about, whether or not like there are

times where you can clearly see where it's like people are just not paying any mind to

stuff that's going on in the world. It's like, 'hey, this is going on right now. This is

important.' So in that instances I will post on social media,"

"I think you're doing this [study] at a very interesting time where I feel a lot of social

media – there's a lot of guilt about using social media for things right now that aren't the

movement or advocating for Blacks Lives Matter or the movement surrounding it."

Rationale for Not Participating in Advocacy Efforts (N=9). Other times, participants

described the reasons that they held back and choose not to participate in advocacy.

"I would post here and there about being active and I think that I was a bit filtered in the

sense that I wasn't as brutally honest. I was honest but I wouldn't post things about

colorism, or I wouldn't post things about cultural appropriation. I knew I was educated on

it but I didn't feel like I needed to post it, or I felt like people wouldn't interpret it the

right way. I would think that people would think I was being too pro-Black or I was just being anti-White which is not the case at all."

"I see it now of like all the stuff in Nigeria or post about this, make sure you tell everybody. And it just feels like everybody already knows. So I don't echo and reinforce it and just kind of be like white noise. Like I also don't want to post too much."

"I'm much less of a post on Instagram kind of person about certain topics. As much as I'm just kind of a have a conversation about it, especially with my family"

"In regards to MeToo movement, that was starting to happen right when I was coming into college, so I was feeling – I was less confident and less aware that I could really use my social media presence. But I definitely followed it very closely."

Reasons not to participate in movements that they believed in included feeling like they didn't hold the appropriate identities to be advocating for a particular issue.

"I recognize my White fragility in that I really can't post things that are angry or that feel angry, or feel really highly emotional. And I recognize that as a White woman, I can't – I also am speaking in the Black Lives Matter context – but I really find myself finding it really hard to be extreme in that I'm okay with the idea of defunding the police, but abolishing everything, I don't know? And then that's all political. I find it hard to be extreme in the way that would be alienating to other people. But I also, firmly hold that the police are a racist institution, so I try to find ways to say that that's not going to – that's not gonna hurt feelings."

"I have friends who are Black who were posting a lot about that movement, for obvious reasons, and I still care about the Black Lives Matter movement a lot, but …I think there came a point on Instagram or it was constant, constant, constant information about Black

Lives Matter and people who aren't necessarily activists in that sense or who care about the movement in that sense, care less if it feels like it's an influx of information. It's like they're tapping through stories of like, 'oh, this again, this again, this again' and I just didn't want to be like white noise amongst voices."

"I, myself, don't think I've spoken out, necessarily, as much as I have recently specifically about women's bodies and sizes and especially because it feels weird making a statement about companies not using different shapes and sizes for their models when I, myself, am not, like I'm pretty skinny. So… it feels weird being like, 'why don't you show different body types?'"

Other participants reported holding back because the felt like they lacked the knowledge to inform others.

"I feel like I don't wanna post something that I don't really fully understand and I feel it does, for me at least, take that personal experience to really understand…but I feel like when it comes more like touchy topics that aren't talked about as much, I find myself very aware but I'm not really posting or talking about it too much unless it's something that I can really relate to and fully understand."

One participant described being aware of social issues, but feeling complacent.

"I just recognize it, like I recognize that that's going on but I'm like very passive about it. I'm not ever gonna take a stand or do something crazy about it and I do just fit into that normal like very complacent, like posting in how I show myself. So I feel like I recognize and I like understand it but I don't do anything about it."

Theme IV: Advocacy Around Women's Bodies

Given the social and political context at the time of data collection, much of the discussion of activism on social media centered around the Black Lives Matter movement, and the ways that participants were engaging in advocacy around supporting equality, peace, and healthy for Black and Brown bodies, rather than around advocacy around women's bodies in particular. When participants referenced advocacy around women's bodies, they identified the ways that their own identities affected their connection to the cause and the importance of giving voice to women, who have historically been marginalized and mistreated.

Connection to Ideas and Ideals Based on Self-Identification as a Woman (N=12). Identifying as women led participants to feel a particular kinship to movements around women's bodies, including the MeToo movement, issues of abortion rights, and other social justice movements that affect women. Participants noted the way that their own identities connected them to women's plight and that their ideals about equality for women stemmed, in part, from their own life experiences traversing the world as females.

"I focus more on women because I feel like I can relate, and also just because I know the struggles that I've had…I would say that my posts do focus more on women because I don't feel represented enough and also dark-skinned women just because of the disrespect that not only I've experienced, but that I've seen."

"I think the activism that I'm posting are things that I want myself to remember and internalize. So by posting it, I'm not only holding myself accountable but also giving the resource to anyone else that's also struggling. I think a lot of times the social media activism thing is too performative and is just one of many so I kind of try to be selective in what I'm posting because I think it's stupid to post for the sake of posting."

"I was posting things that related to myself that others could benefit from. I was posting anti-Blackness within the South Asian community, anti-Blackness on college campuses, things that are more specific to me rather than just general things. They have to be posts that I saw and genuinely read and went 'huh, that's interesting' and then I would choose to share it rather than everyone is posting something for this issue, I should post something too."

"I was much more vocal on issues I think that directly affect me for a number of reasons. Because I feel I have a voice in that sense…I think an instance most recently that I can think of definitely was when RBG passed away and posting about that, because I think that we understood when that happened it was a threat to women and I did remember posting about that as just kind of a rest in peace. And then consequently after that, just kind of a remembrance to vote and remembrance of just how much is at stake with this election, and that sort of thing being something that I understood. Her death, what it meant as far as what it's going to mean for women now that Amy Coney Barrett is now the new Supreme Court justice and the fear that circling around what that means."

"I think as I started to get older and started to use the internet more too, I think I got more exposure to more voices and started to realize that I have a pretty privileged position that I can use. And also started to realize that there were other women who understood the struggles that I had gone through. It's pretty common. My experience is a common female experience that others can speak to."

"I saw a graphic the other day that really depicted this really well for me. There's a White woman and then above her head, it's saying 'this is heavy' and then it zooms out and supporting the White woman's feet and the White man are a Black woman supporting

everyone and saying like 'this is so heavy.' And I thought that really showed it to me how I kind of picture it. Because I know my struggles as a woman. And I know that being female, and talking about being female in the age of social media is really hard. But I don't have to deal with racism on top of it. I don't have to deal with Blackness on top of being female. So I think that that's kind of given me perspective. Because I know how hard it is to just be female. So I think that it's especially important when you know that you have some struggles but you benefit so much that you avoid so many other struggles. That I think that makes me really sensitive to what other people are going through."

Allyship and Advocacy (N=12). The participants noted the importance of using their voices to help advocate for the forgotten and marginalized and noted the ways that their own social locations allowed them to be allies and advocates for change. They note the ways that they engage with activism around women's bodies as they hope to be part of enacting meaningful social change.

"And I've been very active in like remembering that Black Lives Matter means Black women. That is like one of the main points I've been really trying to hammer home on my social media use recently."

"I've been posting a lot about, but for current Corona, BLM times, most of it I would say would be more geared towards Corona in terms of disenfranchised Black women and Black individuals dying at a much more expedient rate from Corona and how the intersectionality of all those things at work are playing into that."

"I'm a very big believer in like it is what it is and so I think whenever somethings happened to me in life, I've like accepted that that has happened and now it's my duty to use that in some way. Like shape myself and use my voice to help when it's something

that affected me it's like this has happened, I can't change it but maybe I can change it for others or at least bring awareness to it to like try to help out and try to make people recognize it happens."

"I've always felt like there's more to it than what I see or what's in my world. I feel like I need to be aware of what happens. Yes, I need to be aware of what happens in my world, but I need to be aware of what happens outside because at the end of the day, the world doesn't revolve around myself. I need to take into consideration other people and what it is that they are going through so if there is any way that I can be a part of the movement and I could help is why I also look at things from a global perspective. Also, I am just very interested in other cultures, it's something that I feel strongly about. Me being interested in other cultures leads me to some of the parts that may not seem normal or some of the parts of people's cultures that seem very dismissive of women's rights, I kind of look more into it."

"Before, I would feel as though I'm not inclined or I'm not required to teach people but what I can do is use my platform to speak up, so I feel as though as a duty for maybe people who don't feel comfortable speaking up or people whose voices aren't heard, I feel like I can be that person. Not to share their story, but how I see things and here is where I think people need to become involved and here is where people can kind of do their due diligence as well… I just feel a responsibility that I need to be active and I need to have other people included because when it comes to my rights and other rights of people who are also going through things, I feel like I need to be that person, I need to do it- not because of any validation from others or wanting to be applauded for it, it's just

basic human rights, and that's kind of how I see it. It's basic human rights, just to sum everything up, it's basic human rights and I need to do it."

"I think that I try to do it in a way that feels authentic and like doesn't feel preachy. And doesn't feel inaccessible. Of like I can't believe you didn't know his. I can't believe you haven't done this already. Like those sorts of things I think really drive people away from a movement coalition and I'm hoping to bring them into…I had a post over the summer that was like, 'hey, if you're just joining into Black Lives Matter movement, that's okay. Like we're sorry that you didn't get there but we're glad you're here. And come on in.' So I hope that my posts are welcoming in that respect and … like ease of entry. Like no barriers, just like, 'hey, like if you have questions, I'm a person that you can ask. Like we can talk about it. I'm not an expert, but I am learning and unlearning my privilege and trying to go through this and I can be a partner in that.; And I'm grateful that a lot of my peers echo some of that."

"But that's where I find myself being most useful in that allyship role or accomplice role… It takes so much energy for other people who hold these identities, whether that be members of the queer community or members of the Black – or people who are Black. Like it takes so much less energy for me as a straight White woman to have those conversations. Either or not they're fruitful is like kind of not in my – that's not in my control. But my hope is that by posting, by engaging and by starting some of those conversations, I plant some seeds somewhere."

Chapter 5: Discussion

The present study is among the few studies to explore the implications of women's socialization on their online posting behaviors. Social networking sites are a tool to construct identity while at the same time manage interpersonal relationships. Worldwide, the number of social media users reached 3.5 billion by 2019 – an increase of 9% from the previous year (Global Digital Report, 2019 cited in Caso et al., 2020). Recognizing that women's use of social media differs from men's use (e.g. Barker, 2009; Korn, 2016; Duggan & Brenner, 2013), this study explored women's social media use in particular. The importance of social networking sites in identity creation is particularly salient for women under 35, who tend to use visually-based sites, those that present content primarily through pictures (Sprout Social, 2019 cited in Caso et al., 2020). Emerging adult women experience various life transitions, including increased independence accompanying the transition to college, and increased mental health concerns (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018; Goodman, 2017). Coupled with their unique social media habits (Smith & Anderson, 2018), the changes associated with being an emerging adult woman who uses social media necessitate improved understanding. Yet, previous studies have not combined the exploration of age, gender, sexuality, self-presentation, and social media use in one place. Respondents in this study explored the often contradictory messages they received about what their bodies should look like and how they should be used, narrated their own processes for navigating self-presentation and self-expression on social networking sites, enumerated the consequences (both social and emotional) of social media use, and elucidated their activism and advocacy efforts online.

Although some of the participants' perspectives overlap with those reported in previous research concerning messaging about women's bodies and sexuality and social media behavior

and its effects on mental health, the use of qualitative methods in the present study provided more details about emerging adult women's social media interactions and behavior. The findings also contribute to new knowledge about the rationale that drives posting behaviors.

The present study sought to use Objectification Theory and Relational Cultural Theory to help to understand emerging adult women's behaviors in online spaces. Guided by these theoretical frameworks, the following section explores the messages women receive about their bodies and sexuality, posting behaviors, and advocacy efforts with the current literature. Implications for future clinical training and practice, intervention, and research will also be discussed.

Summary of Results and Integration with Research Literature

Context and Social Situation of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter

The impact of the current context must be addressed briefly to understand its potential impact on data collection and responses in the present study. COVID-19 brought the U.S. to a standstill in the Spring of 2020. College students experienced the quarantine and U.S. shutdown in a unique way. Their colleges and universities were closed. They were sent home mid-semester with little warning, separating them from the social life and connections that they had been experiencing and had justifiably been assuming they would continue at least through the end of the semester. With the imposition of public safety guidelines to quarantine, almost all in-person social interactions came to an abrupt halt. Without face-to-face social interactions, social media interactions took on a new meaning and prominence in peoples' lives. At the same time as college students found themselves relying on social networking sites as one of the few sources of social connection, they also found their lives and their ability to go out in the world greatly diminished.

Simultaneously, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in Spring of 2020 sparked national outrage and reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement. In part due to COVID-19 and people's being captive in their homes, these issues held our collective attention longer and demanded prolonged attention. One of the ways that people participated in protests was through social media. The BLM movement was rooted in the mobilization of social media, political involvement, and the engagement of average people in activism. Twenty-three percent of adult social media users in the United states report changing their views about a political or social issue based on something they saw on social media in the past year (Perrin, 2020). Not only were people changing their opinions because of what they saw on social media, but also the ways that people used social media shifted dramatically during the period of data collection for this study, with individuals focusing significantly more attention on posting about activism and advocacy than ever before. While many began posting more about activism and social justice, other participants expressed fear about judgment about what they post and how it would be received by others if the content of their posts was not advocacy-related.

At the same time, the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election had people in the U.S. on edge. The controversy surrounding the run-off between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, along with the vacancy of a seat on the Supreme Court in the wake of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death put social justice issues on the ballot. Women's issues were increasingly politicized and individuals were concerned about the potential effects on female freedoms associated with various political outcomes.

College campuses, like the ones that the participants of this study are associated with, typically tout themselves as inclusive spaces, and have become beacons for social and community activism. In the absence of in-person campus experiences due to COVID-19,

students found themselves organizing on social media. Social media became a place for emerging adult students to organize, form community, and participate in social activism. The confluence of COVID, BLM, and politics all created a unique atmosphere that impacted how people post and what they were encouraged to share online during the time the present study was conducted.

Situating Responses in Theory

Objectification Theory. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) provide a framework to understand how societal pressure on female appearances impacts psychological and physical well-being. They explain that women are acculturated to be objectified by others and to objectify themselves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As such, the way that women evaluate themselves is through this lens of self-objectification, and it necessarily affects how women choose to present themselves in all contexts. In keeping with Objectification Theory, participants in this study revealed that they often thought about their own bodies and determined what they could share of themselves on social media based on societal expectations. Women described the processes by which they internalized messages about what makes a good or attractive body, and then determined how much of themselves they felt comfortable showing online. Not surprisingly, women who are the objects of sexual objectification may internalize a thin-ideal and focus specifically on their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). While many participants discussed a belief in body positivity, they also expressed an internalized thin-ideal that guided whether or not they would post any given photo.

The participants in this study struggled to find their place in a culture where women are taught the message that their appearance is more important than what they can do (Caso et al., 2020). Many participants described the struggle of wanting to be authentically themselves, while

at the same time wanting to be seen at attractive, beautiful, or cute. Despite a stated desire to

stray from the pressures of the female beauty ideal, participants consistently described processes

by which their posting behavior was affected by a desire to conform to socio-cultural pressures

around female bodies and what they should look like. Furthermore, consistent with previous

literature, the self-objectification that women experienced often resulted in body dissatisfaction

(Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The efforts that women made to curate their own image can be

viewed in light of their desire to conform to societal pressures around female appearance and

identity performance.

       Relational Cultural Theory. Utilizing a relational cultural lens helped to clarify how

participants viewed relationships and highlights the importance of relationships to well-being

(Miller, 1976). The high value that individuals place on relationships and friendships, suggests

the ways that socialization, even though social media, is impactful on individual well-being and

functioning. Particularly in the era of COVID-19 isolation and quarantine, social media is an

opportunity for relationships and connection. Silverman (2010) explains that online communities

can provide socially enhancing networks, which can be seen in participants' responses to this

study. Participants delineated the ways that social networking sites brought them connection and

support and enhanced their social relationships. Participants typically found moments of

connection through comments and likes. They also described finding social media to be additive

to their social relationships, providing opportunities to connect in person around social media

activity. The disconnects that participants reported, which contributed to poorer mental health,

were typically not related to social or relational processes, but instead focused on internal

processes, like self-judgment and comparisons with others.

Navigating Conflicting Social Messaging

While much has changed for women in the last 175 years since the beginning of first[t] wave feminism, some of the same themes continue to run through women's experiences of inequality and being oppressed by systems of power (Grady, 2018). Nominally, women have many more rights than they did in the 1840's, and yet there are still systems in place that dictate what women should look like and limit what they can do with their bodies. While most participants did not directly address the idea of "feminism" by name, many of them described the thought processes they have around women's rights and bodies, particularly as it relates to their advocacy and thinking about social justice. One participant, however, directly spoke about feminism, stating, "I can be feminine and also feminist." Her juxtaposition of these two ideas highlights the contradictory expectations that society places on women. There is an unspoken belief that women cannot work to change the underlying gendered power structures while at the same time adhering to the beliefs and expectations that society places on women. These power structures are so deeply ingrained into cultural norms that they become pathological in society. As participants describe it, the messages seem to be transmitted through women's socialization and then replicated in their subsequent behaviors and actions.

The participants described how they navigate these often times conflicting messages about what they should look like and what they should do with their bodies. Participants described processes whereby they adhere to expectations around traditional femininity and physical beauty standards, while at the same time discussing a desire for things to change and an interest in challenging traditions. Participants continue to struggle with some very deep and confusing messages about who society allows them to be. Further, women describe their own processes of deciding for themselves who they want to be. The societal messages they receive

about what they should look like and how they ought to represent themselves not only affects their self-concept, but also their choices in self-representation.

Bodies. Participants' responses reflected the complicated and often contradictory nature of their beliefs about women's bodies and beauty. Participants simultaneously identified a thin ideal and beauty standard that exists in American society, and voiced their support of body positivity and acceptance of all bodies. Participants described the cultural shift towards greater acceptance of women's bodies, and yet, despite this shift, they often expressed ways in which they had not truly internalized these beliefs. The findings suggest an emphasis on the values of body positivity, but highlight that as a society, we are not there yet.

Participants discussed body positivity instead as an aspirational ideal, but outlined how challenging it is to choose to post pictures of themselves online, where thin and toned bodies are still valued more than other bodies. In a world in which all bodies are theoretically good bodies, participants noted that the thin ones still get more praise and are treated as better than others. This contradiction complicated how participants described thinking about representing themselves on social media. Many participants simultaneously wanted to love their own bodies, but also censor what they showed of their bodies to fit conventional beauty standards and to get more validation and praise. One participant explained that everyone has an opinion about a woman's body, and it is women's responsibility to take those in and decide what to believe and then what to do with that.

Participants in this study struggled with reconciling messages about equality and their beliefs in social justice with their own self-judgments. They simultaneously held the belief that all bodies, no matter the race, creed, sexual orientation, were worthy of being respected and treated fairly by society, while also censoring parts of their own bodies, and limiting what parts

of themselves they felt confident enough in to show to the world. This self-censoring and objectification of one's own body, supports previous research about the effects of social media viewing on body satisfaction (Caso et al., 2020, Fardouly et al., 2018, Tiggemann et al., 2018). This study also corroborates research that suggests undergraduate women experienced greater body dissatisfaction after viewing thin and idealized images than they experience after viewing average bodied images (Tiggemann et al., 2018).

Interestingly, participants described being more accepting of others social media posts than they are of themselves. Many participants described applauding other people for being comfortable posting pictures that break the ideal mold, while at the same time noting that they would not themselves do that. The participants in this study, by and large, were more supportive of other women and more encouraging of others being their authentic, true selves than they themselves felt comfortable doing. This finding can be understood in light of the guiding theories for this study. The central relational paradox of RCT posits that people carry a deep sense of shame about themselves and a belief that they are less desirable or acceptable to others, and that they then hide those parts of themselves in order to avoid the emotional isolation and distress that are caused by their feelings of deficiency (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Objectification Theory further explains how women may come to view themselves as less valuable, suggesting that women may view themselves in harsh ways, as they have been socialized within a society that sexually objectifies their bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In hiding the parts of themselves that women feel shameful about, women attempt to portray themselves in a light that conforms to societal expectations of White female beauty standards.

Consistent with previous research, the present findings further suggest that participants intersectional identities shaped their social media experiences (Ko & Wei, 2020). Participants

noted the prevalence of White beauty standards that guided the types of images and physical features that receive positive attention on social media, including light skin, slim nose, straight hair, and hourglass figures. These ideals were experienced as impossible to achieve. Participants described processes whereby they evaluated themselves based not only on dominant beauty ideals (i.e. thinness), but also ways in which they evaluated what to post based on the culturally specific beauty standards for their races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. This finding suggests the importance of intersectional identities in standards for social media use. They further highlight the unique sets of social media rules and norms that individuals experience.

Sexuality. The findings support previous literature concerning the conflicting expectations around women's sexuality (Cook & Hasmath, 2014). Many participants described a tightrope they walked between being showy enough to get the right kind of attention on social media and have an interesting feed and look attractive, while also not wanting to appear promiscuous. Responses supported previously described tensions that women face online as they navigate the middle line between hyper-sexuality and sexual abstinence (Cook & Hasmath, 2014). Respondents acknowledged this tension between how to showcase their sexual desirability while still sticking to their individual moral codes.

This tension is particularly interesting in light of participants' consistent discussion about their beliefs in and support of sex positivity. Many women discussed the idea of sex positivity. The very notion that women discussed a shift to where women should be allowed to do what they would like, as opposed to what is socially acceptable, with their bodies speaks to how deeply ingrained ownership and control of women's bodies is. Participants spoke about a shift that comes with a sex positive mindset, where women are allowed to take control of their own sexuality without judgment or repercussion. At the same time, participants noted that they tended

to applaud other women who practiced sex positivity, while still holding themselves to a higher standard in terms of what they showed online.

Many of the women in this study reported that they did not ever think about how they showcased their sexuality on social media. While research suggests that part of the social context of being a woman in the U.S. is to be treated as a sexual object whose body is there for the pleasure of others (Hill & Fischer, 2008), participants described intentionally choosing not to see themselves as sexual objects. This finding seemingly contradicts what might have been expected from Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Douglas, 1997), that women are constantly thinking about how others see them and viewing themselves as objects of sexual desire. While the participants did not express such views directly, it is possible that these self-evaluatory processes are so deeply engrained in their thought processes that they were not fully conscious of the ways that they presented themselves prior to posting. One participant described changing social norms around women's clothing, discussing trends for women to wear crop tops, as a change in the times, and reporting that she did not believe that showing more skin was presenting sexuality in any way. It seems as if participants thought about their own intent when posting as opposed to the impact or interpretation that the viewer might have.

While some participants did not think about how they portrayed their sexuality, others posts were defined by this. This was particularly true for the participants who identified as bisexual, who described making choices about what to post as being driven by what they felt comfortable sharing of their sexuality. They both noted comfort in sharing their sexuality with certain audiences and not with others. This distinction between which participants were able to not think about what they shared of their sexuality and those who were more intentional about

sharing (or not sharing) their sexuality points to the reach of heteronormativity and the ways that society is more accepting or understanding of straight-appearing individuals and relationships.

Posting the Self into Existence

While there has been an increase in scholarship about how people perform their identity through social media (boyd, 2008; Davis, 2010; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013), studies of identity construction on social media are typically textual analyses of posted content that do not incorporate exploration or analysis of subjective experience of participants. This study filled this gap in research by centering women's own voices in describing the meaning they make of their social media experiences.

The findings support previous research that social media gives people control over their self-presentation and shapes the narratives they tell (Davis, 2010). Social media allows participants time to thoughtfully consider, edit, and carefully craft the messages they post and to increase their control over self-expression. Each participant described the processes by which they intentionally curated their social media sites to represent themselves in the way they hoped to be seen.

An examination of participants' choices about when to post permanent versus transient content on social media indicated a fundamental difference between what type of content was deemed suitable for one's page as opposed to one's story. Many participants described their social media curation efforts as an intent to create a platform that showcased the highlights of their lives and give off the persona of someone who is confident in themselves, fun, and lighthearted. The interest in presenting in this way can be understood as one way in which participants enact their yearning to connect with others (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Participants attempted to fulfill a desire to have others like them and be drawn to their social media accounts.

At the same time as they wanted to appear fun and carefree, participants described wanting to be

activists and contribute to social change. Participants grappled with how to engage both of these

parts of themselves at any given time – how to represent the part of themselves that cares about

advocacy and social justice as well as the parts of themselves that reflects their personalities and

interests. While participants thought of advocacy as an important piece of the work they do

online, they also treated it as necessarily different from themselves. This was evidenced by the

majority of advocacy efforts on Instagram being performed in stories as opposed to on people's

personal pages. Participants described how to integrate those two parts of themselves into one

platform. In Instagram, they tended to navigate these two identities by carrying out advocacy

efforts almost entirely in their stories, while they represented their own identities more in their

permanent posts. Participants may keep their activist part of themselves separate from their

personal page in an effort to avoid risking being rejected or feeling marginalized or disconnected

from their followers (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Furthermore, participants may have so deeply

internalized messages regarding the objectification of women's bodies and worth that their

advocacy efforts feel somehow disconnected, and therefore separated into their stories rather

than integrated into their whole persona on their main page.

   Authenticity. Consistent with research about the ways that individuals create their online

selves (boyd, 2008, Davis, 2010, van Doorn, 2010), participants explained how they curated their

social media pages to represent themselves. Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976) suggests

that the underlying interest in self-representation in social media is to experience connection,

belonging, and social inclusion amongst one's peers and followers. Many participants described

in-depth the attention they paid to how they present themselves. They harnessed the use of social

media to compose their own stories, shared only the parts of themselves they want to share, and

curated a particular version of themselves that is consistent with the messaging they found acceptable or desirable. Likely, many of the impressions they hoped to present were informed by cultural trends of objectifying women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) At the same time as they acknowledged this process of painting a picture of who they wanted the world to see, many participants spoke of an interest in being their authentic selves online. Participants seemed to recognize the importance of authenticity in building their social media platforms, perhaps as a way to foster more authentic connection with their followers.

The contradiction between curation and authenticity highlights one of the deepest struggles that participants described online: how to be true to themselves while also fitting into social and cultural expectations of who they should be. In striving to be authentically themselves while also only showing the very best parts of their lives, participants traversed a complicated space between fantasy and reality.

Advocacy. Participants' patterns of curation to showcase the parts of their lives that they wanted to share with their followers juxtaposed with their intentions of using their platform for more serious advocacy efforts in a way that highlights the tensions between these two goals. Participants' focus on advocacy and activism speak, at least in part, to the social and political context in which these interviews were conducted/the current times we are living in. While some of the focus on advocacy may be contextual, participants' discussion of their previous advocacy efforts indicates that the pull to engage in activism and advocacy on social media has become central to the way that some people express themselves and use their platforms.

Each participant in this study discussed a commitment to social justice, describing the ways that she engaged in advocacy and activism through her social media platform. Consistent with previous literature, participants described the accessibility and ease of online activism

(Sharma, 2013; Tynes et al., 2016, Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Participants experienced connection to social movements through their stories and advocacy efforts on social media. The findings support previous research that social media allows for a unique way to join the conversation, share information, protest, discuss beliefs, honor personal experiences (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Tynes at a., 2016). Participants described their deeply held beliefs in equality and social justice. They described the ways that they see injustice in the world based on gender, race, social class, and taking to social media to engage with these inequalities and try to enact social change.

Some participants simultaneously described deep feelings of insecurity about themselves and the worth of their own bodies. While championing others' rights to be unique and still be treated equally, participants identified parts of their own selves as being less than and unworthy of sharing with the world. They experienced the dissonance between the cognitive insight that everyone deserves equality, but the emotional feeling of judging and censoring parts of their own selves and experiences. The attempts to manage this dissonance reflect the central relational paradox (Miller & Stiver, 1997). In other words, participants made active efforts to empathize and connect with others, while at the same time feared the rejection and relational disconnection that they anticipated from others if the participants were to reveal their more complete and true selves.

Intersectionality. This study contributes to the literature concerning intersectionality within the context of the internet. There is a lack of research about the experiences of Black, White, Latina, and Asian American women online. Respondents noted the ways that their own individual identity markers affected their interactions online and what they shared of themselves. Consistent with previous literature, participants in this study used social media as a place to embrace their social locations (Lindsey, 2013).

The participants were keenly aware of their own social locations and identities and the ways they affected their lived experiences, and how that affected what they posted about on social media. Participants described processes of thinking about how and if to share their identities on their social media pages. For more visible identities, like race, participants described additional thought and different considerations and experiences around posting. For example, one participant discussed her journey of using skin lightening filters and coming to a place of acceptance and celebration of her skin. Other participants described the assumptions and expectations that viewers might have of them based on their outwardly presenting identities. For invisible identities, like sexual orientation, participants acknowledged a choice in whether or not to share those parts of themselves. Invisible identities with less stigma associated with them (i.e. education level) felt easier for participants to share than ones that are stigmatized. Structural violence and systemic isms, which are widespread in the U.S., adversely affect people from traditionally marginalized or denigrated groups (Comstock et al., 2008). Chronic cultural disconnections based in race, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identities, therefore permeated all decisions about which parts of oneself to share on social media.

Participants described various identities as impacting not only what parts of themselves they choose to post about and share, but also influencing their advocacy efforts. They felt particular draw and connection to advocacy around identities they shared. Women's rights and empowerment were a theme in the advocacy efforts of participants. Previous research suggests that Black and Hispanic people report being more likely to engage with and see posts about race than White individuals on social networking sites (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). However, participants' discussion of online advocacy suggests that this might be changing. Anecdotal responses from participants suggests the ubiquity of posts about race in the summer of 2020. It is

also possible that participants in this study are particularly open to ideas about social justice, and therefore engage more with online activism.

Implications for Mental Health

Participants described negative consequences of using social networking sites, and yet despite this, they all persisted in engaging with social media. They described a complicated relationship of both feeling harmed by the comparisons they make online, but also gaining a sense of connection in social media that led them to continue engaging in these platforms. These conflicting responses and seemingly incongruous reactions to social media are understandable when considering the contributions of Objectification Theory and Relational Cultural Theory.

Negative Impact on Mental Health. Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) outlines the negative mental health consequences of self-objectification, suggesting that when women internalize others' perspectives as their view of their own bodies, they often experience shame and anxiety. Many participants described self-evaluation processes of thinking about their social media posting that indicate self-objectification. Past studies show that cultural objectification of women has negative mental health consequences (Hill & Fischer; 2008, Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Consistent with studies that suggest that body monitoring and self-objectification are associated with increased risk for mental health outcomes like shame, anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction (Johnson, 2014; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005; Quinn et al., 2006; Szymanski et al., 2011a; Szymanski et al., 2011b; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; Winter, 2017), participants outlined the ways that comparison to other people's posts led them to negative mental health outcomes. It was primarily passive viewing of others' social media pages that lead to these kinds of negative outcomes. The mental

health risks of self-objectification may be compounded by social media, which forces users to think explicitly about the presentation of their own images online.

Positive Impact on Mental Health. Participants enumerated several positive aspects of social media as well. They experienced social media as an outlet to express themselves, provide a sense of confidence, and validate them in ways that respondents could not get elsewhere. Furthermore, while some participants had negative examples of ways social media makes them question their relationships and social life, overwhelmingly, participants described social media as being additive and contributing to a more robust, fulfilling social life.

Relational Cultural Theory posits that relationships are deeply and powerfully impactful on wellbeing (Miller, 1976). Social media allows for a new type of relationship, that supplements, and sometimes even takes the place of, traditional in-person relationships. A relational lens of the participants' experiences with social media illuminates the importance of social relationships and helps to explain the largely positive light in which they cast their social media use. The effects of relationships on social media involves two of Miller's (1976) Five Good Things; increased sense of worth, and desire for more connection. The validation that participants described getting form comments and likes from their follower directly speaks to the ways that social media relationships can contribute to increasing self-worth. Similarly, the satisfaction that participants described feeling from their social media interactions with friends and followers seems to bolster a desire for connection and enhance relationships that already exist.

Limitations

While this research was conducted in a thorough and methodologically sound manner, these results must be interpreted with caution. These limitations are related to methods of

participant recruitment, data collection, the influence of the unique cultural, social, and political context at the time of the interviews, and data analysis. In light of this, the findings of this study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

The qualitative nature of this study means that results should not be generalized to all emerging adult women's experiences with social medial. Rather, these results offer a lens for understanding how some women engage with social media and activism. Further, the women interviewed for this study are unique in their self-selection as being women who use social media and actively post about women's bodies and sexuality. Choosing to take part in a study that they knew would lead them through conversations about these topics, which are sometimes uncomfortable and difficult to talk about, may mean that the participants were comfortable with these topics, and may have spent more time in their lives thinking about women's bodies and sexuality than other women.

Another limitation that was introduced by the nature of the participant sample in this study is the limited diversity among participants. Though all efforts were made to have as diverse a pool of women as possible, the small sample size, suggests there was a relatively limited set of contextual experiences. Given the relative difficulty of trying to recruit participants shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, convenience and snowball sampling were used to find participants. This resulted in a participant pool that shared a set of similar life experiences, including education from a limited number of universities, and for a number of participants, being in the same sorority. Further, there were no questions in the demographic questionnaire or in the interview itself that explicitly asked about political affiliation. However, it became clear after data had already been collected that most participants shared a similar political and social ideology.

The process of data collection also introduced another limitation to this study. The use of semi-structured interviews meant that participants were expected to share intimate details about their lives and experiences with a person they had never met before. Further, the interviews were conducted via zoom, which resulted not only in occasional technology glitches. Additionally, the impersonality of online interviews may have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing. In particular, zoom recording the interviews may have left participants feeling self-conscious about sharing some of their online posting. Indeed, one participant elected not to share their screen or show social media posts to the interviewer at all. Though every effort was made to help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences, the practical experiences of the interviews may have resulted in some discomfort or somewhat limited the participants' ability to share their experiences more completely.

It is critical to consider the unique influence that the current social, political, and ideological context had on this research. The impact of COVID-19 shutdowns, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the subsequent resurgence of Black Lives Matter as a rallying cry for racial equity, and the 2020 presidential election, had unknowable effects on the results. This research was completed at a particular moment in time, when people became even more reliant on social media to be one of the few, if not the only, social interactions in their lives. Furthermore, activism behaviors changed in response to the high-profile police murders of Black bodies in the summer of 2020, and lead to new and increased ways for people to engage in activism through social media and pressure to do so. It is unclear to what extent these influences may be time-limited or longer lasting.

Not only did these realities affect the responses of participants, they changed the methodology of the study. COVID-19 precautions resulted in altered methodology, which

required all interviews to take place via zoom rather than face-to-face. Participants' comfort sharing about their lives may have been altered due to this methodology. Moving all interviews online did allow the research to avoid the geographical limitations that would otherwise have restricted the data collection.

This research was also shaped by my own lens and perspective. My personal identities and life experiences represent both a strength and a limitation to not only the interview process, but also to data analysis and interpretation. My theoretical lenses of Relational Cultural Theory and Objectification Theory shaped how I heard my participants' experiences, and impacted what questions I asked, how I asked them, and when, how, and if I chose to follow up. These orientations, OT and RCT, led me to seek questions about relationships and healing, as well as to explore the ways that women and society viewed their own bodies. Additionally, my experiential lens of being a woman who also navigates societal expectations around bodies and self-presentation informed how I understood my participants. I experienced personal reactions and responses to the stories that participants shared and experienced my own judgments and filters to analyze the images they shared with me during our interviews. In particular, at times, I found myself assigning my own interpretation about the sexuality associated with participants' posts, poses, and outfits that differed from how participants described their own sexualities. In these moments, I pressed further and asked questions when participants noted that they did not express their sexuality in their pictures. For example, when participants included pictures of themselves with partners at events such as proms, weddings, or out on dates, I challenged them to think about how their images may have shown their sexuality in ways that they did not initially think about or intend to share with others. This ultimately shaped not only what was included in the interviews themselves, but also what was missed. Further, my own biases and beliefs shaped

how I interpreted the results. Though I engaged in continuous reflection of my own potential biases, and engaged in journaling and regular conversation with my coding partner, it would be naive to assume that my own worldview did not potentially influence the interpretation of the findings to some extent. Throughout the research, however, I attempted to highlight voices and experiences of participants, and to accurately reflect their narratives.

Implications

The findings from the present study have important implications for clinical practice, intervention, and future research. This research adds to research about Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi, 2010; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012), expanding it to explore the effect of Objectification Theory in an online context. The findings support previous notions of the ways that women internalize messages about the utility of the female body, and highlight the challenges women face in navigating messages about acceptable representation of women's bodies. This study explores some of the detrimental outcomes of self-objectification, and highlights the need for practitioners and educators to work with young women around exploring their self-concept, particularly as it is situated in the broader context of American culture. Therapeutic work focused on self-esteem may affect not only women's mental health, but also their posting behaviors.

The findings of this study also highlight the nuanced connection between social relationships, social media, and mental health. The current investigation intended to explore the ways that relationships were affected by social media use, but was unable to delve as deeply into relational processes given the breadth of topics covered in interviews. The findings indicate that participants view social media as being largely additive to social relationships. At the same time, the internal processes of comparison between the participants and their connections lead to

feelings of isolation and personal discontent. Consequently, social media use was viewed as being both supportive of mental health with regard to social processes, but often times detrimental to mental health and self-esteem.

The present study sheds light on the challenges that young women face while navigating their self-presentation in online spaces. Though extant research has explored self-presentation online (boyd, 2008; Davis, 2010), the impact of social networking on mental health and mood, and online advocacy efforts, there is a dearth of literature that combines all of these things to provide a landscape of emerging adult women's experiences online.

The present study contributes to the complicated landscape of research about the mental health consequences of social networking sites (Chou & Edge, 2012; Gonzalez & Hancock, 2011; Jelenchick et al., 2013; Manago et al., 2015; Meier & Gray, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Pantic, 2014; Pantic et al., 2012). Specifically, these findings illuminate how the interplay between self-concept and social performance of identity can affect not only how participants think about themselves, but also how they represent themselves online and subsequently engage in online relationships through social networking sites. Respondents in this study described the ways in which they curated their self-performance. Using the lens of Relational Cultural Theory's central relational paradox, the curation of how women portray themselves can be understood as a strategy to bring connection through social media (Miller & Stiver, 1997). These findings revealed a complicated relationship between how women feel about the female body in general and how they appraise their own bodies. In an effort to avoid the risk, perceived or actual, of being rejected by peers, participants carefully crafted the identity they wished to present on social media. Though they may strive to be authentic in their relationships, the fear of judgment and vulnerability leads women to carefully analyze and create the version of

themselves they show on social media. This speaks to the contradictory messages they receive about who they are, what they should look like, and how to navigate a world where they look different than cultural ideals.

The data from the present study has significant implications for clinical practice, training, and community intervention, as well as highlights a need for more research to understand the nuances of women's social media behaviors and their effects on mental health and self-esteem. Recommendations for clinical practice and training are particularly relevant given the broadening influence of social media over everyday lives.

Clinical Practice

Given the potential impact that social networking sites and self-presentation have on women's mental health, it is imperative that clinicians bear in mind the multifaceted ways that individuals are impacted by social media use as they approach treatment. The present study highlights the dynamic, complex processes by which women engage online, and showcases the need for services that are responsive to social media use. While women have these experiences online, it also stands to reason that men and non-binary individuals also are deeply impacted by their social media use. Clinicians should be thinking beyond women's experiences on social media to the overall impact that online interactions have on wellbeing, and they should integrate exploration of social media use and its impact into all clinical work.

Helping clients to recognize, and begin to reconcile, the cognitive and emotional reactions they have about their bodies and the ways they share themselves online will be valuable work to increase self-esteem and help them to have realistic expectations of their own bodies. This work is particularly important with emerging adult women. The increased need for, and utilization of, mental health services among college students (Auerbach et al., 2018; Center

for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018; Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2018) suggests an increased need for responsive services that take into account the impact of social media. One way to do this would be to normalize the discussion of social media in clinical work. Asking questions on intake about social media use and the ways women engage online would begin to open up conversations about SNSs that could then span through the course of therapy. Given the difficulty that participants discussed in parsing out reality from fantasy on social media, and the ease with which people represent idealized, curated versions of themselves, it is important to be able to address the difference between social media and reality in clinical work. Additionally, exploring the effect of social media on relationships and self-esteem should become a regular part of discussion with emerging adult women in clinical practice.

Clinicians can play a crucial role in normalizing the stresses that women face online and helping them to think through how to effectively utilize social media in their lives without it becoming harmful or detrimental. The findings of this study indicate that women find social networking to be additive to their social relationships, but that they can often have a negative, detrimental effect on self-esteem. Learning to balance the benefits and harms of social media is important for women in this age group, and clinicians can help women to navigate these challenges.

Mental health practitioners can play an instrumental role in highlighting the insecurities that arise from social media use and helping to normalize the feelings of inadequacy that it can bring, while at the same time helping women to have a more positive, more realistic relationships with the images that they see online. Moreover, clinicians can help women process the conflicting and confusing messaging they receive about the value of all bodies, while at the same time exploring the discomfort woman may feel in their own skin. Findings from this study

indicate that women have difficulty internalizing their stated beliefs about women's bodies –

they believe in body positivity in theory, but in practice have a difficult time internalizing those

supportive ideals for themselves. Many women who participated in this study expressed the idea

that they knew that they should believe that all bodies are good, and yet they have a hard time

feeling like their own bodies were good. Just because they can support other women, does not

mean that women are supporting themselves and internalizing the belief systems that they aspire

to. Clinical practice with women could help them to integrate the cognitive insight that all bodies

are worthy of being loved with the emotional experience of judging and devaluing their own

bodies.

Clinical work with social media users should also explore what parts of one's authentic

experiences are left out of their social media use (Comstock et al., 2008), as well as the origin of

why they hide that part of themselves. Individuals are likely to have increased growth and

connection through their social media interactions if they are able to feel that they are

authentically themselves in their presentation.

Training

Given the possible impact of social media use on mental health, and therefore clinical

practice, it behooves clinicians to become better versed in social media use. Current clinical

training guidelines do not emphasize comfort and familiarity with understanding individuals'

online personas. Doctoral training programs do not typically teach about social media as a part of

socialization practices, yet participants described the tremendous impact that social media had on

their socialization. Many participants discussed the effect that comparing themselves to other

peoples' social media had on their mental health and self-esteem. Clinical training around both

the impact of these types of comparisons as well as how to support clients to diminish the effects

of harmful comparisons would be instrumental in improving social media users' mental health. Coursework in developmental psychology and child development has not caught up to the importance of social media in our society and impact that it has on individuals' lives and mental health from an early age. Given the importance of social media use in everyday life, this is a misstep and a missed clinical opportunity. Clinical training programs should include social networking sites and online interactions and the impact that they can have on mental health as part of their curriculum. Additionally, this area should be expanded on and explored heavily in continuing education courses for licensed clinicians.

Social media use needs to become part of the conversation and part of the training. Clinicians need to learn about the effects of social media use and the mental health implications. In addition to training clinicians about the impact of social media use on mental health, and the importance of exploring these relationships in clinical relationships, mental health practitioners must also consider the ethical considerations of practicing in a world where online context is so important. Clinical training should also include training around the ethical considerations for practitioners who use social media themselves in an era where their clients are also engaged in these sites (Baier, 2019). Social networking sites are a way to share of ourselves while also getting visibility into others' lives. The potential for confusion around the boundaries of the social and professional relationship between clinician and client is high, thereby necessitating training for clinicians around how to navigate social media in a world that their clients could see.

Intervention

The heightened risk for mental illness of college-aged students highlights the need for interventions that focus specifically around emerging adults, aged 18-24 years old (Goodman, 2017, American College Health Association, 2016). As suggested by participants' responses, the

transition to college was a time where many participants noticed changes occurring in their own bodies. Most participants also cited college as a time where they were exposed to new and different messages about what women's bodies could and should look like, and how women's bodies should be treated sexually. These changes in how women experience their bodies suggest that it is particularly important to target training and interventions at college freshman to help them navigate this often times new experience of living their lives away from home.

Furthermore, designing programs for college-aged individuals about navigating social networking sites needs to go beyond how to keep safe or make sure that they are hire-able in the future, but really address the mental health and self-esteem consequences of social media use and ways to combat some of the negative effects. Education for emerging adults about the difference between reality and social media would be an important step to begin to mitigate some of the mental health consequences of social media comparisons. This work is particularly important with high school and college aged women, to help them understand the potentially harmful messages that they internalize online and help them navigate responding to these messages in their social media presence.

Research

This study is the first of its kind to focus on messages about female bodies and sexuality, self-presentation on social media, relationships, and advocacy. As such, the findings provide a wealth of information about the unique stressors that women face online. Future research can build upon these ideas in a number of areas.

First, this was an exploratory study with a limited sample size. Future work would benefit from increased diversity and representation in the sample population. While every effort was made to recruit a diverse sample, the respondents in the current study ended up being

disproportionally White, heterosexual women, who identified as being part of the Christian faith, and who had obtained high levels of educational achievement. Future research should consider exploring on a larger scale with more representative sample.

Second, this study focused exclusively on people who identified as female. Many of the participants discussed their impressions that social media had different meanings and implications for men, though they were not sure. Exploring the ways that men process their self-presentation would help to fill out the picture of what social media use looks like for emerging adult students. Another important area to consider is the challenges that non-binary individuals face on social networking sites, particularly around representation of their own bodies and sexuality. Given the immense pressure that society places on individuals to fit into the gender binary, one can imagine that people who do not identify in that way would have a different set of thoughts, challenges, and motivations in how they choose to represent themselves online.

Third, future research should also explore the ways that women understand their own sexuality and how they present their sexuality online. In the interviews, there was a wide range in even the interpretation of what it meant to show their sexuality online. Many participants viewed questions about sexuality as referring to their sexual orientation, while others understood performance of sexuality online as referring to ways in which they were overtly sexual in their posts. Although participants expressed some variation in opinions about what online sexuality was, many of them reported not ever thinking about their sexuality as it related to their online posting. They talked about feeling as though their posts do not reveal anything about their sexuality.

Fourth, the relationship between social media use and mental health remains unclear. Some of the negative outcomes of objectification (e.g. health, self-harm behaviors, physical

and/or sexual dysfunction, disordered eating (Impett et al., 2006; Johnson, 2014; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005) were not explicitly explored in this research and should be evaluated in future studies.

Fifth, the present study explored the ideas of self-concept and advocacy in tandem, however many participants expressed that the reality of their social media use was that they thought about themselves as individuals differently than they thought about their online advocacy efforts. Due to this disconnect, most participants described their stories as a place to be advocates, whereas their permanent feeds were the place to showcase themselves. As online advocacy gains a seat at the table in social justice efforts, it would be helpful to explore the role of online advocacy as it relates to individual self-concept. How is it that people think of themselves as advocates, yet silo their advocacy work as being a different, separate part of themselves that is somehow other than their own individual identity? Further, given the rise in popularity of social media advocacy work, it would be important to conduct studies to help determine the effectiveness and utility of social media activism and online advocacy, and particularly whether this type of online advocacy helps to enact change for marginalized populations. Exploration into the utility of social media advocacy work and its ability to create change would be helpful in guiding individuals' behavior. Many of the participants asked about online advocacy and queried during their interviews about how they could be more effective in their social justice work. There is clear appetite to be agents of change, and future research could help these women, and others, learn to do this most effectively.

Finally, the present study raises questions about the utility of social media and in what contexts it is helpful versus harmful. Future work will explore the clinical and the research

implications of this incongruence in order to better inform social media use, intervention, and clinical work with individuals involved in social networking.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings are consistent with Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1976), suggesting that emerging adult women experience a dynamic, context-specific set of influences on their social media, which, in turn, shape their relationship to their bodies and with others. Experiencing conflicting messages between what women's bodies should be and their own beliefs about inclusivity and acceptance led women to have deeply complicated relationships with their own bodies and posting behavior. In addition, participants experienced both positive and negative mental health consequences of engagement in social media culture. The findings underscore the importance of clinicians, researchers, and educators attending to the sociocultural influences on social media use, messaging about women's bodies and sexuality, and its impact on women's wellbeing.

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Tables

Table 1

Overview of participant demographics

Age (years)	Sex	Current level of education	Sexual orientation[a]	Race[a]	Ethnicity[a]	Religious affiliation[a]	Social class	Importance of SNS' in everyday life
20	Female	Senior	Straight	White	German	Christianity	Middle class	Very important
24	Female	College degree	Bisexual	White	White	N/A	Middle class	Very important
22	Female	College degree	Bisexual	White	White Jew	None	Middle class	Very important
21	Female	Junior	Straight	White	White	None	Upper middle class	Very important
21	Female	College degree	Bisexual	Caucasian	Russian Israeli	Agnostic	Upper middle class	Absolutely essential
21	Female	Senior	Straight	White	White	Orthodox	Middle class	Very important
20	Female	Junior	Heterosexual	White	White/Caucasian	Catholic/Agnostic	Middle class	Very important
20	Female	Junior	Heterosexual	Biracial - African American, Pacific Islander	African American	Christianity	Working lower class	Very important
21	Female	College degree	Straight	Black	Ghanaian-American	Christian	Middle class	Very important
20	Female	Junior	Straight	White	White	Agnostic/N/A	Upper middle class	Very important
21	Female	Senior	Heterosexual	Asian	Asian	Christian	Low income	Very important
20	Female	Senior	Straight	Asian	Indian	Catholic	Upper middle class	Of little importance

Age (years)	Sex	Current level of education	Sexual orientation[a]	Race[a]	Ethnicity[a]	Religious affiliation[a]	Social class	Importance of SNS' in everyday life
25	Female	Master's degree[b]	Heterosexual	White	Caucasian	Protestant	Middle class	Very important
19	Female	Sophomore	Heterosexual	White	Hispanic/Latino	Christian	middle class	Absolutely essential

[a] Responses represent participant descriptors of themselves.

[b] This question did not include an option for Master's degree; however, this participant discussed her education level as being an important part of her identity, and therefore, it was changed here accordingly.

Table 2
Overview of Social Media Use

	Instagram	Facebook	Snapchat	Twitter	Other
	n	n	n	n	n
Sites Used	14	11	13	8	6
Frequency of use					
Less than once daily	-	2	2	1	3
Once daily	2	6	2	-	2
Multiple times per day	12	3	9	7	1
Time spent					
Less than 1/2 hour daily	2	8	8	1	3
1/2 hour - 1 hour daily	6	3	3	5	1
1-2 hours daily	5	-	2	2	1
2+ hours daily	1	-	-	-	1
Frequency of active use					
Monthly	3	10	2	2	5
Weekly	8	1	3	1	1
Daily	1	-	5	3	0
More than once per day	2	-	3	2	0
Frequency of passive use					
Monthly	-	2	2	1	2
Weekly	-	1	1	-	2
Daily	6	7	7	1	1
More than once per day	8	1	3	6	1
Importance rating					
Average importance[a]	4.42	2.36	3.54	4.25	2.83

[a] Participants rated average importance to their daily life on a 1-6 Likert scale, with 1 being "not at all important" and 6 being "absolutely essential".

Table 3
Social Media Importance

	Frequency
	n
Absolutely essential	2
Very important	11
Of little importance	1
Not at all important	-

Table 4
Social Media Uses

	Frequency n
Posting pictures	14
Staying in touch with friends	13
Engaging in social activism	12
Updating people on their lives	10
Networking	9
Reading the news	9
Making new friends	4

Table 5

Participant Descriptions of Self-Presentation and Curation

Interview	Participant Quote	Description of Personal Curation Efforts
1	"Something that I've started to do since being quarantined to so I have more time to play around with is like getting like an Instagram aesthetic so like all the pictures look cohesive together, but I'm really bad at it cause some picture just don't look like right so I'll just like break it. Um. But I think something else that I like go for is like looking, like, fun. Like it be like for me it's like very much like a typical college experience and I show that a lot. Like all pictures that like going out with friends or um pictures like at the beach. Like that kinda stuff. So just kinda like displaying my like everyday life, not in a everyday sense, but like the fun little parts of it like things I do."	This participant spoke about her desire to spend time ensuring that her Instagram feed appears cohesive and further spoke about the effort she put into "going for an Instagram aesthetic." Additionally, this participant spoke about using her social media platform, specifically Instagram, to showcase the highlights of her day to day life and portray a feed that speaks to her being fun and "showing off" these moments.
2	"I would say that it [her social posts] says about me that I am informed and interested and like what is happening to, um, female and minority bodies in the world. Um, I would say that it, it says I am affected by all of these things that are going on. Um, yeah. I think it's – it's more of a hodge-podge than a direct message. But I would say that I very rarely like post something that is super open and honest about myself. Um, I think the most recent thing would be the post I have up now, which is just about like being furloughed from quarantine, and that effect on mental health. And that sort of thing. But I think in general, it's kind of just a reflection of what I think of what is going on in the world. "	This participant primarily expressed using her social media platform as an outlet to speak about more social justice oriented initiatives. She spoke about how her posts would show her followers that she both informed about and invested in larger issues that women and other marginalized communities face. Additionally, when speaking about her Instagram page, she mentioned posting more surface level pictures that then illicit more surface level interactions.
3	"Like I'm not posting anything mundane on social media normally...Like there's a lot of down time throughout the day, and you don't post about that. At least I don't. And so if all you're seeing on social media is high points of the day or low points of the day, like you're not getting the full picture."	This participant spoke about using platform to share highlights as opposed to more mundane occurrences in her life. Additionally, this participant spoke about her safety concerns around posting and how this affects how she curates her personal profile. She spoke about her dislike around posting pictures of herself, specifically full body-pictures as she never knows who exactly has access to those images.
4	"People know what I look like in real life but they can know I might look in the mirror and think 'oh this outfit isn't flattering.' Other people might just see it and be like 'oh you look cute.'… In real life it's because you're just interacting face-to-face, you can't choose how you present yourself beyond just what you're wearing, whereas online, you're actively making that choice of how you want to present yourself and I think that kind of stirs up 'ok how do I want to look in front of all these people even though they know what I really look like.'"	This participant spoke about posting pictures that she feels she looks good in, as well posting beautiful pictures of different landscapes. This participant also highlighted the unique nature of social media and further discussed how she experiences more pressure when posting on social media because of its ever-lasting nature. She expressed that with social media represent you have more control over every aspect of what you are putting out.

Interview	Participant Quote	Description of Personal Curation Efforts
5	"I take pride in my Instagram feed, one hundred percent..., I guess sometimes you, sometimes I post because it looks really nice and it's a really good portfolio and it's like this is me as a person, this is like the best version of me that I would like to portray."	This participant spoke about wanting to present the best version of herself. Additionally, she spoke about using her platform as a space to express and showcase her interests such as fashion and travel. Further this participant spoke of how her profile shows herself as someone who is happy and further highlights the cool things she's been able to do and experience.
6	"I just hope it comes off that I'm confident and that I don't, Yeah, I think that's pretty much it. I mean I try not to be like 'oh I'm very sexy' or something cause I don't think so, but I just think it's very - I hope it's confidence that comes off and I hope people see that."	This participant spoke about hoping that her profile exudes confidence. Further, this participant spoke about taking great pride in her profile. She mentioned the importance of posting things that she is personally comfortable with and making this her top priority as she decides how to curate her profile. She specifically spoke about this in the context of showing her body and making sure that she "doesn't show too much," because she feels like that's just not who she is. Additionally, she spoke heavily about her using captions as a way to express herself in a way that the picture she posts may not be able to.
7	"I think that they say I am pretty confident and pretty comfortable with what I look like. And I think that they say that I am pretty attractive. I think that's one of the goals that I have. I think that's a goal most people have with their social media – is to present their most attractive version of themselves. I think my page does that. But I – my goal is kind of to do it more subtly, I guess is what I'm trying to do by sharing more interesting things than just pictures of myself like saying 'look at me.' I guess my goal is to show confidence and show being interesting and being, I don't know – being diverse, while also still fitting the ideal body type and the ideal goals that we've collectively chosen."	This participant spoke about posting pictures in which she looks attractive, and further spoke about posting content that is interesting and fits the image she hopes to go for. In efforts to curate a profile that prioritizes these factors, the participant spoke about regretting old posts and further archiving old photos. Additionally, when speaking about curation, this participant spoke about balancing advocacy related efforts and posting more image focused pictures.
8	"I think [my page] would say I am leading a content, happy life and I seem happy with everything about myself and I like to travel, which is just yes, to an extent true, but also not the full picture."	This participant spoke about fitting the narrative of a stereotypical girl in regards to her sexuality and gender expression. Further she spoke about how her profile shows her as a happy and fulfilled person. She mentioned that in curating her profile, she tends to focus on posting about high points and doesn't post her more difficult experiences as openly. She expressed that she feels like on a scale of 1 to 10 of her Instagram portray who she really is, she falls under a 6.

Interview	Participant Quote	Description of Personal Curation Efforts
9	"When I look at this post, I see someone that's accepting of their body and how it's changed and I see that I'm confident in my skin. I would say that it represents a woman that won't be put down again, a woman that has grown and that has become comfortable in herself. A woman that feels very strong in her culture. Those are the things that come to mind when I see this particular picture. It represents myself, it represents my culture and feeling comfortable in my skin, feeling comfortable in my body and how it's morphed into, how I've grown as a person not only internally but physically."	This participant spoke of her profile exuding comfort and confidence, specifically around body image and personal expression. She spoke of how she's experiences a shift in how she curates her profile, and more recently has prioritized representing her true self, free of filters, and sometime makeup. In curating her profile, she expressed wishing to showcase her most authentic self.
10	"I don't pretend to be someone I'm not. I do what I do I guess. that I wouldn't post anything that I wouldn't say in real life or do in real life, like stage something and take a photo so I can post it on Instagram."	This participant spoke staying true to who she is and not using her social media platforms to portray someone that she is not. Additionally, this participant spoke about not going out of her way to post pictures that show off her body.
11	"It shows that I'm confident, I'm happy in my body, it's just a picture of myself so I'm front and center."	This participant spoke about having her profile exude confidence, specifically around body image. She also spoke about the curation process in that it involves pre-planning.
12	"Obviously everyone portrays a different version of themselves on social media so I think my version is someone who travels, who goes places with her friends, who does fun things. I only actually really only started posting selfies or singular pictures of myself after coming to college, so I think that's something that's important to how I'm portrayed. I've never thought about what the world or my friends get, I think it's just pictures that I want to share and I want people to perceive me in a certain way, which is bad I guess but it is what it is. For me, it kind of showcases the best side of myself."	This participant spoke of using her platform to share highlights of her life and experiences, and further showcase the best parts of herself. She also mentioned a relatively recent shift in the type of content she posts as she has started posting more individualized pictures such a selfie. Further she mentioned feeling more comfortable posting pictures that were captured from the waist up. She spoke of posting pictures in which she will be perceived a certain way, specifically around being perceived as a looking good in a specific photo.

Interview	Participant Quote	Description of Personal Curation Efforts
13	"I don't know that this is a woman specific thing, but I am always having a good time. I am always enjoying my job. Nothing is ever hard. And I have really cute fall decorations that I put up and have a good home. I think that it is very much this 'I have it together and my husband and I are so happy all the time. And like my mom and I are so happy.' Everything is what it should be, as a successful adult woman. And I love my job and I love my friends and I'm good at baking. But yeah, I think things that are gonna make people laugh, make people like me more or like will see me as a fun approachable human being. Like feedback I've gotten before is that either I'm far too intense and like a little bitchy or like I'm too sweet and too kind, and like that I'm perceived as fake. And so I think that both in my job and on my social media page, I try to dispel some of that in that I'm just me. Like I'm just – I don't think those things are particularly accurate descriptions of me. But I guess there's an active effort to make sure that people don't think that."	This participant spoke of how her platform shows her as a successful adult, more specifically "a wholesome married adult." Additionally she mentioned in curating her profile she actively tries to exude being approachable and human because of people perceptions of her outside of social media. She mentioned using her platform as a way to stray from these perceptions and create & curate a narrative that is truer to who she is. Additionally, this participant spoke about posting pictures that she feels good about and not wanting to use different forms of editing when posting pictures.
14	"A lot of the things that I post on Instagram I just am kind of like, I like this picture. I think I look good in this picture and so I'm going to post a picture like I think that that's kind of really just my mindset on the whole thing comes up to it."	This participant spoke of how it's difficult for her to even talk through how she curated her profile because it's primarily based on her simply posting a picture she enjoys. Additionally, she mentioned that when posting she doesn't necessarily place her body at the forefront, but she does feel more comfortable with her body because she is, presently, confident and happy with her body.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Women who
- are between 18 and 25 years old
- use social networking sites daily
- have actively posted about women's bodies or sexuality
- were raised in the Unites States

WHAT WILL BE ASKED OF YOU?

Participate in a 60-75 minute zoom interview about cultural messages about women's bodies and sexuality, your social media posts, and your experience with online social networking sites.

WANT TO PARTICIPATE OR LEARN MORE?

Fill out a social media use form

or

Email the researcher of this study, Jena Talbot, at gordonjt@bc.edu

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

<div align="center">

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Boston College

Department of Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology

Informed Consent for Participation in "Body, Sexuality, and Social Media among Emerging Adult Women"

</div>

I agree to participate in the research project, "Body, Sexuality, and Social Media among Emerging Adult Women," being conducted by Jena Gordon Talbot, MA, PhD candidate at Boston College. I am willing to discuss cultural messages about women's bodies and sexuality, discuss and show the investigator and describe my social media posts, and my experience with online social networking sites. I am being asked to participate in this study because:

- I identify as female
- I am between 18 and 25 years old
- I use social networking sites daily, and engage in active posting at least once per week
- I have actively posted about women's bodies and/or sexuality at least once in the past six months.

I understand that the purpose of the study is to better understand my social media posting habits and the factors that influence my online social networking behavior. If I agree to participate in the study, I will be asked to complete a brief social media use questionnaire. Based on my responses to the questionnaire, I might be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and answer questions in an interview format by online videoconference (zoom). I understand that my participation in the study will take approximately 60-75 minutes.

I understand that there are minimal physical, social, and economic risks associated with the study, although the study may include risks that are unknown at this time. It is possible that I may experience some discomfort in answering some of the researcher's questions. In this situation, I will be provided with some brief counseling and provided a referral to a counseling service if necessary.

In terms of benefits, I understand that participating in the study will help gain a better understanding of my own experiences around social media activity. Indirect benefits may include helping to identify the effects of messages about women's bodies, roles, and femininity.

I understand that the interview will be recorded via videoconference (Zoom). After the interview, the recording will be transcribed into a typed document. This transcription will not include any reference to my identity. I understand that the recording will be destroyed after the completion of the project. Thus, any data or answers to questions will remain confidential with regard to my identity. I also understand that screen shots of my social media accounts may be taken, with my verbal permission during the interview. I understand that these images will be used only for analysis

Boston College
IRB Approved
Expedited
March 30, 2020

purposes and will not be reproduced in any way or shared outside of analysis for this project. I understand that these images will be destroyed after the completion of this project. Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law. I understand that the findings from this study will be disseminated in professional presentations and publications, and that anything I share in the interview that may be included in these presentations or publications will not involve any reference to my identity. The Investigator will make every effort to keep my research records confidential, but it cannot be assured. Records that identify me and the consent form signed by me may be looked at by a regulatory agency such as the federal agencies overseeing human subject research and/or the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

Mainly just the researchers will have access to information; however, please note that a few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without jeopardizing my relationship with Jena Gordon Talbot, MA, or Boston College. I will receive a $5 gift card to Starbucks as a token of appreciation for my participation, even if I elect to end my participation in the study before the end of the interview. There are no costs for me to participate in this study.

I understand that if I have any questions related to my participation in this study I may contact Jena Gordon Talbot, M.A. at jena.gordon@bc.edu and (617)893-2440, faculty advisor Usha Tummala-Narra, Ph.D. at tummalan@bc.edu and (617) 552-4491, or the Office of Research Protection, Boston College, irb@bc.edu and (617) 552-4778.

I have read and understand the foregoing information. My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature:_____ Date ____/ _____/ _____

Participant's Name:_____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: ____ / ____ /____

Investigator' Name: _____

Appendix C: Social Media Use Form

You have been directed to this form because you responded to a request for participation for a research study. Completion of this form means you are willing to discuss cultural messages about women's bodies and sexuality, discuss and describe your social media posts, and your experience with online social networking sites.

Eligible participants:
- Identify as female
- Are between 18 and 25 years old
- Use social networking sites daily and engage in active posting at least once per week
- Have actively posted about women's bodies or sexuality at least once in the past six months
- Were raised in the United States

How old are you?
- ☐ 17 years old or younger
- ☐ 18-25 years old
- ☐ 26 years old or older

Informed Consent
Informed Consent for Participation in "Body, Sexuality, and Social Media among Emerging Adult Women"

I agree to participate in the research project, "Body, Sexuality, and Social Media among Emerging Adult Women," being conducted by Jena Gordon Talbot, MA, PhD candidate at Boston College. I am being asked to participate in this study because:
- I identify as female
- I am between 18 and 25 years old
- I use social networking sites daily, and engage in active posting at least once per week
- I have actively posted about women's bodies and/or sexuality at least once in the past six months.

I understand that the purpose of the study is to better understand my social media posting habits and the factors that influence my online social networking behavior. If I agree to participate in the study, I will be asked to complete the following brief social media use questionnaire (5-10 minutes). Based on my responses to the questionnaire, I might be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and answer questions in an interview format, either in-person or by online videoconference. I understand that my participation in the interview will take approximately 60-75 minutes.

I understand that there are minimal physical, social, and economic risks associated with the study, although the study may include risks that are unknown at this time. It is possible that I may experience some discomfort in answering some of the researcher's questions. In this situation, I will be provided with some brief counseling and provided a referral to a counseling service if necessary.

In terms of benefits, I understand that participating in the study will help gain a better understanding of my own experiences around social media activity. Indirect benefits may include helping to identify the effects of messages about women's bodies, roles, and femininity. Participation may also help inform the development of psychological and social interventions with emerging adult women. Further, participation can help to illuminate potential policies related to women's rights, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.

I understand that the interview will be recorded on audiotape either in person or via videoconference (Zoom). After the interview, the recording will be transcribed into a typed document. This transcription will not include any reference to my identity. I understand that the audiotape will be destroyed after the completion of the project. Thus, any data or answers to questions will remain confidential with regard to my identity. I also understand that screen shots of my social media accounts may be taken, with my verbal permission during the interview. I understand that these images will be used only for analysis purposes and will not be reproduced in any way or shared outside of analysis for this project. I understand that these images will be destroyed after the completion of this project. Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law. I understand that the findings from this study will be disseminated in professional presentations and publications, and that anything I share in the interview that may be included in these presentations or publications will not involve any reference to my identity. The Investigator will make every effort to keep my research records confidential, but it cannot be assured. Records that identify me and the consent form signed by me may be looked at by a regulatory agency such as the Federal Agencies overseeing human subject research and/or the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

Mainly just the researchers will have access to information; however, please note that a few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without jeopardizing my relationship with Jena Gordon Talbot, MA, or Boston College. If selected to be interviewed, I will receive a $5 gift card to Starbucks as a token of appreciation for my participation, even if I elect to end my participation in the study before the end of the interview. There are no costs for me to participate in this study.

I understand that if I have any questions related to my participation in this study I may contact Jena Gordon Talbot, M.A. at jena.gordon@bc.edu and (617)893-2440, faculty advisor Usha Tummala-Narra, Ph.D. at tummalan@bc.edu and (617) 552-4491, or the Office of Research Protection, Boston College, irb@bc.edu and (617) 552-4778.

I have read and understand the foregoing information.
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

I agree to participate in this study.
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Social Media Use Survey

How important are social networking sites in your everyday life?
- ☐ Not at all important
- ☐ Of little importance
- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Absolutely essential

I use social media to:
- ☐ Stay in touch with friends/family
- ☐ Make new friends
- ☐ Read the news
- ☐ Post pictures
- ☐ Update people about my life
- ☐ Network
- ☐ Engage in social activism
- ☐ Other…

I have used social media in the past 6 months to post about women's gender, bodies, or sexuality.
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which social media sites do you use?
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Other…

Facebook

Do you use Facebook?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

How often do you visit Facebook?
- ☐ Less than once per day
- ☐ Once daily
- ☐ Multiple times per day

How much time do you spend on Facebook?
- ☐ Less than ½ hour daily
- ☐ ½ hour-1 hour daily

☐ 1-2 hours daily
☐ 2+ hours daily

How much do you engage in active Facebook use (i.e. posting pictures, text, news articles, comments)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How much do you engage in passive Facebook use (i.e. observing content others have posted)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How important is Facebook in your social life?

Not at all important					Absolutely essential
1	2	3	4	5	6

Twitter
Do you use Twitter?
☐ Yes
☐ No

How often do you visit Twitter?
☐ Less than once per day
☐ Once daily
☐ Multiple times per day

How much time do you spend on Twitter?
☐ Less than ½ hour daily
☐ ½ hour-1 hour daily
☐ 1-2 hours daily
☐ 2+ hours daily

How much do you engage in active Twitter use (i.e. posting pictures, text, news articles, comments)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How much do you engage in passive Twitter use (i.e. observing content others have posted)?
☐ Monthly

☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How important is Twitter in your social life?

Not at all important					Absolutely essential
1	2	3	4	5	6

Instagram
Do you use Instagram?
☐ Yes
☐ No

How often do you visit Instagram?
☐ Less than once per day
☐ Once daily
☐ Multiple times per day

How much time do you spend on Instagram?
☐ Less than ½ hour daily
☐ ½ hour-1 hour daily
☐ 1-2 hours daily
☐ 2+ hours daily

How much do you engage in active Instagram use (i.e. posting pictures, text, news articles, comments)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How much do you engage in passive Instagram use (i.e. observing content others have posted)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How important is Instagram in your social life?

Not at all important					Absolutely essential
1	2	3	4	5	6

Snapchat
Do you use Snapchat?
☐ Yes

    □   No

How often do you visit Snapchat?
    □   Less than once per day
    □   Once daily
    □   Multiple times per day

How much time do you spend on Snapchat?
    □   Less than ½ hour daily
    □   ½ hour-1 hour daily
    □   1-2 hours daily
    □   2+ hours daily

How much do you engage in active Snapchat use (i.e. posting pictures, text, news articles, comments)?
    □   Monthly
    □   Weekly
    □   Daily
    □   More than once per day

How much do you engage in passive Snapchat use (i.e. observing content others have posted)?
    □   Monthly
    □   Weekly
    □   Daily
    □   More than once per day

How important is Snapchat in your social life?

Not at all important					Absolutely essential
1	2	3	4	5	6

Other social networking sites
Do you use other social networking sites?
    □   Yes
    □   No

Which other social networking sites do you use?
How often do you visit these other sites?
    □   Less than once per day
    □   Once daily
    □   Multiple times per day

How much time do you spend on these other sites?
    □   Less than ½ hour daily
    □   ½ hour-1 hour daily
    □   1-2 hours daily

☐ 2+ hours daily

How much do you engage in active use on other social networking sites (i.e. posting pictures, text, news articles, comments)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How much do you engage in passive use on other social networking sites (i.e. observing content others have posted)?
☐ Monthly
☐ Weekly
☐ Daily
☐ More than once per day

How important are other social networking sites to your social life?

Not at all important					Absolutely essential
1	2	3	4	5	6

Thank you
Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this survey. You will be contacted by email if you are selected to participate in an hour long interview about your social media use.

Please provide the best email to reach you at if you are selected for the interview process.
_____

Thank you for your time.

Appendix D: Demographic Background Form

Age (in years): _____

Sex:
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Current level of education:
- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Freshman in college
- ☐ Sophomore in college
- ☐ Junior in college
- ☐ Senior in college
- ☐ College degree
- ☐ Master's degree

Sexual orientation: _____

Race: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Religious affiliation (if any): _____

Social class:
- ☐ low income
- ☐ lower middle class
- ☐ middle class
- ☐ upper middle class
- ☐ upper class

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

1. **Social media - general**
   a. Which is your favorite social media site? Why?
      i. What do you use it for?
   b. In what way do you use social networking sites (i.e. passive – viewing others' posts, versus active – posting yourself)?
      i. How much time do you spend thinking about what you want to post/share on social networking sites?
      ii. How do you decide what to post?
      iii. What are the key factors you take into account?

2. **Messages about women's bodies, sexuality, and gender and influence on self-presentation on social media**
   a. What messages have you received about women's bodies (i.e. taught by others you know through direct or indirect conversation or online posting, seen on TV, News, Magazines, etc.)?
   b. Sexuality refers to the way that people experience and express themselves sexually (biological, erotic, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual feelings/behaviors). What messages have you received about female sexuality (i.e. taught by others you know through direct or indirect conversation or online posting, seen on TV, News, Magazines, etc.)?
   c. What messages do you receive through social media about women's bodies and sexuality?
   d. Do you think that being a woman has influenced your views about women's bodies and sexuality? If so, how?
      i. How does being a woman affect how you think about and want to represent your own body on social media?
      ii. How does being a woman affect how you think about and what to represent your own sexuality?
   e. Are the messages about women's bodies and sexuality that you have learned consistent with one another?
      i. If inconsistent, what are sources of inconsistency?
         1. How do you make sense of these conflicting messages?
   f. Are there other aspects of your identity (race, class, SES) that impact the messages you get about your body and sexuality?
      i. How do they impact your thinking?
      ii. How do they impact your likelihood of responding?
      iii. Do these messages affect what you choose to post on social networking sites? How so?
   g. How closely have you followed current trends towards public recognition of how women are treated in American society (e.g. #MeToo, abortion debates, #SayHerName)?
      i. Have current popular and political cultural references (e.g. #MeToo, abortion debates, social media influencer posts) about women's bodies and sexuality affected how you think about yourself?

1. If so, how do these affect what you choose to show/share of yourself on social media?

h. Do you think that the messages you receive about women, and women's bodies and sexuality affect how you portray yourself on social media?

i. Do the messages you've received about women's bodies and sexuality influence how you see movements like #MeToo?

    i. Did you participate in #MeToo? Why or why not?
How do you decide whether or not to participate with movements around bodies and sexuality online, and which social activism movements to participate online?

3. **Performance of body and sexuality in social media spaces**

    a. **Social Media – Self-Presentation**

        i. Do you think that there are certain ways that you present yourself to others as a woman? How do you communicate, talk about, or show your body or feelings or thoughts about your body on social networking sites?

            1. Can you show me an example in a post?

            2. What does this/do these posts say about you and your body?

        ii. Do you think that there are certain ways that you present your sexuality to others?

            1. How do you express your sexuality on social networking sites?

        iii. Can you show me an example in a post?

            1. What does this/do these posts say about you and your sexuality?

        iv. If you had to think broadly about what these posts collectively say about you and your body, what would that be?

        v. How accurately does your (various) social media account(s) represent who you are as a person (how you think of yourself, how you want others to see you)?

    b. **Social Media – Relational/social interaction**

        i. What type of responses are you hoping to get from other when you post on social media?

            1. How do you feel when you do/do not get the responses you were hoping for?

                a. Does it affect the way that you feel about yourself?

            2. Can you share an example of a post you made, how others responded, and how you felt about the way that they responded?

            3. How does social media use affect your relationships? Friendships? With family? Romantic? How does posting about your body and/or sexuality affect these relationships?

                a. Is the effect of social media on relationships different for online versus in person relationships?

            4. How does social media use affect how you feel about yourself? How does posting about your body and/or sexuality affect how you feel about yourself