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Everyone is on Their Phones: Eighth Graders' Struggle with Social Media in School

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of College of Education and Social Work

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

George Weinhardt

April 2023

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the brave participants who were willing to be part of this study and to all the students who are traversing through the trepidatious period known as middle school. I am continuously humbled and energized by the passion and resiliency I see in middle school students. While this study was many years in the making, the concept of making sure the collective voice of the participants remained in the foreground was one of the few constants throughout the various iterations. My hope is that the youth will critically examine and question how structures and power alter our world in an attempt to produce a better tomorrow.

Acknowledgments

I believe it is fitting to begin with a huge thank you to Dr. Heather Schugar. I still remember our conversation during my interview three years ago about the opportunity to join Cohort 5! Your compassion and commitment have permeated throughout the EDD program. While Dr. Schugar welcomed me into this program, Dr. Backer's inquisitive and reflective personality was instrumental in completing this program. Some of the concepts he discussed with our cohort during Year II helped inspire the foundation of this study. Whether I was sharing musings during Year II on course readings or trying to hold together my composure at the crux of my dissertation, you always listened and offered just the right amount of feedback to allow me to take the next step. Lastly, I would like to thank all the other inspiring professors and colleagues I grew alongside throughout this journey.

This journey, like many, was a selfish one. I will forever be indebted to Tris, Ralph, Keene, Michelle, and George for the sacrifices they made which allowed me to complete this journey. Tris, thank you for giving up three years of nights and weekends together as I immersed myself in the literature, my writings, and the chaos of my thoughts. It's been a minute, but I am back! Ralph, my loyal companion, your company during weekend reading and writing marathons was priceless. We love you and are blessed that you are still with us. Keene, I'm sorry for missing many moments during your first year of life. Know that I will always be there for you, and look forward to the moments yet to come. Last but not least, Mom and Dad. Thank you for everything you've sacrificed for us. Since a young age, you have encouraged and supported my desire to question my surroundings. None of this would have been possible without your support! Dad, Mom, Keene, Ralph, and Tris, thank you! I love you more than words could ever express.

Abstract

This qualitative study examined social media in the school setting from the point of view of eighth-grade participants. This study implemented a focused ethnography, examining a group of individuals' perspectives on a focused area of their shared culture. Using critical theory, this study examined qualitative data with the concepts of structures, subjectivity, and power at the confluence of social media and school for eighth-grade students. Qualitative data were collected using five semi-structured focus groups, artifact analysis, fieldnotes, and memos. The findings highlighted that eighth-grade students acknowledge that there is a struggle between social media and school. This struggle alters their school experience, both in terms of subjectivity—in the form of a struggle for recognition—and in the structures they navigate daily—in the form of a friction between the media and scholastic apparatus. The findings show this struggle as an antinomic, ambiguous, and ambivalent battle where students experienced both advantages and disadvantages from the confluence between social media and school.

Keywords: social media, middle school, critical theory, struggle

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Chapter I: Introduction

“Good morning Mrs. Gibson. How are...” my words stopped as I began processing the feeling that reverberated throughout my body. I tried to determine whether a student just pushed or lightly punched me in the back. As I turned, my curiosity was confirmed as I saw Mrs. Gibson’s face quickly turning red. She appeared to be using all her energy to mask her emotions. I finished my 180-degree turn to find an eighth-grade student staring up at me in total confusion.

The stream of students flowed unphased around us momentarily before the student broke our silence, “Mr. Weinhardt, I’m so sorry. I was walking. I was on my phone. I guess I was distracted. I didn’t mean to run into you.” The eighth-grader was as confused as me and thoroughly embarrassed. Before I could respond, he had picked up the phone he had dropped due to the unexpected collision and shifted back into the stream of students.

I turned to Mrs. Gibson, “Did that really just happen? Did that eighth-grader not see me talking to you in the middle of the hallway?”

“You’re 6’5”. I saw him heading towards you but figured he would have noticed you. He had no clue! I’m sorry, but I watched the whole thing,” Mrs. Gibson said as she started to laugh. “I taught him last year. He is a great kid. I’ve never seen anything like that before. I don’t know what he was looking at, but his mind was clearly elsewhere!”

Problem Statement

The rise of online social networking platforms has (re)shaped how individuals interact and navigate their physical and social worlds (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Dyer, 2015; Campbell & Park, 2008). The infusion of smartphones and internet-capable devices (Long et al., 2021; Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Nesi et al., 2018; Dyer, 2017) into everyday life provides a multitude of opportunities to witness the collision individuals experience between the physical and digital realms. How has this infiltration of technology changed how individuals interact with the world? Has this recent injection of technology, specifically social media, into everyday life shifted how outside forces influence the individual? This dissertation is about the melding of social media and school and how this interplay might alter eighth-grade students' school day.

Purpose

This study examined whether students within a site-specific suburban school setting struggle with social media during the school day. A qualitative approach supports the research purpose, representing the participants' lived experiences and understanding the interplay between social media and school. Tatlow-Golden and Guerin (2010) argued for using qualitative methods when examining youth experiences since a child's perspective and experiences may not be accessible by scales, and the data gathered is from the youth participant's viewpoint, not an adult perspective. In addition to participant data gathered from five focus groups, the researcher analyzed field notes and observational data from specific areas, such as the main entrance, eighth-grade hallway, and cafeteria throughout the school day. This study will contribute to the literature on how social media is shifting the traditional educational landscape and the power of schooling as an ideological state apparatus (ISA).

Rationale

The developmental stage, known as early adolescence, is a critical time for behavioral and cognitive growth. This stage is often associated with an increased need for social acceptance, a de-emphasis on parental input, and an increase in impulsive behaviors (Cappella & Hwang, 2015; Tetzner, Becker, & Maaz, 2017; Watson, 2017). This increased emphasis on social behaviors is evident in both the physical and virtual realms, with online connections holding almost equal weight to adolescents as face-to-face communications (Edwards, 2016). The Pew Research study, *Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview* (2015) found that roughly 92% of teens reported going online daily.

Social media platforms allow adolescents to explore and experiment with various personas to a large audience (Andreassen, 2015; Mazzoni & Iannone, 2014; Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2014). Similar to face-to-face interactions, social media can improve one's self-esteem and sense of connectedness, and it can negatively impact self-esteem and create social ostracization. As a structure, the school and students are not immune to the effects of the ever-increasing social media saturation. Therefore, examining how social media is shifting the school landscape is critical to better understanding how today's youth experience school.

Research Questions

This study's driving question was whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students in a suburban setting. Additionally, the study had two sub questions: (1a) How do eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school describe the convergence of social media and school? (1b) How does the influence of social media manifest during the school day?

Significance of Methods

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) highlighted that qualitative methods allow the researcher to capture participants' voices, which assists in gaining a more complete view of the participant's understanding and experiences related to the area of study. This study utilized a qualitative approach through focused ethnography. Marshall and Rossman (2021) stated that, at its core, ethnography is the study of human groups and interactions, and researchers who implement this approach seek to examine or better understand the (re)shaping of a group's culture (p. 21). This study implemented a focused ethnography approach as the researcher sought to maximize the time in the field by only focusing the data collection on how one subset of students perceived the struggle of social media and school. Higginbottom et al. (2013) stated that focused ethnography is ideal for exploring a group of individuals' perspectives on a focused area of their shared culture (p. 1).

This study will use four methods to triangulate the data; focus groups using semi-structured interview protocols, artifact analysis, observations, and field notes. Creswell (2012) highlighted the benefit of implementing focus groups to collect shared understandings and individual perspectives on a focused topic (p. 218). Following the traditional tools used within ethnography design, the researcher also spent time in the field engaged in participant observation. Schensul and LeCompte (2013) noted that "Participant observation represents the starting point in ethnographic research" (p. 83). While participant observation is a generalized definition for ethnographic fieldwork, this study focused primarily on gathering and examining fieldnotes, observations, and informal interviews. Saldaña (2012) discussed how field notes help the ethnographer harness "what your senses take in, how bodies move in space, and occasional rich quotes of what participants say" (p. 51).

Significance of Study

This study aimed to add to the literature on social media and its presence in school. Keefe and Andrews (2015) highlighted the importance of recognizing that research is often conducted through the lens of the researcher, not built around the participants' perspective. The voices and perspectives collected and represented throughout this study will help to illuminate how early adolescents perceive the potential struggle between social media and school. As technology advances and expands the ability for individuals to access digital communication, the number of elementary and middle school social media users will continue to rise. While the concept of social media providing us with the ability to remain socially connected may raise concerns for some, this study also aimed to elucidate benefits that the adult population may overlook.

Definition of Terms

There are many content-specific words woven throughout this dissertation. I have provided focused definitions for a few key terms that are foundational to this study:

Focused ethnography - a research design within the ethnography realm, which is an ideal design for exploring a group of individuals' perspectives on a focused area of their shared culture (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013, p. 1).

School day - refers to the times students are present inside a traditional brick-and-mortar school and engaged in synchronous, in-person learning.

Social media - internet-based channels that allow users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 50).

Struggle – “an antinomy, right against right, bearing the seal of the law of exchanges” in which tension presents itself between two or more apparatuses (Marx, 2004, p. 164).

Limitations

Marshall and Rossman (2021) emphasized the importance of qualitative research as qualitative researchers are “exquisitely aware that they work in and through interpretations—their own and others’—layered in complex hermeneutic circles. These interests take qualitative researchers into natural settings, rather than laboratories...” (p. 2). As a qualitative researcher, one’s positionality and subjectivity must continuously be (re)examined throughout the study. Reflexivity, memoing, thick descriptions, repeated observations, data triangulation, and data transparency through audit trails were implemented to establish credibility and trustworthiness. Triangulation occurred through the use of (a) focus groups, (b) artifact analysis, and (c) participant observations.

A discussion of design strategies and trade-offs is necessitated by the fact that there are no perfect research designs (Patton, 2015, p. 223). While steps have been taken to increase this study's overall credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher acknowledges the limitations. First, the results of this study cannot be generalized as the generated data is bounded by population, location, and time. While each participant is unique and their backgrounds vary, there are local and societal commonalities that cannot be ignored. Examples of commonalities include what the various groups of students most commonly use social media platform(s), the level of acceptance and tolerance of student technology usage throughout the school day, and how much time students have to interact with each other in person throughout the day. The study pulled participants from five selected social studies classes. While this selection method provided a

randomized and heterogeneously mixed pool of participants, it also increased the opportunity for participants to discuss the study as they interacted daily.

In addition to the small and purposeful sample size, the duration of this study also presents limitations. The relatively condensed timeframe means that the study's results may reflect and be shaped by recent events. While the researcher was unaware of any localized events, this study was completed during the school's first year of no COVID-19 restrictions since the 2019-2020 school year. During this study, the school was implementing a school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. This initiative emphasized positive, school-appropriate use of cell phones on the bus, in the hallways, and cafeteria. The framework stated that cell phones should not be used in bathrooms or classrooms. This heightened focus on technology may have impacted how the students viewed the struggle between social media and school, as many teachers were firmly aligned with the new PBIS framework.

Lastly, the researcher acknowledges a level of insider status as the study was conducted within the building where the researcher was employed. The researcher's role within this setting is essential as it provides the researcher somewhat of an insider's status and certainly a level of power based on their position. The 2022-2023 school year will be the fifth year as one of two assistant principals in the building. The school's administrative structure does not have administrators assigned to a specific grade or cohort of students. Therefore, the researcher has worked with individuals and groups of students in 6th through 8th grade. Students who participated in this study would have likely recognized the researcher as one of their administrators who often leads or co-leads assemblies, visit classrooms, works closely with the

counseling department, handles student discipline, and interacts with students during all grade level lunches.

Summary

Technological consumption, specifically social media, has steadily increased over the last twenty years. Examining first-hand accounts of how eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school describe the saturation of social media within the school day and the potential struggles that stem from their digital exchanges will provide further insight into the complexities of early adolescents' experience of school. Critical theory will be used to examine the relationships between eighth-graders' social media usage and school experiences. A focused ethnography was designed to elicit a rich data source, including focus group data, an artifact analysis, and field notes. Chapter II will begin with an explanation of how critical social theory was integrated throughout the theoretical framework of this study. Chapter II will then provide a review of the current literature regarding early adolescents, their desire to fit in, and their use(s) of social media. The results of this study will add to the current literature that examines how social media (Communication Ideological State Apparatus) is potentially shifting how students experience school (Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus).

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter is broken into two parts; the theoretical framework and the literature review. Chapter Two begins with an explanation of how critical theory is used as the basis of the theoretical framework. Critical social theory aids in examining how the concepts of structures, subjectivity, and power are instrumental to this study. Due to the complexities of how students engage with social media and school, the literature review incorporates information from various fields of study such as education, psychology, and cultural and digital media studies. To better understand how the convergence of social media and school play out in the lives of early adolescents, this literature review is broken into three fronts or aspects that may factor into whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for early adolescents. The Technological and Societal Fronts focuses on how social media has become entrenched within the current culture. This section examines the ever-increasing reliance on technology in the modern world, specifically social media platforms, and how companies use data collection and surveillance to commodify one's digital social exchanges. The following section, the Community and School Fronts, examines how the community and school are entangled with early adolescents' social media usage. The fluidity and unpredictability associated with how early adolescents engage and interpret social interactions can become even more obscure and intense with the injection of social media. The literature review concludes with the Internal Front, which focuses on how early adolescence may invoke various internal tensions through the utilization and implementation of social media. The yearning for early adolescents' drive for socialization may be intensified by the hyperconnectivity provided through the usage of social media platforms. This chapter argues that one cannot examine the confluence between school

and social media experienced by early adolescents without considering the various contexts in which they reside.

Theoretical Framework

Critical theory is the theoretical framework guiding this study, specifically how critical theorists have questioned and critiqued the relationship between technology and society. While there are various approaches to critical theory, critical theory is most often associated historically with members of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School originated in 1929 at the Institute for Social Research in Germany. By 1933, the school and most of its thinkers had moved to the United States to escape the growing Nazi regime. Critical theory recognizes society's social and historical conditions and is grounded in Marxism. Browne (2017) emphasized that “Critical theory does not juxtapose an ideal state against existing conditions of oppression and inequality; rather, critique focuses on those existing trends and developments that prefigure an emancipated society” (p. 3). The Frankfurt School’s eclectic group allowed the first-generation Frankfurt School scholars to analyze and critique aspects of society from multiple academic perspectives. One area of research that these theorists examined was instrumental reason and its relationship to technology and domination (Rust, 2021).

While the Frankfurt School produced many influential theorists, the concepts in this study build upon the works of first-generation Frankfurt school members Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Theories from third-generation Frankfurt School members Andrew Feenberg and Axel Honneth provide this study with current insight into the increasing use of technology within our current capitalist society. Though not explicitly connected to the Frankfurt School, the works of (post)structuralists Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault are also woven into the study’s theoretical framework. Drawing from the concepts of

power, subjectivity, and structures in this broad tradition of critical theory, I will seek to understand whether the convergence of social media and school produces tensions or struggles.

Power

This study examines the confluence of social media and school with the understanding that there is no neutrality when engaging and consuming social media and other forms of technology. While the positivist, psychologist, or technological instrumentalist may focus on pathologies or efficiencies in student usage of social media, the critical theorist is interested in understanding and dismantling oppressive structures and engaging with the dialectic of power in which social media and school are embedded as social structures. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979, as cited in Dant, 2004) stated that technological rationality standardized the form of the new media but excluded the possibility of response which provided an avenue of distribution similar to the technique used to spread forms of propaganda (p. 111). Herbert Marcuse highlighted the comparison of the abstractness of technology and the abstractness of equal exchange between owners of money and owners of labor power (Best et al., 2018, p. 650). The abstractness in both conveniently conceals the exploitative nature within the relationships and showcases how the relationships provide subversive domination that favors those in power. Marcuse (2010) showcased the dichotomous nature of the implementation of technology when he called technology “a wound that can only be healed by the weapon that caused it: not the destruction of technology but its re-construction for the reconciliation of nature and society (p. 224).

Louis Althusser furthered the Marxist concept of infrastructure (base) and superstructure. Althusser (2001) argued that State power is derived from two kinds of State Apparatuses, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Together these

structures aid in the reproduction of relations. Althusser argued that whether the institutions are realized as public or private is unimportant since what truly matters is how they function (Althusser, 2001, p. 145). Althusser also viewed institutions, specifically the Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), as crucial modes of power. He held the Scholastic ISA as the dominant ideological state apparatus and deemed it the most effective with its ability to “take, drum, eject” individuals throughout the duration of their engagement with the Scholastic ISA as well as reproduce dominant social relations (Backer, 2022).

Michel Foucault examined how institutions reinforce and reproduce ideology by enacting various forms and levels of force. Taylor (2014) noted how Foucault believed that power, precisely the force of discipline, flows through institutions such as schools, workshops, prisons, and psychiatric hospitals as these institutions interact daily with people on an individual level. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault (2003) described power as being situated in the area that resides between sovereignty and discipline:

It is the actual instruments that form and accumulate knowledge, the observational methods, the recording techniques, the investigative research procedures, the verification mechanisms. That is, the delicate mechanisms of power cannot function unless knowledge, or rather knowledge apparatuses, are formed, organized, and put into circulation. (p. 33)

Foucault (2019) viewed power as relational, not something that could be acquired, distributed, or excluded from individuals or groups. Unlike Althusser, Foucault (2012) saw power as a positive force “...power produces; it produces reality it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (p. 194). The Communication ISA can be viewed as a vehicle of knowledge and truths, which can be

contested and rebuked in current times.

Andrew Feenberg aligned with Marcuse and Foucault's concept of power but argued that both did not capture the relational exchange between power and technology. Feenberg (2002) stated:

the gears and levers of the assembly line, like the bricks and mortar of the Panopticon, possess no intrinsic valuative implications...Critical theory shatters the illusion by recovering the forgotten contexts and developing a historically concrete understanding of technology. (p. 82)

In *Questioning Technology*, Feenberg (1999)

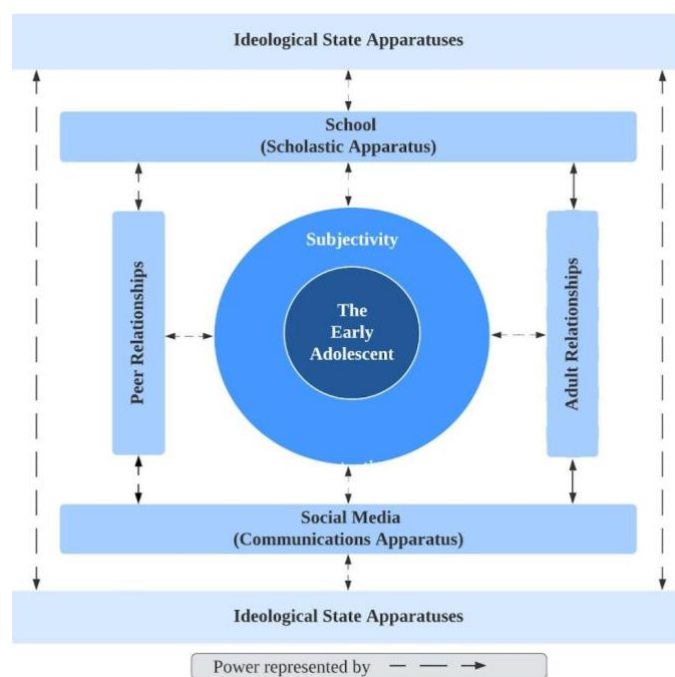
compared Marcuse's term "technological rationality" to his term "technical code" (p. 162). Feenberg (2002) used the term "technical codes" to capture where ideology and technique converge, thus providing the ability to control human beings and resources in conformity (p. 7). Figure 1 illustrates the various forces that act upon the early adolescent as they navigate the school and social media terrains. These forces play a role in exploring and examining how one feels, and processes lived experiences in an attempt to see themselves in the world.

Subjectivity

Blunden (2018) noted that the concept of subjectivity is interconnected to forces outside

Figure 1

Visual of Theoretical Framework



of an individual and encompasses much more than merely knowing oneself; it is the culmination of knowledge, agency, and identity. The individual experiences these three concepts, but the experiences are a product of society, thus nullifying any sense of neutrality. In Marxism, subjectivity is often associated with worker subjectivity, which focuses on the ideas and frameworks that structure the worker's experience of the world (Little, 2008). Nealon and Giroux (2011) noted that Althusser disregarded the bourgeois concept of individuality but postulated that through interpellation, individuals are continuously defining themselves and being defined by the generalized social categories of the modern state (p. 44). Crossley (2004) noted how Althusser argued that we could not reduce society back down to individuals as individuals are formed by society. They are interpellated by ideology and shaped by ideological practices, which constitute the milieu of their life (p. 154). Backer (2018) highlighted how interpellation only makes sense in the context of struggle (p. 10). Althusser's concept of interpellation focuses on how individuals experience and internalize ideologies as experienced in Ideological State Apparatuses [ISAs] and Repressive State Apparatus [RSA]. This freedom or space where negotiations reside allows the ISAs to attempt to interpellate individuals.

Lovink (2019) stated that one function of ideology, as defined by Althusser, is recognition, the interpellation of the subject who is called upon (p. 28). As noted in the Power section, the abstractness of technology coupled with the level of (dis)connectedness one feels while engaging in social media can create a unique sense of becoming. Lovink (2019) argued that when looking at the convergence of technology and subjectivity, interpellation can be extended to examine the idea of "becoming-user" (p. 28). Foucault argued that through different psychological, medical, penitential, educational, or religious practices, certain models of self and subjectivity are developed, reproduced, and eventually accepted as universal (Esteban-Guitart,

2014, p. 1930). Feenberg (2010) argued that in a consumer society, technologies are marketed as signifiers of one's identity; you are no longer judged on what you do but also on the technologies you possess (p. 10). The intersection of subjectivity and social media usage among early adolescents provides an opportunity to examine how early adolescents engage and consume social media and to what extent these interactions add to the overall struggle they face at the intersection of social media and school.

Axel Honneth's recognition theory is based on the normative values through which identity is established in social relations (Pada, 2018, p. 3). Honneth's Theory of Recognition weaves together critical theory with psychological underpinnings. Building on the works of Kant, Hegel, and Mead, Honneth (1996) argued the importance of recognition through the spheres of self-confidence, self-respect, and social esteem. Honneth, a student of Habermas, decided to depart from the first-generation critical theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno and align with Habermas to emphasize the power of communication. Honneth (2014) argued that through communicative actions, individuals encounter "normative expectations whose disappointment becomes a constant source of moral demands that go beyond specifically established forms of domination" (p. 69). Honneth (2014) further explained how his theory encompasses the normative and psychological spheres stating:

social recognition constitutes the normative expectations connected with our entering into communicative relationships..the experience of social recognition represents a condition upon which the development of human identity depends, its denial, i.e., disrespect, is necessarily accompanied by the sense of a threatening loss of personality...this model asserts a close connection between the kinds of violation of the normative assumptions of social interaction and the moral experiences subjects have in their everyday

communication. (p. 71-72)

The recent technological advances regarding the internet, mobile technology, and social media have provided individuals with the ability to connect to a seemingly endless stream of social interactions. The totality of these interactions is critical in how an individual feels about who they are and their relation to others. Internal feelings and one's relation to others outside of their realm of control are shaped by various structural forces.

Structures

Horkheimer and Adorno argued that if technology is left unchecked, technology has the potential to impact society negatively. Both believed that technology pushed humanity further away from nature, thus causing instrumental domination, which would lead to dehumanization (Hanks, 2019). In his earlier work, Horkheimer (1947) compared the perils of technology to the rise of the automobile:

We must keep our eyes on the road and be ready at each instant to react with the right motion. Our spontaneity has been replaced by a frame of mind which compels us to discard every emotion or idea that might impair our alertness to the impersonal demands assailing us. (p. 98)

While Marcuse and Feenberg are both critical of technology, both acknowledged the potential for positive change when used within the appropriate contexts. Marcuse believed that technology within a capitalist structure would become inherently oppressive but was optimistic about the liberating opportunities technology provided once removed from capitalism. Feenberg argues that the confluence of the technical and the social is not extrinsic and accidental, as Habermas noted, but instead defines the nature of technology (Feenberg, 1999, p.162).

Feenberg (2002) built upon Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno's views and stated that

technological rationality had become political rationality (p. 12). Regarding the neutrality of technology and the free market, Feenberg (2002) noted that markets are not neutral arbiters of the community's values but prejudice choices wherever they are instituted and susceptible to manipulation (p. 163). Feenberg (2010) explained the relationship between society and technology as a “democratic paradox” since:

technology and society are an entangled hierarchy insofar as social groups are constituted by the technological links that associate their members, and these members react back on those links in terms of their experiences...once formed and conscious of their identity technologically mediated groups influence technical design, their choices, and protests.
(p. 13)

Feenberg's view encapsulates the ruling class's reproduction and manipulation of culture through these modes of structure.

In *Technologies of the Self* (1988), Foucault examined the genealogy of how humans created structures to aid in the process of identifying oneself. Gordon (1980) connected how Foucault and the Frankfurt School aligned in regards to the concept of technology as a potential oppressive process of the objectification of human beings, which obscures the essence of one's surroundings in the natural world (p.238). Though using the term of technology in a much broader sense, Foucault (1988) outlined four types of technologies:

- (1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things;
- (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification;
- (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectifying of the subject;
- (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with

the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Foucault argued that each of the four types of technologies utilizes various forms of domination and often works in conjunction to reinforce established structures and promote reproduction.

In addition to Foucault's perspective on structures, Louis Althusser (2014) offered a perspective on how the ruling party leverages structures in order to reproduce social formation through the dominant mode of production (p. 233). Althusser famously claimed that, with the onset of industrial capitalism, the school replaced the church as the West's most effective ideological state apparatus (Backer, 2018, p. 3). Althusser (2014) stated:

behind the 'theatre' of the political struggles which the bourgeoisie has offered the popular masses as a spectacle or imposed on them as an ordeal, what it has established as its number-one, that is, its dominant, Ideological State Apparatus is the scholastic apparatus, which has in fact replaced the previously dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the Church, in its functions. (p. 144)

Althusser highlighted how the Political ISA might be seen by many as the main ISA. However, the ruling party subtly maximizes the reach of the Scholastic ISA as it holds a far more extending and grounded grip than the (un)stable Political ISA. Backer (2020) proposed that the extent to which schools require certain production practices to function, school law regulates and sanctions those practices. Backer (2018) noted how Althusser's philosophy focuses on struggle, a development of the geological problematic that understands society as a formation, a balance of forces where each force engages in contestation.

Conclusion

Crossley (2004) shared that Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer all believed that society had become a truly consumer-based society, which tends to produce alienation in various aspects of life, such as work, hobbies, and home life. This commodity fetishism is magnified by the continuous loop of signs and messages that bombard the senses when engaging with social media platforms. Fuchs (2016) noted that digital fetishism provides immediate social gratification, and users often overlook or are unaware of the levels of exploitation, control, surveillance, and exclusion that are simultaneously occurring (p. 173). Leveraging critical theory with a focus on power, subjectivity, and structure to examine whether eighth-graders experience the struggle between social media and school in a suburban setting will provide a clear vision that will resonate throughout the various stages of this dissertation.

Literature Review

While this literature review acknowledges and includes information from the current social sciences, it should be explicitly stated that the intention behind including information from these fields is not to align with the positivist paradigm but rather to examine how power and structures play a critical role in the development of one's subjectivity. The following sections attempt to illuminate points of collision between the social sciences' approach to the why and critical theory's examination of how the confluence between social media and school may impact early adolescents.

The Technological and Societal Fronts

In today's highly connected society, the number of students with a personal device in the United States is drastically increasing. Rideout (2018) found that from 2012 to 2018, smartphone ownership amongst teens went from 41% to 89%, and during the same six years, daily social

media usage amongst teens steadily increased from 34% to 70% (p. 6). Today, the majority of early adolescents have daily access to their own devices, and those who do not own a device often have daily access through their school. A 2020 OECD found that approximately 90% of students have access to some form of a computer to complete schoolwork (p. 3). Technology and social media platforms can provide a level of connectedness and acceptance but also can isolate and exclude. This section will briefly examine how society and various forces exploit early adolescents' desire for social exchanges.

The Social Networks

Flickr and Myspace were once two of the most prominent social media platforms that appeared in research on youth and social media. Yet, both are no longer relevant in today's social media conversations. During this same period, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were also prevalent in published research on youth and social media. However, Facebook and Twitter have maintained a solid but aging user base. While all three of these platforms were heavily used by the youth in the 2010s, early adolescents have turned away from Facebook and Twitter and currently favor more image-based platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and BeReal (Kim et al., 2017). Srnicek (2016) highlighted that certain social media platforms' rise and fall may be attributed to network effects. The concept of network effects centers around the idea that the more users who use the platform, the more valuable the platform becomes for everyone else (p. 45). In this sense, the platform's users partially control the success and reproduction of the social media platform. While users hold a level of control, Harari (2016) stated that the level of authority continues to shift away from humans to algorithms "not as a result of some momentous governmental decision, but due to a flood of mundane personal choices" (p. 350).

The network effects that Srnicek (2016) described can also be applied to how early adolescents engage (un)willingly with various social networking platforms. Gangneux (2019) highlighted the tension that arises when an individual becomes frustrated or no longer wants to be a user of a social networking platform, as the individual has to consider the social cost that may occur due to their disengagement. Dunlap et al. (2016) showed how intentionally pervasive social media marketers create and curate user-relevant content to continue engaging and growing their audience. Social networking sites, unlike past forms of media such as movies and television, provide early adolescents with the endless opportunity to not only consume media but actively have a role in the (re)production of media. This has allowed social media to alter the marketing landscape fundamentally, moving young audiences from passive recipients of advertising to active participants in the co-creation and dissemination of marketing messages (Dunlap et al., 2016, p. 36).

The Collapse of Space and Time

Regardless of location or time, many of today's youth can access the internet, which may provide even more power to the influence of peers. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2022) stated that nearly 90% of teenagers have engaged in some form of social media. Ryan et al. (2017) noted that social media could impact one's social capital, sense of community, and loneliness. These three social concepts are all areas where early adolescents have a heightened sense of emotionality. Early adolescents' in-school and out-of-school interactions impact their social capital, sense of community, and loneliness long before social media enters the social realm. Lovink (2019) noted that our attraction to social media is not the social aspect but rather the never-ending flow of information (p. 31). This seemingly never-ending void pulls the user back into the digital social realm of the platform.

boyd (2014) noted that in order to be socially accepted by peers, it is crucial to socialize and network with peers at places where one's group has been deemed "cool" (p. 5). boyd goes on to acknowledge that each generation and sub-cultures within those generations have defined what constitutes "cool places." Once popular youth hangouts locations such as malls and Myspace have given way to current digital social interactions through technologies such as Instagram, TikTok, and Discord. Contrary to what early adolescents may believe, interactions outside of school do not stay outside of school, as all social interactions impact one's social capital.

Social media has allowed users to connect without being bound by time or location. While there are benefits and drawbacks to this new level of connectedness, the early adolescent population is susceptible to some drawbacks associated with increased social media use. Nesi et al. (2018) stated that social media had transformed the way early adolescents interact with each other in five distinct ways:

(1) changing the frequency or immediacy of experiences, (2) amplifying experiences and demands, (3) altering the qualitative nature of interactions, (4) facilitating new opportunities for compensatory behaviors, and (5) creating entirely novel behaviors. (p. 268)

The yearning for social acceptance and interaction often displayed during the early adolescent period intensifies the impact of all five critical factors.

Exploiting Early Adolescents' Drive for Social Interaction

Being active on social media allows early adolescents to have their voices heard. As noted above, early adolescents may be aware of the privacy settings and who has the ability to view how they portray themselves and engage with social media (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019;

Wisniewski, 2018; Raynes-Goldie, 2010). However, for most early adolescents, this extension of intrusion only extends to their family, friends, and other platform members. Early adolescents may not truly understand the magnitude of how much social media platforms capture, store, and disseminate user data.

Van Dijck (2013) demonstrated how technology companies have deployed terms such as “connectedness” and “sharing” in an attempt to promote a welcoming and social experience while commodifying user data for company profit (p. 12). Lupton (2017) showed that creating accounts or downloading apps has become such a common everyday experience that individuals no longer question the rights they provide to companies to track current information and future data to potentially monetize and sell for profit (p. 265). Gangneux (2019) built upon this concept by highlighting how many platforms subtly encourage dependency by offering free upgrades such as storage space or curated content to discourage users from leaving the platform and make it somewhat difficult to shift to a competing platform (p. 1062). Lovink (2019) empathized that the majority of social media users today are no longer worried about conveying passion or capturing the moment. However, the darker aspects, such as understanding the like economy, the political economy of the cloud, and how the platforms' codes and algorithms leverage one's posted images, are still often overlooked and under-analyzed (p. 99).

Fuchs (2010) outlined how social media and other forms of interactive technologies exploit not only the working class who are responsible for the production of these technologies, but also their users, who are creating and curating content (p. 191). Fuchs (2010) stated:

It is a direct and indirect aspect of the accumulation of capital in informational capitalism: There are direct knowledge workers (either employed as wage labor in firms or outsourced, self-employed labor) that produce knowledge goods and services that are

sold as commodities on the market (e.g., software, data, statistics, expertise, consultancy, advertisements, media content, films, music, etc.) and indirect knowledge workers that produce and reproduce the social conditions of the existence of capital and wage labor such as education, social relationships, affects, communication, sex, housework, common knowledge in everyday life, natural resources, nurture, care, etc. (p.186)

Fuchs (2010) argued that social networking platforms exploit youth as they produce and reproduce intellectual knowledge and skills appropriated by capital for free as part of the commons (p. 187). Andrejevic (2014) described how social media and technology companies create a level of user-specific algorithmic alienation, which occurs when companies utilize data mining, analysis, and statistical correlations to leverage a certain amount of power to (in)directly impact certain life chances (p. 189).

Before the eruption of social media, Hardt (1999) highlighted the potential that affective labor holds in the modern world and noted that “affective labor is one of the highest value-producing forms of labor from the point of view of capital” (p. 90). By implementing data mining, companies are able to curate advertisements, personalize suggestions for additional users to follow, and disseminate news while gathering more information about an individual’s life choices. While this barrage of media exposure may not be new, the ability to remain connected at all times brings a new level of social engagement that today’s youth must grapple with and learn to navigate appropriately. In a Foucauldian manner, Lovink (2019) succinctly identified the actual dangers embedded within data mining, “Lists empower. Lists repress. Lists order” (p. 89).

The Community and School Fronts

In this section, I examined how early adolescents' engagement in social media manifests in their community and school environments. Mass media and technology can be found in all

aspects of our everyday life. Datareportal (2022) stated that more than two billion YouTube videos are accessed monthly, and the average human consumes more than six hours of online content daily. This consumption and coercion may make adolescents feel pressured to join or create content to post in an attempt to fit in with their peers. From a school perspective, educators worldwide have continued to digitize their curriculums and rely more heavily on electronic communication. The field of educational technology has exploded since the early 2000s. EdTech Evidence Exchange (2021) estimated that the United States public education system could have spent up to 50 billion dollars on education technology hardware and software during the 2020-2021 academic year.

The Community Front: Publicly Private

Social media debate has prompted action at the family, state, and federal levels. In 2021, the United States Senate held hearings where representatives from Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat had to answer concerns on whether social media may be detrimental to the mental health of today's youth (Disinformation Nation: Social Media's Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation, 2021). Local and national news outlets quickly disseminate stories that cast social media and youth engagement in a negative light. Parents, schools, and other groups may advocate for implementing strategies for monitoring or surveillance of social media usage to combat too much screen time, accessing inappropriate material, cyberbullying, adult predators, etc. Some groups may even try to monitor youth social media activity by joining various social media platforms as a means of surveillance. Conger and Singg (2020) noted that in researching social media studies, they found more academic studies that concluded that social media usage equated to more adverse effects than positive effects on youth (p. 43). However, the researchers shared that they could not identify whether the implications of these studies were representative

of social media's impact or if the findings were products of a bias within the research community.

Studies and surveys have shown that adolescents realize the negative impact social media can have but also acknowledge that there is much to gain from appropriately leveraging social media platforms (Yau et al., 2021; Eisenhart & Allaman, 2018; Tulane et al., 2015). In a 2018 PEW Research survey, 71% of surveyed teens responded that social media made them feel more included, and 69% stated that social media platforms increased their overall confidence. Conger and Singg (2020) stated that social media could act as a support network in a myriad of ways (p. 43). Youth considered part of vulnerable populations might find the support they cannot obtain in their current physical location. Early adolescents who may not fit in with their peers can turn to social media to find others who make them feel welcomed and accepted. Latif et al. (2016) found that adolescents see social media as less addictive than their parents' perception of early adolescents' social media usage.

While social media platforms have made privacy settings more transparent, users often still have to take additional steps if they want their content limited to a particular audience. Dunlap et al. (2016) noted that many social networking sites have tried to install artificial safeguards, such as requirements regarding age limits. However, most social media platforms have no authentication process to ensure users meet the minimum age requirements. As noted above, parents may attempt to monitor by requesting or demanding to be a friend or follower. boyd (2014) indicated that adolescents often see their content mainly reaching their friends or followers and may overlook who else can view their content.

Early adolescents may feel that their privacy is compromised regardless of whether settings are public, semi-public, or private when unwelcomed adult authority figures enter their

social media worlds. Lincoln (2014) found that youth often highlighted what occurred in their physical settings on their social media, which (un)intentionally documented the event(s) to a potentially larger audience than those who were physically present at the time of the event. boyd (2014) stated that “in networked publics, interactions are often public by default, private through effort.” (p. 12). Users of social media platforms may find themselves caught in a struggle regarding how they act and what they share while online. Chun (2016) portrayed the struggle users face as they often act publicly in private or are caught in public acting privately (p. 95). This struggle creates a complex landscape for adults and adolescents to navigate.

Adolescents may feel that the adult is invading their privacy as the communication being shared over social media platforms has an intended audience that does not include their adult authority figures. Another layer of complexity regarding adolescents and social media is when the unexpected authority figure questioning an adolescent’s social networking posts are not a family member but another authority figure such as school officials or law enforcement.

The School Front: Embracing Technology

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Standards for Students provide educators with a framework to “empower student voice and ensure that learning is a student-driven process” through the infusion of technology, collaboration, and innovation. From a technology integration perspective, many students across the United States connect to the internet through a district or personal device. Based on federal data, Gray and Lewis (2021) concluded that approximately 82% of school districts throughout the United States provide all students or some students with daily access to a computer. This continual use of technology, coupled with the high percentage of students who have smartphones, provides students ample

time throughout the school day to engage and consume the latest posts, likes, and updates on their preferred social media platforms.

The U.S. Department of Education (2013) highlighted the importance of integrating technology into the classroom as a way to “increase student engagement, motivation, and accelerate learning” and “usher in a new model of connected teaching” (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, Use of Technology in Teaching and Learning section, para. 1). Districts throughout the country are having students engage with learning through the use of Chromebooks, laptops, digital readers, iPads, and other portable devices. Students and families access coursework, view grades, and review student data through learning management systems (LMS), student information systems (SIS), and virtual data management warehouses.

Educators and education advocates are faced with the difficult task of finding ways to promote technology integration while also ensuring the security and privacy of the students (Dodson, 2020, p. 9). Educators have a variety of educational technology hardware and software at their disposal to maximize student learning pathways and tailor lessons that are responsive to individual student needs. According to a Harris Poll (2016), 86% of educators were not interested in leveraging and incorporating social media into their classrooms (Chang, 2016). While the concept of digital citizenship (Gleason & Von Gillern, 2018; Heath, 2018; McGillivray et al., 2016) has been used in classrooms since the 1990s, many districts are still apprehensive about actively engaging social media within the classroom for fear of unknown or potentially adverse outcomes.

The Cost of Social Collisions

Gosetti-Ferencei (2020) highlighted how mass production and consumption are not limited to material products and plays a crucial role in lifestyles and the conception of ideas (pp.

206–207). This concept is critical when examining how early adolescents reproduce actions or beliefs they encounter while consuming social media. Frey et al. (2015) noted that identity formation is a shared process inclusive of friends' conversations, actions, and reactions. Social media provides a level of connectedness that allows users to be influenced by more than just a close group of friends and peers. Fidan et al. (2021) noted that early adolescents they interviewed admitted to being influenced by celebrity and influencers' behaviors on social media platforms. When early adolescents reproduce an action of an influencer or viral video, the student may not thoroughly analyze and reflect on the possible outcome of the event as they instead seek only the short-term approval or digital likes from their peers. The lack of impulse control and desire for social acceptance has led to an increased focus on disciplinary discussions in the classroom and courtroom.

The Legal Fight and the Potential Impact

The landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) has long provided students with a certain level of freedom regarding speech; it has also been crucial in understanding when a district has the authority to intervene. Other cases, such as *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) and *Morse v. Frederick* (2007), have provided further clarification. In the ruling of *Bell v. Itawamba County School Board* (2015), the court sided with the school and noted that the student's actions could reasonably be forecasted to disrupt the learning environment.

The more recent ruling of *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* (2021) redefined the legal precedent regarding the rights students have to use social media as means of personal expression and what jurisdiction school districts have regarding possible discipline. In this case, the defendant, a minor, used Snapchat to post her distaste for the cheer coach and school after

being cut from the varsity cheerleading team. The Snapchat post, “Fuck school fuck softball fuck cheer fuck everything,” was eventually reported to the school, and the school suspended the student from the team (Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L., 2021, p.2). The defendant’s parents sued the school claiming that the school’s actions violated her right to free speech, covered under the First Amendment. In the ruling of the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. Judge Krause (B.L. v. Mahanoy Area School District, 2020) concluded that the school overstepped its level of authority over the minor and supported this ruling by highlighting that:

Technology has brought unprecedented interconnectivity and access to diverse forms of speech. In the past, it was merely a possibility, and often a remote one, that the speech of a student who expressed herself in the public square would “reach” the school. But today, when a student speaks in the “modern public square” of the internet, *Packingham*, 137 S. Ct. at 1737, it is highly possible that her speech will be viewed by fellow students and accessible from school. (p. 30)

Judge Krause (B.L. v. Mahanoy Area School District, 2020) found that there are times when the school can intervene regarding social media. However, it is essential to understand that this level of reach only extends so far as students are entitled to “enjoy the free speech rights to which they are entitled, students must be able to determine when they are subject to schools’ authority and when not” (p. 34). When dealing with cases involving social media, determining when student technology usage reaches a substantial disruption to the learning environment has become an increasingly complex issue for school administrators.

A Shifting School Discipline Landscape

Auxier et al. (2020) found that two-thirds of surveyed parents noted it is harder to raise a child than twenty years ago. The top two reasons that were highlighted in this survey were

“technology” (26%) and “social media” (21%). Discipline stemming from social media has become more common and complex over the past twenty years. The guidelines for addressing one’s personal media presence and the school’s responsibility to address this presence that may be curated and maintained entirely outside of the school day may often become unclear. Districts throughout the country have tried a variety of strategies to address the growing distraction that technology and social media platforms are causing to the school experience. Since returning from the pandemic, the Brigantine Public School District has seen a significant increase in disruptive student behaviors that have been linked back to social media. Glenn Robbins, district superintendent, shared that their schools would combat this wave head-on by having honest conversations and empowering students to leverage technology positively, such as creating a student-led, district-wide news network (Merod, 2021). Located just one state away from Brigantine Public School District, Ringgold School District implemented a district-wide technology policy on the other end of the continuum. The district implemented a no-cell phone policy to start the 2022-2023 school year. In their welcome back letter (Skrinjorich, 2022), the district stated that this policy was to reinstate the safety and welfare of their students and staff as:

Ringgold Police Department documented 56 criminal incidents in the last school year where students used cell phone communication with fellow students to plan fights, harass other students, coordinate vaping “gatherings” in school bathrooms, vandalize property, and commit other criminal mischief. (p. 2)

Efraín Martinez, a middle school principal in Illinois, stressed that schools are battling outsider influences of social media, which is hard to combat due to its elusive, evolving, and invisible nature (Merod, 2021).

A Possible Result of Over Engagement

The exploration of subjectivity is a phenomenon that occurs throughout various stages of development. However, there is a growing body of research that suggests that early adolescents who spend too much time on social media may experience adverse outcomes such as depression, loneliness, and the fear of missing out (FoMO) (Conger & Singg, 2020; Twenge et al., 2019; Nessi et al., 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Przybylski et al. (2013) defined FoMO as a “pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent; characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” (p. 1841). Lovink (2019) highlighted the paradox that arises within social media when the user simultaneously displays themselves as a hyper-individualized subject while falling victim to the herd mentality of the platform (p. 27). Social media has the ability to build relationships and a sense of belonging but can also ostracize and create a negative sense of self-worth.

Social media companies have found ways to leverage and publicly display users’ level of connectedness. Social media apps such as TikTok, Snapchat, and BeReal each have their unique way of encouraging users to continue to log in, consume, and produce content. Snapchat’s streak feature utilizes gamification (Hristova et al., 2020) to entice users to post at least one content item daily. Lovink (2019) stated that Snap-induced feelings sync with the rapidly changing teenage body, making puberty even more intense (p. 52). The BeReal app is centered around taking one picture daily to show users “being real.” While this app does not implement streaks, it does keep users invested through its once-a-day alert to upload the daily picture. Once the notification is sent, users have a set amount of time to upload their image before being penalized.

While both Snapchat and BeReal have the ability to spill into the school day, TikTok’s challenges have made the most headlines regarding school and social media. TikTok’s built-in

feature of tagging someone provides users with the ability to spread a challenge with ease. While some challenges are positive and linked to charities, others have proven problematic and dangerous. In 2021, schools across the United States faced students completing TikTok challenges under the umbrella entitled “devious licks.” This challenge encouraged destroying items in school bathrooms, inciting vandalism, and stealing items from school faculty. Schools nationwide suspended and expelled students for these acts, often involving local law enforcement. Additionally, many schools limited or shut down bathroom usage during certain parts of the school day, negatively impacting the entire school community (Marples, 2021).

The Internal Front

This section focused on the impact of social media and school on young people individually. During the early adolescent stage, individuals explore new freedoms, boundaries, feelings, and emotions. The confluence of social media and school during this period is unique for various reasons. Acceptance and friendships are two driving forces seen throughout the early adolescent stage of development. Early adolescents’ yearning for acceptance may factor into the positive and negative ways they consume and create on social media platforms. The internal forces compounded by the previously noted external forces may create a landscape where early adolescents struggle to balance school and social expectations.

Internalized Uncertainty

Early adolescence is the developmental period most often associated with individuals between 10 to 14 years old and is a critical developmental period regarding physiological, sociological, and cognitive growth. Social dynamics during this developmental period bring certain groups of students closer while others become increasingly isolated. Often, this stage is associated with an increased need for social acceptance, a de-emphasis on parental input, and an

increase in impulsive behaviors (Tetzner et al., 2017; Watson, 2017; Cappella & Hwang, 2015). There has also been extensive research surrounding what Eccles (2004) labeled a mismatch in stage-environment fit such that the structures driving middle school and junior high models are supposed to foster independence and prepare students for high school. Nevertheless, these structures often leave students feeling isolated, unable to make strong connections with school staff, and with an overall decline in motivation to succeed academically (Eccles, 2004). This vulnerability may lead youth to find connections outside of their physical setting, intensifying their interest in engaging with others through social media platforms.

Roeser et al. (2002) stated that perhaps nowhere in our lives, except for infancy, is the interplay of individual and collective factors of human life more pronounced than during the early adolescent years (p.443). Early adolescents may experience various negative emotions and uncertainty regarding who they are and how they view themselves during this developmental stage. Early adolescents have a lot of forces and factors they must continuously assess as they navigate home and school, peers and adults, and in-person and virtual interactions. Forces such as social media can accelerate and compound the psychological struggles that occur during these critical years of development. Chun (2016) argued that the power of media does not come when it is first introduced to an individual but rather when media shifts from being new to being integrated into one's daily habits. The early adolescent's view of the world is unique and complex and can only be genuinely articulated when the early adolescent's voice is the narrator.

Exploration of Identity

Social media provides an outlet for early adolescents seeking to be socially accepted and to explore who they are as individuals. Choices that feel identity-congruent in one situation do not necessarily feel identity-congruent in another (Leary & Tangney, 2011, p. 70). This urge to

push boundaries and impress peers is magnified when social media is entered into the equation, as individuals can quickly post or share media that is accessible by a much larger audience than the peers that are physically in their presence.

Chun (2005) argued that individuals utilizing social media are being influenced, altered, and interpellated:

Software produces “users.” Without OS there would be no access to hardware; without OS no actions, no practices, and thus no user. Each OS, through its advertisements, interpellates a “user”: calls it and offers it a name or image with which to identify. (p. 43)

Social media platforms allow early adolescents to explore various personas and alternative modes of identity (Conger & Singg, 2020; Dyer, 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Song et al., 2014). boyd (2014) argued that when adolescents create multiple identities, they simply represent themselves in different ways depending on their expected audience and their understanding of the norms of the specific platform. These various identities are similar to how adolescents act differently while digitally engaging with their peers versus how they represent themselves when confronted by their peers in person. Fuchs (2016) noted that when individuals are continuously attacked or excluded in the digital realm, the damages caused by digital alienation are more indirect, mediated, long-term, and invisible (p. 172). This ambiguity of what to expect could lead to (un)intentional social strains between early adolescents.

The Desires and Tensions of Peer Relations

Established friendships and social support provide stability in the ever-shifting landscape of adolescence. Friendship groups during the early adolescent stage are highly fluid and transient due to various factors in and out of student control. Swirsky & Xie (2020) found that there are two significant facets to an adolescent’s peer experience: interpersonal relationships (e.g.,

friendship, social support) and social positions in the peer hierarchy (e.g., popularity). During early adolescence, a social support system's strength relies less on the number of friends and more on the established connections made with a select few.

As early adolescents grapple with their subjectivity, their social support system plays a role in the direction of this exploration. Frey et al. (2015) noted that our view of identity formation is the role of friends' conversations and actions in response to social conflicts and victimization. Through this array of social interactions, students adjust their aperture to focus on specific areas deemed socially significant. Yeager (2015) discussed how adolescents could be characterized by a desire for high-intensity behaviors that can secure social status. If this status were to become threatened, early adolescents may react differently than in an earlier or later stage of development. Harari (2016) argued that individuals in our current society are “more likely to disintegrate gently from within than to be brutally crushed from without” (p. 350). Early adolescents’ lack of impulse control and their developing concept of social accountability, coupled with the immediacy of social media, creates the opportunity for frustrated or hurt adolescents to become at odds with academic, school, or local authorities.

When early adolescents are victimized, this population is at a much higher risk of becoming involved in retaliation than other developmental age ranges. Casper and Card (2017) found that lower levels of received prosocial behavior are linked to higher levels of both overt and relational victimization and point to a general victimization model such that youth who are victimized also lack social support from peers. Pender et al. (2005) defined prosocial behaviors as “representing a broad category of acts that are defined by some significant segment of society and/or one’s social group as generally beneficial to other people” (p. 366). Established positive social support systems provide support critical to mitigating further involvement or retaliation.

Selection processes refer to mechanisms by which individuals hang out or become friends. In contrast, influence processes refer to changes in behavior or attitudes in response to peer relationships (Veenstra et al., 2013). During this period of development, the selection processes and influence processes are more fluid than in other stages due to the heightened desire to be liked or accepted. Gremmen et al. (2017) stated that a core principle driving selection is ‘homophily,’ which holds that people tend to pick similar others as friends.

The Impact of Positive Peers

To increase the likelihood of displaying prosocial behavior, early adolescents need a variety of positive reinforcers. Social power dynamics between peers can lead early adolescents to have difficulty determining which behavior to model and which to ignore. Many early adolescents present themselves differently depending upon the situation or what other individuals are involved. The idea of influence processes is a more profound and impactful influence regarding behavior. Gremmen et al. (2017) found that a friend’s prosocial behavior might influence an adolescent, but it takes repeated exposure and time to replicate. This same concept can be applied to how established positive peer influence can shape prosocial behavior. Conversely, if friends encourage disruptive behavior and respond positively, a student would be more likely to engage in this kind of behavior (Shin & Ryan, 2017).

Peer intervention opportunities far exceed those of adults, thus the need to leverage the potentially positive effects of friends' co-regulatory and problem-solving efforts. According to Frey et al. (2015), if positive feedback loops sustain peer actions, the effects may be sustained long after adult implementation efforts have ceased. Due to the fact that victimization begins to shift from overt to relational as individuals move from elementary to middle school, positive modeling of prosocial behavior becomes even more significant as the victimization moves

towards less visible methods and less susceptible to immediate adult intervention. Swirsky & Xie (2020) found that receiving peer support may increase the ability to regulate emotional reactions to victimization experiences, in turn alleviating feelings of loneliness or isolation. Peer support may also facilitate the ability to engage in retaliatory aggression against the perpetrator(s). Nesi and Prinstein (2018) argued that adults often overlook the differences between the offline and online environments and adolescent interactions, which can quickly lead to inaccurate generalizations.

Gaps in Literature

Research on peer relationships, school relationships, and connections to trusted adults have been explored to understand better the impact these forces have on individuals and groups of students. However, many of these studies are filtered through an adult's perspective. Douthirt-Cohen and Tokunaga (2020) noted that distorted reports and results could occur as researchers are thinking, being, and communicating through an adult perspective (p. 208). Additional research into how technology, specifically social media platforms, alters the lifeworlds of early adolescents. The drastic increase in youth anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, and overall mental health since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic only further brings to light the necessity of listening to the voices of the youth and including those voices in the analysis reflection and future research.

Conclusion

We live in an age where it is unreasonable to compartmentalize the impact of structures, subjectivity, and power. In order to most accurately examine the potential collisions between social media and school and how these collisions impact early adolescents' experience of school, it is critical to acknowledge the potential struggles as the product of the collective forces of the

three fronts. Deuze et al. (2012) shared that we currently reside in a world where the lines have become so blurred that we no longer live with media but rather live in media. Early adolescents may be more willing than adults to integrate various forms of social media into their lives. Nevertheless, this willingness does not preclude adolescents from the potential fallout of their actions.

While today's early adolescents have grown up in a world where they are continuously encouraged to engage with various forms of social media, the early adolescents' desire for acceptance and a sense of belonging may be one of the driving forces behind their social media usage and consumption. boyd (2014) stated that it is critical to understand that the internet mirrors, magnifies, and makes more visible the good, bad, and ugly of everyday life (p. 23). Early adolescents engage with social media and technology as an integrated tool for exploration and education outside and inside classroom walls. Adults may believe that early adolescents are utilizing social media too much. However, a PEW Research survey (2019) showed that parents of teenagers admitted that the infusion of technology into their lives have made them more distracted and less attentive. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) noted that social media usage could positively impact adolescents, whereas it often negatively impacts adults regarding overall life satisfaction and feelings of loneliness (p. 5).

With such a high rate of accessibility, early adolescents must be skeptical of the portrayed personas they consume and critical of how they engage with the various social media platforms. Similar to how research has shown the benefits early adolescents receive when surrounded by peers who model prosocial behaviors, early adolescents who appropriately use social media platforms can reap social and emotional benefits. Media outlets are quick to spread stories surrounding youth who feel isolated or afraid to attend school due to cyber bullying,

leaked photos, or online threats about overall school safety. Orban (2020) discussed how our society often entertains moral panics that cast the others (youth, immigrants, or women) directly in the spotlight but omits those in power from the same moral panics (p. 1147).

In an attempt to find common ground between parents, schools, and government bodies, Sidonie Gruenberg, Director of the Child Study Association, stated that “The most serious and most common complaint is its frequent interference with other interests and activities” (p. 124) and “no locks will keep this intruder out, nor can parents shift their children away from it” (p. 123). Both quotes were excerpts from Gruenberg's 1935 article in response to the growing unrest, and concern advocacy groups had regarding the duration of time children spent listening to the radio daily. New forms of technology are often met with skepticism and concern. Further research is needed on how early adolescents struggle with social media and how it impacts their school experience. The data collected from future studies can help amplify the voices of the youth, which will provide a more accurate representation of this tension as it will be told by those who live in that particular world, not by those who theorize about that world.

Chapter III: Methods

Overview

This qualitative study examined whether the confluence between social media and school creates a struggle for eighth-grade students. This study used a focused ethnography approach, which included multiple forms of data collection. Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu (2013) stated that focused ethnography is ideal for exploring a group of individuals' perspectives on a focused area of their shared culture (p. 1). The confluence of school and social media was emphasized through the gathered data from the participants' views. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) highlighted that by including participants' voices through qualitative methods, researchers could get a complete picture of the participant's understanding and experiences related to the area of study.

This chapter provides background information on various aspects factored into the results of this study. This information includes details on the setting, participant criteria and recruitment processes, study procedures, and the various forms of instrumentation used for data collection. Threats to the study's validity and reliability, analysis and coding methods, and the overall schedule are also discussed in this chapter. All of these factors were carefully selected and analyzed to examine the study's driving question of whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. The two sub-questions that were situated within the primary question were: (1a) How do eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school describe the convergence of social media and school? (1b) How does the influence of social media manifest during the school day?

Description of Site Selection

In an attempt to ensure the confidentiality of the participants of this study, the selected site will be referred to throughout the study as Springs Middle School. Springs Middle School is a public suburban middle school in the Southeastern portion of Pennsylvania. The school utilizes a middle school versus a junior high model for programming. In a middle school model, students at each grade level are grouped into smaller teams, which helps bridge the elementary and high school structures. This model emphasizes frequent and consistent interactions between students and a team of teachers. The building schedule is intentionally designed to establish stronger connections compared to a junior high model. Springs Middle School has an enrollment of approximately 1,100 students in grades sixth through eighth.

Like many districts nationwide, Springs Middle School faced various student and technology challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2021-2022 school year, the school decided to expand its social-emotional supports for students by engaging in a School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports system (SWPBIS) (Speakman-Spickard, 2020; James et al., 2019; Evanovich, 2016; Nelson, n.d). One of the many aspects of this system was to be proactive and transparent with the students and staff regarding digital citizenship (Fingal, 2022; Starks, 2022; Fagell, 2021), social media usage (Bonsaksen et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2018; Guinta, 2019), and respect for self and others. Additionally, the staff revisited and updated their student cell phone policy based on these newly established PBIS principles.

The SWPBIS, coupled with the work Springs Middle School had done regarding social media and student cell phone usage over the past two years, was part of the rationale behind selecting this site for the study. While the school had a variety of district policy infractions and

disruptive behaviors occur throughout the 2021-2022 school year, a good portion of more severe infractions were associated, either directly or indirectly, with inappropriate use of social media. The selection of eighth-grade students as the observed participant group allowed the participants to share their experiences with social media and school, specifically as it relates to their time in middle school. With Springs Middle School being a sixth through eighth grade building, the selected participants are the most senior class residing within the building.

Participants

In order to obtain participants, I presented an overview of this study to five eighth-grade social studies classes. The classes were pre-selected at the discretion of the four eighth-grade social studies teachers. Qualitative research leverages purposeful sampling to intentionally select individuals and sites which provide rich details to understand the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). I chose social studies classes as this subject is the only unleveled core academic course, thus providing a heterogeneous cohort of possible participants. The five teacher-selected classes gave the study a focused but randomized and unique potential participant pool.

Data Collection Schedule

This study was conducted between November 2022 and February 2023. I introduced the study to the four Social Studies classes in October 2022. The first two focus groups met before the end of December 2022. The remaining three focus groups all occurred between January-February, 2023. After the initial three focus groups, the researcher introduced the study to another social studies class to seek additional participants. After meeting with the new social studies class, two additional focus groups were established.

Throughout the study, I spent time in the field. I attempted to enter the field at least once a week to observe the eighth-grade class in various less-structured settings, such as transition times and

during lunch. Observing the eighth-grade students in less structured settings provided me with insight into how students engaged with technology, specifically social media.

Informed Consent and Protection of Human Subjects

Since this study focused on the voice of minors, all participants had to submit a consent and assent form. After meeting with the class and sharing the opportunity to participate in the study, I sent an introductory email to all parent(s) or guardian(s) of the students enrolled in the five selected social studies classes through the district's Student Information System (SIS). In addition to a brief overview, the email included a link to the electronic consent form. The consent form was created using West Chester University's consent form generator. The consent form included an overview of the purpose, procedures, any associated risks and benefits, and protections related to the study. Parent(s) or guardian(s) could view and complete the electronic consent form online through West Chester University's Qualtrics online program.

All potential participants who submitted an electronic consent form received a physical copy of the study's assent form. I created this form using West Chester University's assent template for minors. The assent form provided an overview explaining the study in wording accessible to all potential participants. Parental consent and student assent were necessary for the student to participate in the study.

Instrumentation

This study utilized a focused ethnography design. Saldaña (2011) noted that employing an ethnographic approach is done when the researcher is interested in the default conditions of a people's ways of living (p. 6). Below I will outline the three methods of data collection that will be used in this study. Chapter IV presents the codes and themes extracted from the collected data set.

Focus Group

One of the methods for data collection will be implementing multiple focus groups. Marshall et al. (2021) stated that focus groups provide participants the ability to listen to others' opinions and understandings, which helps individual participants form their contribution to the group discussion. All participants will be active members of the eighth-grade class and submit their consent and assent forms verifying their willingness to participate in the study.

Schensul & LeCompte (2013) noted that meaningful interviews are grounded in the working codes and domains previously uncovered through earlier tools and observations that comprise the ethnographic study. Due to the evolving nature of the research and based on the data collected throughout the study, I plan to conduct between four to seven focus groups. Each focus group will invite four participants with the understanding that participants may still choose to excuse themselves from the study. The duration of each focus group is approximately 45 minutes. This window of time includes verifying the collection of all consent and assent forms, an overview of what to expect from a procedural standpoint, the actual discussion within the focus group, and time afterward for individual questions or feedback.

I secured an available room within the school for all focus groups. This room provided plenty of privacy, a welcoming environment, limited distractions, and space for all participants. I reminded all participants that I would record the session using audio-only technology. The progression of each session remained the same. It consisted of (1) starting the session by sharing the ground rules for the focus group, (2) passing out a handout that would be collected for the artifact analysis portion of the study, (3) moderating the focus group through the use of five pre-determined questions, (4) asking follow-up, clarifying, or redirecting questions based on

participant responses, and (5) concluding the focus group. I will remain available after the focus group in case any participants would like to ask questions or provide feedback.

Fieldnotes

Aligning with the ethnographic design, I will focus on the school's culture throughout the study. Initial areas where I will observe social interactions among eighth-grade students include the main entrance at the start and end of the school day, the eighth-grade hallways during class transitions, and the cafeteria during eighth-grade lunch. It is important to note that some pre-identified areas may adjust once the study is underway if richer areas of social interaction are discovered. Saldaña (2011) stressed that fieldnotes ensure researchers are present while in the field and should seek to witness the mundane, typical, and occasionally extraordinary events that compose human life (p. 46).

The above locations are areas within the school where students are used to seeing me. Due to my administrative role, I will not enter classrooms for fieldnotes as the natural setting and behaviors could be disrupted by my presence, thus producing altered data. Initial areas of focus are noting how often students engage with technology in these areas, tracking disruptions or student gatherings and documenting if technology is present at that time, and seeing how technology shapes student interactions throughout the school day.

Artifact Analysis

This portion of the study will examine the completed brain map produced by each participant at the start of the focus group. Saldaña and Omasta (2016) noted that discourse analysis examines not the frequency of the words but the words selected to communicate or convey the message (p.67). In addition to the brain map, participants have the opportunity to answer a few demographic questions and write a brief response to a closing prompt activity. I

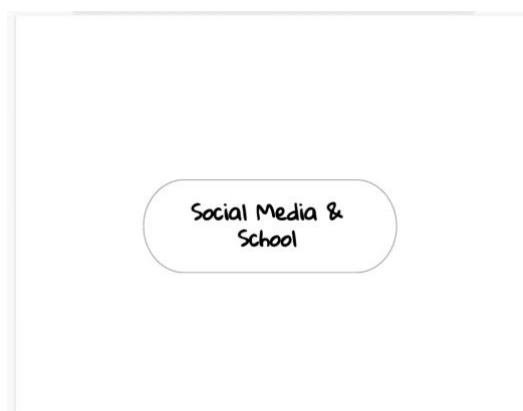
will collect this two-sided handout and use it for the artifact analysis portion of the study. Figure 2 shows a blank brain map that all participants received at the start of the study. I shared with each focus group that participants could write down thoughts, sentences, or images to depict whatever came to their mind when thinking about the two words, social media and school. For the closing writing prompt, participants will be asked to provide a brief reflection on whether they believe social media is a positive, negative, or neutral force regarding their school experience.

I will code the artifacts at the same time I code the focus group transcriptions. When analyzing the data, the same codes will be applied.

Figure 2

While the artifacts may not contain the same level of depth as the focus group data, collecting the artifacts allows participants to share a more personal glimpse into their initial and closing thoughts regarding social media and school.

Blank Brain Map Image



The participants will be unaware that the first question of the focus group will ask for volunteers to share an idea or topic that they wrote down on their brain map. The reason I will not share this before the start of the discussion is due to the fact that participants may be less willing to reflect and write about topics that they are unwilling to share with the group. Participants will not be required to share any portion of their brain map during the focus group discussion. The data collected from the artifacts will be compared to see if they mirror topics discussed during the focus groups. The participant artifact provides a glimpse of what each participant initially thought regarding school and social media.

Data Collection Procedures

I will recruit enough participants to hold at least four focus groups with a minimum of four participants per focus group. Each participant will attend one session, which lasted approximately 45 minutes. Focus groups were designed for at least three participants per session. Throughout the study, I remained open to recruiting participants for up to three additional focus groups in order to reach saturation regarding data collection.

As outlined above, the focus groups focused on the potential struggle between social media and school. At the start of the focus group, each participant received a sheet of paper that contained a brain map. I started each focus group by introducing the brain map activity as a way for participants to prime themselves for the upcoming discussion. The brain map worksheet consisted of an oval in the center of the page with the words “Social Media & School.” I encouraged participants to jot down words, notes, or short sentences as well as images that came to their mind when seeing the two topics together

All focus groups utilized semi-structured interview protocols, which allowed me to ask additional clarifying or follow-up questions based on participant responses to the main questions. All focus group sessions were recorded by capturing audio only and transcribed using the software, Temi. I completed this task within 24 hours of the initial session. I made sure to remind all participants that they should not include their name on brain map as their names would not link to any documents outside of the consent and assent forms. Participants had the option to complete a few short questions before starting the discussion (age, preferred pronouns, years attending Springs Middle School, Does social media impact your school experience?, How many social media platforms do you use?). Before starting the brain map, I assigned each participant a random number, which allowed me to match the demographic information to the participant’s

verbal responses shared throughout the recorded focus group discussion. I securely stored all of this data on a password-protected computer.

Fieldnotes were collected throughout the study as part of the focused ethnography. This ongoing exposure and reflection allowed me to examine how I saw the potential struggle between social media and school possibly manifest within the school day. This data was analyzed, in conjunction with the other forms of collected data, to further the scope of the study. I examined the collected artifacts that the participants completed during the focus groups for the artifact analysis. The brain map activity served as the artifact, representing each participant's initial reactions to the concept of school and social media.

Qualitative Analysis

Coding

The primary CAQDAS software for data analysis was Dedoose. I uploaded all focus group transcriptions and participant brain maps into Dedoose. In an attempt to capture the unique perspectives of the focus group participants, thematic analysis was used as there was no a priori theory or presuppositions prior to entering the field for data collection. Through this iterative process, codes and categories were (re)analyzed and descriptive themes were compiled.

I implemented the following steps to assist in discovering the presented themes: (1) first cycle coding, which consisted of descriptive coding, (2) second cycle coding, which consisted of revisiting the codes and beginning to sort for patterns, (3) the examination of confirming and disconfirming cases, and (4) grouping the identified patterns into themes (Roper & Shapira, 2000). Saldaña (2013) noted that while descriptive coding can apply to almost all qualitative methods, it is especially useful for ethnographies and examining data forms such as transcripts, field notes, journals, and artifacts (p. 89).

Using artifact analysis as a means of data collection is another way for the study to highlight participant voices regarding the potential struggle of the confluence of school and social media. The data gathered from the artifact analysis complemented the analyzed dialogical interactions captured from the focus groups and my observations shared through the analysis of the fieldnotes. In addition to displaying the results in tables and charts, Chapter IV will include participant-created images from the artifact analysis and vignettes pulled verbatim from the focus group transcripts.

Threats to Internal and External Validity

Acknowledging that quantitative and qualitative methods stem from two distinct and different epistemological, ontological, and axiological orientations is imperative. Ross and Johnson (2020) emphasized that quantitative studies often rely on a more positivist approach and strongly believe in the value of objectivity, generalizability, reliability, and validity (p. 433). Qualitative research places a greater emphasis on participant subjectivity. Foucault (2005) classified the sciences as being a byproduct of those who hold power and argued:

The human sciences laid down an essential division within their own field: they always extended between a positive pole and a negative pole; they always designated an alterity (based, furthermore, on the continuity they were analyzing). When, on the other hand, the analysis was conducted from the point of view of the norm, the rule, and the system, each area provided its own coherence and its own validity... Everything may be thought of within the order of the system, the rule, and the norm. By pluralizing itself-since systems are isolated, since rules form closed wholes, since norms are posited in their autonomy - the field of the human sciences. (p. 359)

I believe there are multiple realities and interpretations of events, so qualitative methods were

selected to examine how early adolescents described their experiences regarding social media and school collisions.

Threats to Internal Validity

The main threat to the study's internal validity is my administrative role within the school, though this could also be considered a strength. The imprint of my level of privilege and power could have manifested in various ways throughout the study. My position may have factored into whether or not parent(s)/guardian(s) allowed their child to participate in the study. The power dynamic also could have impacted how comfortable the participants were discussing matters that bridge the academic and social realms of their school lives with a familiar school authority figure. If the school district did not employ me, I might not have been able to access the site to conduct the study.

Another threat to the study's internal validity may be the participant pool. As noted above, I worked with a team of eighth-grade social studies teachers to select four random classes. Once the classes were selected, I provided each class with a brief overview of the aim of the research and asked for potential participants. Since the study was completely optional, and all participants who inquired were included, some voices might be missing from this small sample of the school's youth culture. The fact that the study did not provide any incentive to participate and scheduled focus groups during the participants' lunch and study hall times may have only added to the limited scope of participants willing to participate.

Threats to External Validity

Given (2008) stated that generalizability is often associated with quantitative methods and external validity is often used in mixed or qualitative methods. Marshall et al. (2021) noted that the burden of demonstrating how findings are applicable outside of the study is the

responsibility of the researchers looking to incorporate the findings into their own work (p. 260). While the external validity of the findings is limited, this was the direct product of the study's design. That said, the data and findings could be a reference for other researchers interested in social media and school. Donmoyer (1990) argued that "qualitative researchers have redefined the [external] generalizability question in more common-sense terms: Why will knowledge of a single or limited number of cases be useful to people who operate in other, potentially different situations?" (p. 372). Based on the study's theoretical framework, this study may provide a unique snapshot for researchers studying how technology influences and uniquely shape social interactions, specifically within youth culture.

Trustworthiness

Lichtman (2006) stated that the purpose of a qualitative study is to describe and interpret rather than to generalize findings (p. 119). While the results of qualitative research are heavily tethered to the researcher and the participants, a strong qualitative study should present all of the information so that others can replicate the processes. Taylor and Medina (2013) highlighted that qualitative research should build trustworthiness based on four areas; credibility (time in the field), dependability (open-ended or emergent inquiry), transferability (rich description), and confirmability (research data tracked to sources) (pp. 4-5). This study was conducted from November to February. In addition to being mindful of how eighth-grade students were engaging with technology throughout the school day, I set time aside each week to be in specific locations, such as the hallways and cafeteria, to observe student social interactions and the incorporation of technology.

My insider status provided a multitude of (un)scheduled interactions with students, which allowed for a more rich and more accurate depiction of the complex social system being studied

(Marshall et al., 2021). The study implemented data triangulation by examining all fieldnotes and memos, focus group data, and artifact analysis data to validate the collected data. Utilizing these three data sources ensured that the study included data mined from various times, locations, and perspectives. This process also helped with the confirmability of the study by ensuring that the participant's views were at the center of the research, which aided in minimizing the researcher's bias.

Adding to the study's overall dependability was that all data would be held securely for three years after the study's conclusion. In addition to having all data available, I kept notes throughout the various stages of the study to develop an audit trail (Marshall and Rossman, 2021, p. 52). The audio from all five focus groups was transcribed using the transcription service Temi. After completing the transcription, I compared all transcriptions against the original audio and corrected any errors during the transcription process. Listening to the audio recordings and reviewing the transcriptions for accuracy before examining the participant data within Dedoose provided me multiple opportunities to review and reflect on the participants' responses.

Positionality

As an educator who has spent the last 15 years learning and growing alongside a student population representative of 5th-8th graders, I have continued to be amazed at the resiliency and bravery early adolescents showcase daily. Since shifting from a classroom teacher to a building-level administrator, I have had additional exposure to the level of involvement and entanglement today's early adolescents have with social media. Being involved in multiple learning experiences with early adolescents, their peers, and their families, I felt a gap in my understanding regarding how the youth engage with social media and how this engagement alters their school experience. Through the participant lens, this examination gave me the unique

opportunity to hear how students at Spring Middle School described the confluence of social media and school. Throughout this study, I remained mindful of the power dynamic of my roles as a researcher and administrator and how this power could shape the interactions with the focus group participants. I also continuously reflected on my actions to co-create a welcoming space through respect and authentic listening with all the participants.

Ethical Conflicts

Tensions and ethical issues that may unexpectedly occur during this qualitative study were not fully known as participants conversed on topics that had the potential to evoke reflection and introspection. I intentionally devised the structures and processes of the focus group in a manner that honored participant confidentiality to the greatest extent possible to avoid any negative social dynamics that the participants' peers may associate with individuals who opted to participate in this study. This concept was critical to consider when working with early adolescents as this developmental period greatly emphasizes peer interactions and social acceptance. Placing a spotlight on a student or particular group of students could have unknown ramifications. All focus groups met during the 8th-grade lunch period, which allowed no instruction loss. From a social standpoint, this also minimized possible questioning from their peers that could reveal their participation in the study. Lastly, the focus groups were held in an area of the school that students often access. All attempts were made to limit (in)direct impact(s) from an academic and social lens regarding the student's participation in the study.

Another ethical consideration for this field of study is the intersection between social media and the forces or examples students may disclose during the focus groups. While it was determined that the risks associated with participation in this study were minimal, potential risks included, but were not limited to; loss of confidentiality, loss of privacy, loss of a study hall, loss

of free time (lunch), discomfort with content of questions, nervousness when answering questions, and questions from peers regarding being selected as a participant of the study. Throughout the focus groups, I remained cognizant that participant responses could have had a strong possibility of overlapping with the behavioral science field. I made sure to define my role clearly and noted that my goal in entering this shared space with participants was to be a listener and wonderer, not a counselor or psychologist. As mentioned above, all collected data would remain securely stored as participants may have shared personal and sensitive information regarding their social media and school interactions.

I used West Chester University's form creator for the creation of the consent and assent forms. The consent form provided parent(s) or guardian(s) with the purpose, procedures, associated risks and benefits, and protections related to the study. Parents were asked to complete and submit the signed consent form using West Chester University's Qualtrics electronic submission form. Before the start of the study, I explained the study to the students whose parents had provided consent before the start of the focus group. Each participant received a copy of the assent form to complete before the start of the focus group. Using Qualtrics to collect the electronic consent forms allowed participants to submit the consent form without having to return the form at the main office. The digital consent process ensured that the form was returned and provided a layer of confidentiality for all potential participants.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methods used in this study to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. The study's methodology was depicted by explaining the description of site selection and participants, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the qualitative analysis used in the

study. Chapter III also details the study's threats to validity, trustworthiness, ethical conflicts, and my positionality. Chapter IV will include selected participant data showcasing the study's major themes and results.

Chapter IV: Results

Overview

In this chapter, I present the qualitative findings of this study, which examined whether middle school students struggle with the recent rise of social media throughout their school day. This research study had one central driving question and two sub-questions: (1) Does the confluence between social media and school cause a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting? (1a) How do eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school describe the convergence of social media and school? (1b) How does the influence of social media manifest during the school day?

A total of five focus groups were conducted and analyzed for this study. Of the five focus groups, two focus groups consisted of four members. Of the focus groups with less than four participants, one group consisted of three participants, and two groups had two participants. All three focus groups with less than the original number were due to participants requesting removal from the study. All participants who changed their minds sought removal when they entered the room where the focus group was meeting or purposefully did not attend, even when reminded by a third party. No participant requested to exit the focus group once the focus group officially began.

Table 1 provides an overview of the focus group participant demographics characteristic summary. 93% of the participants either acknowledged that social media played a role in how they experienced school or were unsure of its role in their school experience. The participants who selected unsure captured the ambiguity prevalent throughout the various themes when participants tried to confine the confluence between social media and school to a dichotomous line of thought of positive or negative.

Table 1

<i>Focus Group Demographics Characteristic Summary</i>		
Characteristic	All Participants (N = 15)	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
13	9	60%
14	6	40%
Preferred Pronouns		
She/her	9	60%
He/him	4	27%
He	1	7%
He/his/him	1	7%
Years at Springs School		
1	2	13%
2	-	-
3	13	87%
Does social media impact your school experience?		
Yes	8	53%
No	1	7%
Not sure	6	40%
How many social media platforms do you use?		
None	2	13%
1-2	5	33%
3-4	7	47%
5+	1	7%

Note: The table summarizes participant demographic from all conducted focus groups.

Table 2 provides the demographic responses of each individual who participated in the focus groups. This table is a brief snapshot of each participant's views and background experience regarding social media and school prior to the start of the focus group discussion.

Table 2

<i>Focus Group Participant Demographics</i>					
Pseudonym	Age (years)	Preferred Pronouns	Years at Springs School	Does social media impact your school experience?	How many social media platforms do you use?
Madelyn	14	She/her	1	Not sure	1-2 platforms
Wen	13	He/him	3	Yes	1-2 platforms
Shamil	13	He/him	3	Not sure	None
Emma	13	She/her	3	Yes	3-4 platforms
Isiah	13	He/him	1	Not sure	3-4 platforms
Mona	13	She/her	3	Yes	5+ platforms
Rayan	14	She/her	3	Yes	1-2 platforms
Salih	14	He/him/his	3	Yes	3-4 platforms
Ivy	13	She/her	3	Not sure	3-4 platforms
Daren	14	He	3	Yes	None
Ella	13	She/her	3	Not sure	3-4 platforms
Aria	14	She/her	3	Yes	3-4 platforms
Deidra	14	She/her	3	Not sure	3-4 platforms
Sam	13	She/her	3	No	1-2 platforms
Chris	13	He/him	3	Yes	1-2 platforms

Note: The table provides a summary for each participant that participated in the focus groups.

Findings

Table 3 includes the themes and subsequent subthemes discussed in this chapter. Through analyzing the collected data, a total of five themes emerged: (1) social media and school collisions, (2) disequibrated usage, (3) internal struggles, (4) how influencers create an influence, and (5) a rise in power. The first two themes examine how participants described the collisions between social media and school and how the ripple effects of these collisions alter their school experience. The following two sections focus on how collisions create internal unrest for eighth-grade students. The chapter concludes with examining how participants discussed how students leverage the interconnectedness of social media and power.

Table 3

Overview of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Social Media and School Collisions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Blank Face 2. Drama 3. Stuff That's Actually Productive 4. They Work Better When They're Talking
Disequibrated Usage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It's Like 2. Social Media is Different Than Real Life 3. Little Clips 4. Off Balance 5. Seen Or At Least Felt Seen
Internal Struggles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Representation and Not Being Weird 2. Taking a Toll on the Mental 3. An Escape, But Not Really
How Influencers Create an Influence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Influencers & Creators & Trends, Oh My 2. Influenced, Whether It's Good Or Bad
A Rise In Power	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You Have More Power 2. Are You Guys Actually Doing This Or Is It Just Me?

Social Media and School Collisions

This first theme starts with an overview on how digital social actions produce unexpected responses. These unexpected responses are sometimes due to misinterpretations of peer digital interactions. The section concludes with an overview on how social media platforms have the ability to shift the focus of how students learn inside and outside of the school day.

Blank Face

At Spring Middle School, students are permitted to use their phones on the bus, during transition times, and lunch. This is the second year this version of the school's cell phone policy has been implemented. Before this iteration of the policy, there was a two-year trial of a tiered approach where sixth-grade students were not allowed to have a personal device in their possession at any point while in the building. Seventh-grade students were permitted to use their personal devices only during lunch. Eighth-grade students could use personal devices during lunch and select classes at the teacher's discretion. No student was allowed to be on a personal device in the hallways. Prior to the 2018-2019 school year, no student was allowed to have any personal device on them during school hours. Even though this is year two for this policy, the participants' responses showcased that building-wide rules and expectations are not always followed, which can lead to inconsistency and uncertainty.

While social media usage was difficult to assess during the various time in the field, during transition periods, I observed many students on their phones as they navigated the hallways of Spring Middle School. The use of technology by students was even more pervasive during observations that occurred during the breakfast and lunch periods. Technology, specifically phones, was observed on multiple occasions as a catalyst for groups of students to gather and converse. Ella noted how students had been repeatedly made aware of the

(in)appropriate ways to use electronic devices “We've learned about it. We definitely know. We've had multiple meetings about how social media affects people's lives, so we know how it works and stuff.” Online social etiquette and digital citizenship lessons and units have been created and shared in various classes at Spring Middle School. However, like schools nationwide, additional discussions may be warranted (Dodson, 2020; Gleason & Von Gillern, 2018; Martin et al., 2018).

Participants conveyed that digital actions often cause physical reactions. While this conclusion may not seem unexpected, the examples of eighth-graders' physical reactions were not examples that I would have anticipated or expected. When discussing social media and school, Madelyn expressed that students may become distracted or heightened simply by seeing their peers' phones “like if you see somebody texting, they like, I don't know, hide their phone or something. You could be really like intrigued or a little paranoid.” Madelyn's response underscored the level of social media usage by eighth-graders and how some students immediately start wondering if their peers are using phones to post thoughts or images of them. Students have always talked about each other, but the connectivity of social media now allows these comments or images to spread instantaneously to a much larger audience.

Participant data and collected fieldnotes showed that technology played a role in how students navigated the school environment. Madelyn recalled how “people can like bump into others while on their phone in the hallway.” I observed firsthand the unintentional act of students bumping into peers due to being on their phones while I was in the hallways during a transition of classes. I had stopped in the hallway when a teacher asked me a question. As I was responding, an eighth-grader accidentally walked directly into my back. When I turned around,

the student's face was red, and the student quickly apologized noting that he was too preoccupied with looking at his phone.

Ivy commented that phone usage had become habitual or instinctual, and she found it strange that her peers "just text with like a blank face probably. It's so weird." This lack of emotion adds to the uncertainty and angst of the peers who fear they may be the target of a peer's social media post. Ivy later recounted an incident during lunch earlier in the school year:

I saw this girl. She was having an argument in the cafeteria. She was texting this girl on the other side of the cafeteria, and they were like fighting. I'm like, what are you doing?

Don't you go like, just go talk to her? She's like, no. Like, I don't know. She's right there.

When Ivy shared this, she was genuinely perplexed as she could not understand why the student was against talking to their peer face-to-face. This echoed Chun's (2016) argument that social media becomes even more of a force once integrated into one's daily rituals and habits. The habits and rituals of eighth-graders using social media platforms as a means of communication could result in negative peer interactions due to the interconnectivity and availability of peer engagement.

"Drama"

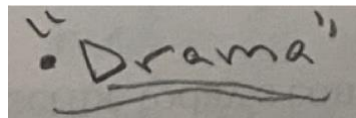
Interpersonal conflict is a topic that the participants shared had occurred during the school day due to students' social media usage. Hodkinson (2017) argued that the closer the friendship between peers, the more likely those friends would view each other's social media content. The algorithms within the social media platforms exacerbate this exposure as the algorithms filter and prioritize pre-determined content (p. 283). Mona explained how issues have occurred with her peers due to social media "I also think that some people like talk about it a lot and like it'll like affect sometimes like their friendships." While Mona did not provide any

additional context, it appeared that social media platforms' impact on eighth-grade friendships was more destructive than constructive.

Ivy explicitly noted on her brain map Figure 3 how the word drama was one of her strongest associations when thinking about social media and school. Madelyn also shared that often in-school drama stemmed from (un)intentional social media messages:

Figure 3

Text on Ivy's Brain Map



...stuff that can happen on social media, um, like you can get into a disagreement and an argument whereas like if you didn't have social media, you'd say it face-to-face but over text it or like Snapchat or something. It can be like very misinterpreted um, to something if you're just saying like in a normal tone or you're thinking like not trying to be mean, somebody can take it like really bad.

The concept of misinterpretation appeared in various forms throughout the data, and Madelyn noted how the lack of physical interaction with the user's audience creates a fertile foundation for misunderstanding.

While participants varied on whether in-school or out-of-school social media usage caused more issues among their peers, the consensus was that disagreements that began in the digital realm found a way to permeate throughout the hallways, classrooms, and cafeteria. Emma shared how social media magnified minor issues between friends by putting the disagreement on display:

I was also thinking that although a lot of it does happen outside of school, it can also be brought in the school. Like if both of the people are in school or if both people aren't in

school and like one person is, it could be like talking bad about someone, which can cause other people to have interpretations about some other person.

By posting and engaging in digital disagreements, peers could weigh in without having the full context of the situation. Rayan explained how, even when others do not get involved, these little fires could cause damage and harm:

someone will be on social media during school and we will say something and then like during the day their friend will see it, and we'll like get mad at them, and then they'll like, they like will be like mad at each other for like the school day.

Emma and Rayan provided examples of how the accessibility that social media provides eighth-graders regarding peer interactions has made a difference in how students experience school. Even before the reverberations of one's digital social interactions appear, participants shared how the mere existence of social media has the potential to cause eighth-graders to grapple with focusing on their academic learning.

Stuff That's Actually Productive

This section presents how participants shared social media has been in direct competition with the school for the engagement of students. Wen shared how he believed social media could compete with academics for the attention of eighth-graders "if you're trying to study for something and your friend like wants to talk about something else, it could be a distraction." Wen's response showed how interactions on social media could influence or alter one's focus regarding schoolwork. Yau et al. (2021) suggested that using digital communication during homework could be disruptive as adolescents need to continually reorient each time they shift between schoolwork and digital interactions (p. 3). Though friends often initiate the initial level of distraction, integrating social media could further compound the force of distraction. Ella's

response explained how social media could be especially stressful for students who already have issues with executive functioning:

And um, social media I feel like has caused me to procrastinate a lot. I already procrastinate a lot in general. And then with social media it's just a big distraction. So I've tried to set timers on my phone and that way I know I've been on social media for like 10 or 20 minutes. I'm like, oh gosh, I gotta go do some stuff that's actually productive and it's helped a little bit, but I've like refrained from downloading certain apps that I know I'm gonna get sucked more into. So I like tried to tone it down.

Ella and Wen's struggle to balance the social and academic worlds seemed to be common for students in this eighth-grade class. Ella's words highlighted how social media could sometimes be a vehicle for positive production and, other times, a vehicle for distraction. The collected data from this study presented a struggle that students continuously face regarding striking that balance. Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2019) analyzed data regarding social media usage from over 10,000 students. They found that heavy social media usage was negatively associated with school connectedness among middle school students (p. 203). In the case of Ella, she admitted to implementing multiple strategies to help alleviate some of the pull she felt to engage with social media but noted that these strategies "helped a little bit."

Multiple focus groups also discussed the topic of social media causing a visible disruption within the classroom. Wen believed that the teacher plays a large part in how often students use social media during class. Wen shared "if the teacher doesn't really care, then lots of people use it like social media and stuff. So if the teacher does care, then people don't really take it out." Madelyn echoed a similar sentiment regarding the level of student engagement with social media during class: "it's definitely in like the free periods and sometimes when the

teachers like chill with it, like people just have their phones either, maybe they're not like on them, but they have them like on their desk, which causes them to sometimes like check it.”

According to Madelyn, eighth-grade students need not have their phones out or on social media to think about the social events that have or might occur(red). Students could be sitting in class and appear as if they are focused on the lesson's learning objectives. However, their attention is elsewhere as they are preoccupied with the social implications of what had or is transpiring on social media. Figure 4 was drawn by Rayan on her brain map and depicted a student being distracted by their phone going off in their school bag. Rayan's initial connection between social media and school mirrors what Madelyn shared during her focus group discussion.

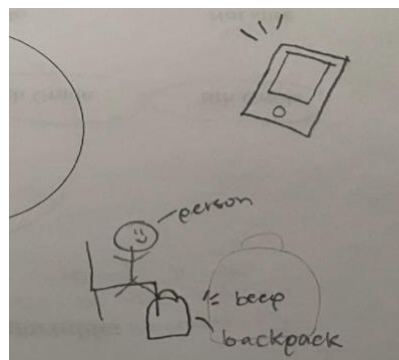
Rayan was one of the only participants to share how teachers react to students being on social media during class:

Um, I also mentioned that sometimes um, students having social media can cause their teachers to be more like impatient and angry because everyone, like whenever there's a chance of free time, everyone always just goes on their phone and sometimes it's only for five minutes, and then the teacher has to go back to a lesson and then students like, don't listen. Um, and that just kind of like brings people's days down.

Rayan acknowledged that social media has the ability to alter the experience of school, not just for social media users but for everyone in the class. Teachers must be aware of and work against the physical and digital social dynamics in the classroom to maintain their students' attention and interest. Sam summarized teachers' continuous battle “you don't have to pay attention like to

Figure 4

Image on Rayan's Brain Map



school the way you do social media. It's like it's for your entertainment, and sometimes school doesn't entertain everyone the same way.” While it seems as if everyone at Spring Middle School is fighting against social media’s ability to distract, participants noted that, at times, increased communication could help students with their academics.

They Work Better When They’re Talking

This study occurred two years after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools worldwide. While this topic did not surface during any focus groups, being at the school during the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced firsthand how the pandemic forced all teachers to update and maintain their Schoology (the district’s selected learning management system) courses. Though virtual learning has ended, the digitalization of lessons and an up-to-date Schoology course page has become standard practice for all teachers at Spring Middle School. A current Schoology page allows students who were absent from school the opportunity to access the activities and notes that occurred while they were out.

The idea that social media allows users to foster connections was woven throughout this study. In examining how social media could benefit students, Wen’s brain map summarized many of the talking points raised during the focus groups regarding how social media has helped eighth-graders navigate their academics. Wen wrote “studying together to better understand content...learning things if you were not there that day in school...helping each other with things like homework.” The two recurring ways that participants shared that social media has directly helped them or their peers were communicating with peers on projects and utilizing social media to catch up on missed work.

The participants shared that their classes often assign a variety of projects, which often include group work. From Madelyn's perspective, social media was a great way to communicate with peers without giving away too much personal information. Madelyn shared:

it's like also better because sometimes if it is somebody you don't know, you don't want them in your contacts necessarily. Like you could, but you don't need them, so you can just talk to them on Snap cuz it's the only time you're ever gonna talk to them.

Madelyn's response implied that she felt social media was a more informal way to communicate than giving her peers her cell phone number. While Madelyn might hesitate to add a partner to her phone contact, she seemed to have no concerns about sharing her Snapchat username. Mona shared a similar response when discussing group work and noted how Snapchat was her preferred method of choice "recently I had a health project, and I did the same thing with a group where I've Snapchat them and like asking them questions on what I should do." Both participants felt more comfortable utilizing the group chat embedded within Snapchat instead of using a group text message that would provide their peers with their phone numbers.

Rayan commented on how, whether it be a group project or just questions about class, social media has helped her academically:

It can be easier because sometimes you just don't have enough time in class to work on that project or that presentation. So it's helpful to just be able to like get your, um, group members or whoever you're working with, uh, numbers, and then you can like, discuss things through social media and stuff.

In Rayan's response, she used the term social media but also stated that she would get numbers, not usernames, from her peers. Rayan did not explicitly state a social media platform for contacting her peers, which could suggest that the participants have different views on initiating

and maintaining communication with peers. Emma mentioned that social media has helped her and other eighth-graders in their classes “they work better when they're talking to someone about what they're doing, which social media can really help because then you could like talk with someone who's doing the same homework.” Emma’s response focused heavily on the social aspect of completing schoolwork and homework. The comradery that social media provided Emma and her peers allowed the students to engage collaboratively with their assigned schoolwork.

Whereas Emma strictly leaned into the social benefits of leveraging social media for coursework, Wen noted how social media had fulfilled a social and practical need for eighth-grade students:

Social media can help students in school. For example, if a student is struggling with a concept and their, they know their friend is good with it, instead of having to go all the way to like their house to help have help, they can ask them over social media, and they can help each other if they can.

Not only do middle school students rely on others for transportation, but many eighth-graders are involved in multiple outside activities that limit the time they have to physically meet up with a peer after the conclusion of the school day. Wen’s comment also emphasized that social media gave eighth-graders some control and freedom. Instead of relying on adults, eighth-graders could leverage the connections made through social media to determine when and how they socialize and study with their peers.

Madelyn shared that, while Schoology has helped, Schoology cannot fill the void created when a student is absent:

I recently missed a class, so like making up for it was a lot easier when I have like this group chat of people who are in that class as well and can tell me everything they talked about and everything they did.

Madelyn's comment showcased how social media has allowed students to retake some control over the ownership of their (re)learning. This communication could benefit Madelyn or any absent student, but these interactions also provide all of the students involved the opportunity to (re)engage with the concept. Shamil recounted how a recent absence could have been much more difficult without the assistance of social media:

I also recently missed a day. I feel like...it is, um, much easier to catch up on work if you have friends in the same class as you that are working on the same material. Because you can either, uh, overwork yourself or, um, there's not enough. You don't understand it. It's really, it could be really stressful to try and figure it out all by yourself.

Social media has allowed participants and their peers to harness the power of peer (re)mediation and enrichment. While participants varied in how they described social media, most participants stated that social media has the potential to make school-based peer interactions challenging to navigate.

Disequilibrated Usage

This theme begins by examining how participants view and define social media platforms and eighth-grade student usage. The next subtheme presents how digital social interactions do not align with expected in-person social interaction norms. Participants shared that eighth-graders purposefully curate their content in an attempt to attract the attention of their peers. Lastly, this theme will highlight how social media can provide eighth-grade students with opportunities to engage in positive and negative social interactions.

It's Like...

No focus group question directly asked participants to state their definition of social media. However, during one of the focus groups, participants raised a possible distinction between what they consider the news and social media, which broached the topic of students' social life. When I asked for someone to explain if there was a difference between the two, Emma stated:

I mean news can be found on Instagram. News can be found on Facebook. News can be found on anything, but it really depends on what you're looking at because, say you're looking at your friend's post that might not have anything like news related, but it could be something that you're gonna talk about later, which could be beneficial or not beneficial. But news like say you're out somewhere and you're talking in class, and you're talking about current events, that can inform you about that. It's another positive influence [of social media].

Emma's response showed how students view social media as encompassing more than just images and posts from friends. Emma touched upon a critical concept that appeared throughout the data when she stated "it really depends." This uncertainty or ambivalence was recurrent throughout the themes, but Emma's choice of words suggested a tension for eighth-grade students that surfaces when interacting with their peers on social media.

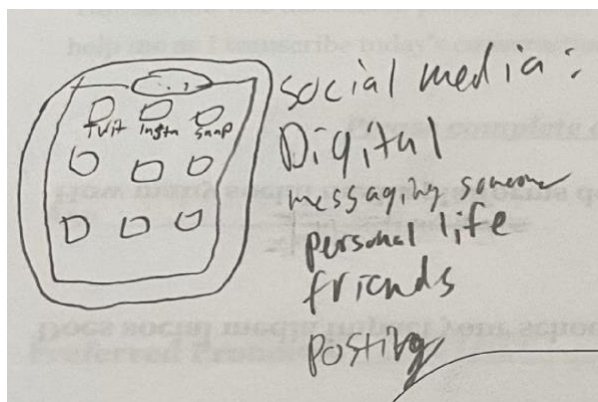
The discussion portion of the focus groups occurred after the participants had time to complete their brain map that included the words "Social Media & School." Each focus group began with the invitation for participants to share something they wrote down on their brain map. Madelyn volunteered to be the first person to speak in her focus group and shared "I wrote down that it's like a form of entertainment and sometimes can be a distraction regarding homework and

stuff....” Like Emma’s response, Madelyn highlighted that users decide how they engage with social media. Madelyn seemed to view social media as entertainment while placing school in a different, unnamed category. Isiah responded and built off of Madelyn’s concept of social media by adding: “I think, um, that when mixing school and social media [there] needs to be a middle ground where students can post on social media. But, like Madelyn said, they should be focusing on their studies at school and their homework instead of posting all day.” Both responses showcased the positive side of interacting with peers in the digital realm but underscored that social media could negatively impact school performance. These two responses portrayed social media as a force that is noticed within the school day and could cause students to shift their attention away from school.

Figure 5 shows a portion of Isiah’s brain map that included an image and words that he believed defined social media. Isiah labeled the first three apps on the home screen to indicate Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Isiah’s first word was digital, which may seem obvious. Isiah’s brain map included how he viewed his social media presence and school presence as separate realms when he stated “It’s like 2 separate lives. One is on our phones, and one is in school.” When these two separate lives come in contact with each other, the friction created has the potential to create a state of disquietude that eighth-graders must confront and learn to navigate.

Figure 5

Image on Isiah’s Brain Map



Social Media is Different Than Real Life

Participants shared that interacting with their peers on social media can lead to unexpected social outcomes. Many participants commented that people are more open to taking risks when communicating through social media compared to face-to-face discussions during the school day. When discussing how digital and in-person interactions differ, Daren shared “I feel like on social media, people aren't as regretful for sending things. They feel like, oh, it's there, I sent it. After a week, no one will care.” Ella immediately responded to Daren’s comment “Especially if you don't know the person.” The design of social media allows users to capture and share content seamlessly. As Daren noted, this seemingly never-ending flow of content could make individuals more willing to post risky content with the expectation that it will draw attention or quickly get buried by new content.

Similar to Daren, Chris also felt that eighth-graders viewed social media interactions differently than face-to-face interactions:

I feel like people just accepted that social media is different than real life. So on social media you can say what you want or do what you want, and in real life, it um, you can do different things. So like you can be quieter, but on social media you can be more bold.

In the vignette above, Chris did not specifically state whether he viewed social media’s ability to empower and embolden eighth graders as a positive or negative force.

Aria shared how she has experienced the negative side of her peers feeling empowered by social media “So I think it's way easier to talk to somebody in the digital world. So if you would like, there's a lot of comments saying like, oh my gosh, you're so pretty. You're like perfect...” Aria shared how comments are often posted on social media by peers she has never spoken to in school. Aria stressed “...but nobody would go up to you in like real life and just say randomly

like, oh my gosh, you're so pretty, you're perfect.” Aria’s reflection affirmed what both Daren and Chris discussed about social media having a different set of accepted norms than face-to-face social interactions. Aria finished her argument about how eighth graders take advantage of this altered set of norms:

you can like hide behind a screen and not like you can be mean, but you can also be like, nice, but how nice is it really? Like are you genuinely saying that or are just saying that so you can like pretend?

Aria’s skepticism towards some of her peers’ motives seemed to question whether her peers’ intentions were because they liked her as a friend or they wanted to gain likes from others by posing as a friend. Aria even seemed to question how meaningful some of her friends’ posts had been, which could alter future interactions between Aria and her friends on social media and during the school day.

The following two vignettes from Deidra captured how she grappled with the ambiguity surrounding social media and school. Frustrated by her peers’ lack of transparency and unwillingness to post content that accurately depicts their lives, Deidra shared:

I would say it kind of changes it cuz you think like, oh these people already get so much attention, like why bother to try and talk to them. Their show isn't really real, so you don't really know what to talk to them about. Um, and it like poses this whole popularity thing cuz everybody likes what they're seeing in regards to the fact that they're pretty or they're successful or something like that. And so it kind of, like, I guess, decreases the likelihood of you wanting to talk to them. I guess.

Deidra expressed how social media has prevented her from speaking to certain peers in her grade. Her words showcased how students leverage social media to increase their digital and

physical presence by purposefully posting curated content. Deidra's frustration with her peers' purposeful posting habits (Pescott, 2020; Chae, 2017) and their obsession with their audience (Kang & Wei, 2020; Ranzini & Hoek, 2017) was met with agreement from the other members of the focus group.

Later in the focus group, Deidra shared that she has heard of social media acting as a bridge to friendships that would not have emerged otherwise:

I don't have Snapchat or anything, but from what I've seen with friends of mine who are very active on it, they're talking to people who you wouldn't really see them talking to in an actual setting because they're more approachable on social media.

In this response, Deidra argued that some of her peers are much more relatable online and willing to talk to peers they may not have chosen to talk to during the school day. In this instance, the digital divide allowed for a digital friendship to flourish, which could eventually turn into a friendship that would spill into the school day. Though it is apparent that the two vignettes depict different audiences, Deidra's words outlined how social media could be a vehicle to (dis)assemble social divides. What eighth-grader posts on their social media platform(s) could factor into how their presentation of self is received by their peers.

Little Clips

Participants discussed how eighth-graders use social media to showcase portions of their life, which might be (in)congruent with how the student presents during the school day. Deidra used the term "false identity" to describe how many of her peers use social media to project an image that is not a true reflection of their life. In the same focus group, Aria used the term "altered" to describe how she viewed her peers' intentional social media curation. Both participants discussed how the posts they have viewed only show "the best moments" (Aria,

Focus Group 4, 2/13/23) of someone's life as they capture when they "go out to nice places" (Deidra, Focus Group 4, 2/13/23).

Sam expressed her frustration about how her peers only share specific moments of their life when she stated "You never know if someone's actually being like real or authentic because you're just seeing like little clips of their life, not the whole like behind the scenes." Many participants seemed frustrated by their peers' lack of willingness to share more than the highlights of their daily lives. Emma explained how only seeing the positive events of her peers' lives can become frustrating at times as it makes it harder to relate to some of her peers:

I was also thinking about how sometimes people might only wanna share like the good parts and be like, I want to show everyone how happy I am and like doing all these fun things instead of showing some of the sadder things that maybe more people can relate to but they don't see as much.

Daren shared a similar sentiment regarding how only seeing one aspect of his peers' lives can be difficult at times:

...on the bad side it can be very deceitful, and it doesn't necessarily show all the parts of someone's life. If someone posts something, um, it can just show like the happy parts, and sometimes that can impact people in different ways.

Emma and Daren shared how social media has the ability to allow eighth-graders to learn more about their peers' interests and hobbies that they otherwise would not discover through their daily interactions at school. Emma felt she could learn and relate better to her peers if people were more willing to share personal and intimate posts. Daren's response touched on the fact that people can use what others share on social media in negative or deceitful ways. He also shared how the same post may elicit varying emotional reactions based on the individual.

When asked to what extent do you believe students authentically represent who they are on social media, Ella responded:

I think people are sometimes scared to post something on social media that's a little bit more vulnerable because people expect you to be happy and you know, like not involve other people and stuff that might be affecting me negatively. So I guess they don't really put a side of themselves that they struggle or just like a part of their life where they're struggling. They don't really post that on social media. They don't try to put that out there.

When asked why people are scared to be vulnerable on social media, Ella responded “A stigma around it? Of like not expressing like mental health issues or just like family problems or just anything that you're going through. There's just a big stigma around it.” Ella’s response resonated with Madelyn’s idea of meeting a social standard. The hesitancy Ella shared seemed to stem from how the user’s posts can make others feel and how others feel about the content posted by the user. The desire shared by the participants to use social media as a means to better understand and be better understood seemed to conflict with the reported current usage of social media amongst the eighth-grade population, which was described by Sam as “little clips” or Madelyn as “only the good parts” of the user’s life. The level of discord surrounding how eighth-grade students could present online compared to in person creates confusion, which could further strengthen feelings of disequilibrium.

Off Balance

Participants described what occurred when eighth-graders who frequently used social media interacted with students who were not as active or not on social media. This tension was brought up by participants in multiple focus groups, and responses were often met with acknowledgment or support from their fellow participants. Sam shared that eighth-graders are

often influenced and judge their peers based on their social media activity. Sam explained that once something is posted and viewed, the viewers are already making judgments and sharing their thoughts with other eighth-graders:

And if you're actively posting while, um, while you are going to school as well, um, these people know you so they can form their opinions before they actually like, just like if they see a video of you, they'll form opinions of you before they actually meet you.

Sam's response showed how students feel as though they know a certain amount about a person based on viewing the content, posts, and the student's overall social media presence. Students who do not remain current with their peers' social media accounts may feel uncertain when their peers discuss recent posts.

Social media platforms attempt to build network effects, which is how social media forces users to either remain on their platform or risk missing out on what other users are posting (Gangneux, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). Sharing and viewing content during the school day could defer students' attention from school and have unintended social consequences that cause a sense of uncertainty. When discussing social media usage and how it has competed for students' attention throughout the school day, Deidra shared:

it's [Snapchat] become like this big connection through everyone. Like everybody is constantly on it, like talking to each other. Um, so that for me is hard. Like not knowing what's going on between like friend groups or like, cuz I think half of our group has it and then the other half doesn't, and it's like, so there's half of that interaction, and the other half is like "What?" So that's a little difficult.

Deidra's response showed how the use of social media could shape the dynamics within a friend group based on who uses and who does not use specific social media platforms. Without a

Snapchat account, there is a potential disconnect within Deidra's group due to members of the friend group's inability to access the most recent snaps.

Ella shared how the lack of not knowing about what is going on in the digital world could lead to frustration amongst peers, "I feel like, um, sometimes people will like get annoyed at the fact that they have to explain it to you." Based on Ella's response, she felt her friends held a level of accountability that everyone should remain current on each friend's social media accounts. Ella believed that if a group member missed something, they should expect to experience frustration from their peers who are up to date on the social media feeds. Madelyn described how her peers could also get frustrated if someone tried to discuss something that they posted as if it was unknown news:

I would just like to say that I think like there's definitely the aspect of students telling like stories about what they did while like posting it on their thing and then it kind of like takes away from that cause everybody's already seen it. So it's kind of like the stories like everybody knows what they are. So them telling it makes no difference.

Once again, ambiguity has surfaced regarding how social media transformed how students socialize with their peers in school. There is the possibility that a student could receive a negative response for asking about a friend's post that friends were discussing. However, an adverse reaction could also ensue if a student decided to talk to their peers about something the student posted as if their peers were unaware. Deidra encapsulated this social dissonance when she admitted "Like I text more people than I text others, and there's that like off balance sometimes between like what's happening." However, Deidra also acknowledged that social media has provided her with the ability to deepen ties with some of her peers.

Seen Or At Least Felt Seen

Starting at the broader social network level, participants shared how social media provided a bridge for individuals to learn and connect with others outside of their community.

Ella shared how social media can be a positive force in one's understanding of the world:

It can expose you to like different cultures or just things like around the world that you might not experience in your hometown. Especially if it's small, you can learn more things about other people and how other people live and stuff.

Here Ella showcased how students use social media to better understand the world from their local perspective and the perspective of others outside their community. While Ella did not explicitly state how being seen or seeing others with similar views benefitted marginalized groups, she was clear that establishing these connections could validate and reassure those who feel isolated.

Salih shared with his fellow participants “through social media, people [are] just sharing their experiences and information about it.” Salih expressed that not everyone feels accepted and represented in his school and community, and social media provided exposure for those individuals to seek out alternative perspectives and voices. Agreeing with Salih's comment, Daren added “You can find people that are similar towards you based off of social media. Um, you can expand your friend group.” It was unclear whether Daren's definition of a friend group referenced individuals in the digital and physical worlds or just one, but the concept of learning more about others aligned with the responses of other participants throughout this study.

Ella described social media as a way for eighth-graders to connect with others who can sympathize and relate to students' struggles “You can find people that have gone through experiences.” Ella also noted how finding this support is not always easy “sometimes it's also

hard because sometimes it's harder to find those certain communities.” Ella's comments highlighted how she and her peers could use social media for more than just passing the time. For Ella, some students intentionally leverage social media's networking features to seek out support. While this search can be difficult at times, Ella concluded with an emphasis on hope for those individuals looking to find connections with like-minded peers “there are definitely communities out there on social media are pushing for representation so that everyone can be or at least feel like seen.” Ella’s final words “can be or at least feel seen,” struck upon more than just a reason for eighth-graders to engage with social media usage. Ella described one of the basic needs all individuals seek to fulfill. This feeling of being included and represented aligned with the study conducted by Anderson and Jiang (2018) when they surveyed adolescents regarding social media usage and found that 71% of participants responded that social media made them feel more included.

The desire for acceptance, friendship, and connection were concepts that appeared throughout the various forms of data and tied closely to how participants expressed using social media as a means to gain further exposure. Emma believed many students are willing to share as much as it takes to gain the attention of their peers, as she wrote “sharing everything” on her brain map. Deidra commented on how her peers often post pictures and comments on social media to get the attention of others. Deidra, through equal parts frustration and confusion, shared:

I know personally, for me recently seeing like there've been a lot of people who are posting like their perfect like pretty picture or whatever...But I see this and I see all the people liking it. It's like hundreds of likes.

Deidra's frustration appeared to stem from her interest in leveraging social media to learn more about her peers. Nevertheless, Deidra's takeaway was that many of her peers were only interested in leveraging social media to elevate their digital and school status. Deidra also noted that as soon as a post amasses a certain number of likes, reposts, and attention "it kind of starts a chain reaction." She shared how there have been times when people from various social groups all started posting similar content.

While participants discussed being seen or at least felt that others acknowledged their presence as one of the main drivers behind social media usage among eighth-graders, there was discussion regarding quantity and quality. As Deidra touched upon, being a frequent social media user only sometimes equates to increased followers and likes. The response, or lack thereof, and social interactions that stem from an eighth-grader's social media posts can alter how they feel about themselves and their peers.

Internal Struggles

This theme examines how the confluence between social media and school can alter how eighth-grade students feel about themselves. Participants shared how the ambiguity of social media could produce feelings of acceptance or rejection. This uncertainty has the possibility to cause eighth-graders much stress that may or may not be noticed by their peers but alters how they navigate and experience school. Lastly, this section will examine how social media can serve as a bridge to peer connections and peer isolation.

Representation and Not Being Weird

In the United States, middle school or junior high often marks the end of childhood and the onset of adolescence. Frey et al. (2015) noted that teens, especially those from marginalized groups, feel they have limited control over their lives as society no longer recognizes them as

children but not yet as adults (p. 31). Many participants expressed mixed feelings regarding how social media alters or produces conflicting internal feelings for eighth-graders. Some participants found social media liberating, while others saw it as an oppressive force that led to conformity. Rayan believed that social media could be a positive or negative force, but felt that social media could make a big difference for certain eighth graders “for some kids who are like more shy, um, social media can help them like branch out there and like maybe like meet more people on there and help to like boost their confidence.” Daren shared that social media has provided him with another avenue to meet people with similar interests. Participants agreed that building one’s confidence and expanding friend groups provide eighth-grader social media users with opportunities to learn more about who they are as a person.

Sahil wrote on his brain map that social media provided students with “AWARENESS - awareness to identity, religion, gender, sexuality, etc.” and “IDENTITY - social media affects identity.” During the focus group, Salih shared “I think like representation is really important because I think without it people don't know like, representation. People can know about it and discover if someone like themselves or someone else could be different or anything like that.” Salih discussed how he found an extreme amount of support online, making him feel much more accepted and confident. Ella shared how social media can be a refuge for some of her peers and how social media has helped “You can find communities that are supportive of choices that you wanna make or beliefs that you have. And it just creates a better environment for people.”

Ella connected social media and school on her brain map when she wrote “They both expose you to new/different things/experiences.” While the previous paragraphs explored some participant-identified positives that social media can have on individuals, there was also concern about how social media can negatively alter one’s self-perception by exposing eighth-graders to

new or different things. Mona noted on her brain map that social media could have a negative effect as students can become meaner to their peers due to social media usage. Ivy shared a converse to social media's ability to foster feelings of inclusion when she shared:

Someone posts something that's like representing their culture, and then like the wrong audience they want doesn't see, and a different audience sees it. Now they're all making fun of them for like maybe dancing, like, like doing a cultural dance or something.

This uncertainty around who will view social media posts and how they will be received makes it difficult for eighth graders to predict the feelings elicited from the likes or comments posted by their peers. Sam discussed how certain apps could be more powerful than others:

...self-image and the self-esteem, I feel like mostly on Instagram probably, um, if you see like there's like this constant feeling of comparing yourself to like mostly like people on Instagram. So, um, I feel like that also really damages your confidence. Like cuz you're constantly comparing, seeing how you can be better and be more like these like people.

Sam highlighted how social media heightened the internal struggles many of her peers face as she recognized that it is easier to say do not compare yourself to what you see others post on social media, than actually to put that thought into practice. Depending on the social media platform, the design and usage may evoke varying emotional responses (Kang and Wei, 2021; Dyer, 2017).

Multiple groups discussed the idea that eighth-grade students compare themselves against others' posts. When asked if anyone was willing to share something they wrote down regarding social media and school, Chris shared:

One of the things I thought about was self-esteem associated with social media and how like it affects kids' minds. Cuz sometimes I know in my experience in social media, sometimes I've seen kids that like their self-esteem lowers because of social media.

Chris' response did not indicate whether the lowering of self-esteem from social media consumption was due to posts of mainstream influencers, their peers, or a combination of factors. Madelyn admitted that viewing and representing yourself on social media, where eighth-grade peers could judge you, could be a complex process to navigate "See you try your best to not sound like weird or like, I don't know, it's just, it's weird because you try your best to not be weird. Yeah. I guess that's what I'm saying." Due to the level of uncertainty regarding how social media posts are received, participant responses presented a level of unrest as they are continuously attempting to strike a balance between gaining attention and not being labeled as weird can occur as this terrain is difficult to navigate.

Taking a Toll on the Mental

Participants shared that social media could negatively impact friendships and cause additional stress for some students. Participants noted that social media could be stressful for the creator and consumer, and sometimes both groups could feel additional pressure. When reflecting on social media and school, Rayan wrote on her brain map:

It depends on the situation. Sometimes it makes school easier (getting to know more people, working on projects), and other times it can be harder (FOMO). It also depends on the individual. For me, it's made it easier and harder in different ways.

Social media appeared to remove some of Rayan's stressors regarding friendship and academic work but was an added stressor regarding friendships and socialization. Rayan highlighted how this equation isn't always balanced as the positive and negative reverberations of one's social

media usage are constantly in flux. Daren shared how students worry about how their posts will be received “[students] think they're gonna get judged based off what they post, and if they post something that they think other people may not like, um, that can definitely have some impact.” Daren’s comment showed that eighth-graders might sometimes be reserved about what they post, while others may post things based on peer influence.

Mona explained how she had witnessed firsthand how social media strained peer friendships. “They lose like a good friendship over some things that they agree with and like say on social media.” Mona’s comment showcased how not only what one posts on social media could cause stress, but students must also be mindful of how their peers will perceive their likes and comments. Isiah shared “It kind of like increases like stress in like your life, and that could like really affect you.” When asked if he would like to elaborate on his thought, Isiah responded, “No.” I shifted the discussion to the next question based on Isiah's tone. Isiah’s response was a reminder that the participants were sharing experiences that could be sensitive, current, and very real.

Participants also highlighted how these negative internal feelings from engaging with social media are visible to peers and teachers throughout the school day. Rayan shared one example of how she had seen the negative emotions that stemmed from social media play out in school:

You'll like be in school, and like sometimes there's like someone just seems like sadder than usual, and you're not really sure what's wrong, but a lot of the times it's from social media like someone could have been saying bad things about that person and just bringing them down.

Rayan's example captured how eighth-graders often internalize the negative feelings that arise from social media usage. Those feelings could spill over into how students are perceived and interact with their peers throughout the school day. Chris shared that finding out that some of his friends had intentionally left him out of private group chats "really took a toll on my mental [health] for like a day or two." While some participants willingly shared how social media has caused them or others in their friend group to deal with unwanted negative emotions, many of the participants' comments indicated that the social and emotional repercussions of engaging with peers on social media factor into how eighth-graders navigate their daily school experiences. Licoppe (2012) stated that the connectedness felt in modern society heightens the call for others to be able to appear and a constant state of readiness to be noticed, recognized, and treated (p. 1088).

Ivy recorded on her brain map "I don't know what's going on with the majority of other students." Ivy admitted that while she is a member of three to four social media platforms, she does not have many contacts and does not follow many of her eighth-grade peers. Students disconnected from their peers' social media presences could experience uncertainty because they are close to the student in person but cannot access and comment on the student's digital life. Emma explained how she was not in many classes with her friend this year, so she had decided to use social media to stay current with them throughout the school day. Emma noted how staying up to date with everyone in the digital world but remaining disconnected in the physical world has presented unique social challenges for her:

you're in a different class than all of your other friends. So when they're posting about it, when they're talking about it, you feel like, oh, I wasn't there. Like I need to catch up with

them. I need to talk. But that can also lead to like you being more left out or you feeling like you didn't get included.

Emma's response showed how her friend group used social media throughout the school day and how school topics are part of their digital dialogue. Emma's social media consumption shifted her focus away from academics as she attempted to make up for not being in the same classes as her friends. The more Emma consumed her peers' feeds trying to fill in the social gaps only led to her viewing more posts that referenced events she missed. The inability to bridge this divide could lead to what Emma described as feelings of being left out or not included. The experience of this rejection could prompt students to take a step back from social media, but others could lean further into the isolation of a digital void.

An Escape, But Not Really

Participants shared that social media could be a means for students looking to fill a social void. Shamil shared that social media is often used "just to pass the time," and usage in certain areas of the school "is widespread." When asked to elaborate, Shamil shared that there are areas throughout the day, specifically the bus ride and lunch, where students feel there is not much to do, and many students prefer to go on social media or play games on their phones. Shamil's response showed how social media could offer an alternative experience to simply engaging in what is occurring in one's physical setting. While this alternative experience could provide students comfort, some participants were uncertain whether this behavior was beneficial or could lead to using social media to avoid what occurs throughout the school day.

Ella hesitated about using social media as a positive outlet during the school day as she shared:

I feel like people think that social media is like almost like an escape sometimes, but it's really not. And I feel like we could have a lot of better interactions with other people if we didn't depend on social media as much at times.

Ella's use of the word escape highlighted how social media could more than simply stifle physical interactions and communication throughout the school day. From her perspective, students are avoiding social interactions with their peers in the physical realm through the assistance of social media. In a different focus group, Sam shared a similar sentiment regarding social media usage during school "Social media, like it's a way to like basically escape from school." The use of social media as a means of escape can be a response to the social or academic demands students feel regarding school. However, based on Sam's reaction, it appeared that the escape could also be in response to the mundane or the structures of traditional education.

Chris struggled with identifying whether using social media as an escape was positive or negative for him as he recounted how he has felt in the past:

..if I like take a break from it and go play outside or play with my friends and not be on social media. Like sometimes, I just feel way better without it. Sometimes I feel better with it. So it's like a mix of mixed emotions.

The data did not clearly show whether using social media as an escape or release from academic and social pressures benefited or hindered eighth-grade students. This ambiguity signals that individuals struggle with the pressure of maintaining a physical and digital presence. Mona described student social media usage as "...like it's either a 50/50 if it's a positive or a negative thing."

How The Influencers Create an Influence

This theme presents how social media plays a role in shaping eighth-grade students social interactions. The concept of influencer, at a celebrity and peer level, is examined to see how the attention these influencers gain alters what eighth-graders may decide to replicate in their own digital and in-person social interactions.

Influencers & Creators & Trends, Oh My

In the focus groups, participants used the term influencer or creator to describe someone who utilized social media to gain and grow their following. While the media often depicts the youth as a group who are malleable and susceptible to following social media trends, the term trend was only used three times throughout all five focus groups. Emma described the significance of influencers and trends as:

a lot of social media involves pop culture, like doing trends, um, seeing like celebrities doing things and that can tie into what we talk about at school. Some people might be like, oh, did you see I posted this or did you see I posted this?

In a different focus group, Chris shared a similar stance regarding influencers and trends "I think that kids are influenced to follow what the big creators are doing...they just feel they have to do that, too, so they can be cool or whatever." Both participants described how students think about ways they can mimic what these prominent social media figures post to their social media accounts. Emma and Chris structured their thoughts similarly as both talked about the influence social media figures' influence on the youth. The second half of their responses depicted that these actions stem from a desire to gain the attention of their eighth-grade peers.

Sam grappled with the concept of mainstream influencers aloud as she processed her thoughts with her fellow participants:

Everyone is on their phones. They see like, whether it's just someone giving advice, they feel like they have to follow that advice because this person obviously has a big platform, so they obviously know what they're doing. So I feel like, um, it is something they would like to mimic.

Sam's initial reaction showed that she thought her peers were influenced more by the influencer's number of followers than the influencer's content or how qualified they were to speak on the topic. From Sam's perspective, her peers felt the number of followers gives merit to the influencer, which could lead to the influencer gaining even more followers. This idea of following and replicating was shared when Sam stated "because maybe if they do the same thing, uh, that this creator did, they will have the same level of success." Here the definition of success is directly linked to the number of followers a user amasses. Applying this same logic to the physical school setting parallels how many middle school students view social success by comparing their number of friends and overall popularity to others.

Before the focus group shifted topics, Sam shared a final piece of insight, which marked a critical turn in questioning the underlying motivation of mainstream influencers. In reflecting on how influencers can sometimes be a negative force in someone's digital world, Sam questioned "You should know that, like, you don't need to compare, um, to these people who probably don't even have this like lifestyle. It's just probably an act for like these social media platforms." Sam identified how not only are the followers of the influencer being used, but the social media platform is using the influencer. The grappling Sam described regarding her urge to compare herself to the posts of others when viewing social media has been researched and well-documented (Grogan, 2021; Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Influenced, Whether It's Good Or Bad

Participants stated how peers could also play a vital role in the overall engagement one has with social media. This engagement could encourage individuals to help strengthen healthy relationships with their peers. However, the engagement could also encourage individuals to take risks that may not be congruent with how they act in their physical worlds. Mona wrote on her brain map “Some people who have been on social media are influenced to do the things they see online, whether it is good or bad.” Mona captured how eighth-grade students must navigate what they consume on social media, the emotions that arise from the consumption, and the responses to what they decide to reproduce on social media. Chris shared that social media has influenced how he has interacted with his friends and people's perception of their peers. Chris noted that some social media platforms had encouraged him and his friends more than others “especially with trends on like TikTok or Instagram.” Kim et al. (2017) argued that the social interaction experience is one of the main draws of Instagram. This act of reproduction does not have to go viral on the internet as the goal of eighth-grade students often is focused on gaining more of a following from their peers. The participants highlighted that digital followers are influential, but the primary objective was to gain more attention in school from their posts.

When discussing how the role of technology facilitates or hinders interactions between peers at school, Ella shared:

Now that I have a phone, it's definitely changed. I've definitely felt like more, I wouldn't wanna say like I've been like discluded before, but it just feels like you're not missing out on as much. It feels like you're like in the loop.

Social media and technology, specifically smartphones, have become increasingly ubiquitous in human interaction, and school is no exception (Mittmann et al., 2022; Dodson, 2020; Martin et

al., 2018). Participant responses discussed how students who do not have social media are sometimes seen as outcasts, just as students obsessed with social media usage are sometimes depicted as weird. Aria summarized how she and her peers had felt pressure to maintain a social media presence:

People our age can really do that I think a lot because you're influenced by your peers and like, oh my gosh, these people are like so cool. You wanna be liked by them so you have to look perfect.

The final theme of this chapter will examine how the concept of power arises from the friction between social media and school.

A Rise in Power

In this final theme of Chapter IV, the focus will be on how eighth-graders described how social media provides users with a level of power they may not encounter in their face-to-face school setting. Participants shared multiple ways that students leverage social media for power. Anonymity, secrecy, and the notion of feeling removed from one's digital actions were points of discussion in multiple focus groups. Feelings of disrespect, exclusion, and coercion are also discussed in the section subtheme of this section.

You Have More Power

When participants discussed how social media provided users with power within the school setting, most discussions centered on power as an oppressive force. Participants shared how the physical distance between the user and the audience may allow individuals to feel more comfortable interacting with their peers in a way that does not accurately represent how they interact with their peers throughout the school day. This level of detachment was one of the main reasons participants shared when they discussed how individuals could leverage social media to

promote themselves or put others down. Daren wrote on his brain map “can be deceitful” when considering the connection between social media and school. While there are opportunities for eighth-graders to be deceitful in school, the anonymity provided by social media allows peers to interact in ways that are impossible with face-to-face interactions.

Depending on the social media platform, social interactions could occur in real time or when students view other students’ posts. Mona shared that it is not necessarily the real time or scrolling that empowers students but rather the ability to avoid confronting their peers in the physical world at the time of the social exchange:

I think it's pretty common for people to have a different personality, um, on social media than they do like generally online or like in person like we've said. And um, I think it's because they feel more comfortable saying it behind a screen than they would, um, [pause] like publicly online or like in person.

Mona’s choice of words that occurred after she paused briefly and responded with “like publicly online or like in person” stuck out. Here, Mona acknowledged that while publicly online and in person may have different social standards, neither applies to students interacting on social media through direct messages or some other form of private digital space. This could indicate that while students feel empowered online, it is essential to understand that different modes of digital interactions may carry varying levels of empowerment. Nesi and Prinstein (2018) discussed that there is not enough attention directed at how adolescents’ peer experiences via social media, given the variety of ways interactions differ between offline and online environments (p. 268).

Through examining the various forms of collected data, the power that social media provides students has the potential to cause social waves that spill into the school day. Sam made

the connection between how an increase in one's social media following could be visible within the school day "If people are like coming up to you because they recognize you, um, that physically shows that you are more popular. You have more power over like decisions." Sam shared how the power of popularity in school is a force students leverage, which mirrors the strategies of social media influencers in modern society. Students can use social media as a means to generate attention, which could lead to their peers giving them more in-person attention throughout the school day.

Whereas Sam focused on how saturation or the selective curation of one's social media life can lead to increased attention, Deidra provided an alternative way students leverage the power of social media. In the following response, Deidra described how students often exploit the digital-to-physical divide for specific reasons "...once we get back to school, when you really don't talk to that person but you can't really, like other people aren't gonna know that." Deidra shared how students will often exploit the secrecy of social media. In Deidra's statement, she shared how students may talk extensively online, but their online interaction is altered or nonexistent once they enter the school setting. She highlighted the internal struggle of wanting to break the unspoken social barriers and talk face-to-face to the peer they know from social media exchanges. However, breaking this barrier runs the risk of rejection by that person in the physical world and potentially in front of their peers. Deidra also showed how students grapple with concealing these digital relationships from their peers for fear of exposing the digital interactions or being ridiculed for talking to a peer outside of their accepted friend group.

Before social media, students could talk with their peers during class, but the teacher often intervened and ended the conversation. The act of passing notes to peers was a slower but potentially more discrete mode of social interaction within the class period. In the following

quote, Deidra highlighted the power students now have due to social media versus before the rise of social media “I don't know, like just seeing the note being passed and that means you get that association with, you actually have to interact with the person to be able to say it.” Deidra showcased that, by leveraging the social media median, students could interact with their peers while gaining additional privacy. The student now has power over the teacher in that even if the student got caught on their phone, the chances that the student's message would be intercepted are extremely unlikely. Instead of writing and passing multiple notes, social media allows students to share their messages with a larger audience. Based on Deidra's response, perhaps the most powerful aspect of shifting these side conversations to the digital realm is that neither the teacher nor the other students in the class see the digital interaction. The digital shift adds a heightened level of secrecy, thus allowing students to message their peers without worrying about being judged by their friends or classmates.

Lastly, participants noted that social media can provide power to eighth-grade students since they have the ability to remain connected to their peers at all times. When discussing the concept of power of social media and school, Rayan shared:

...there's like a filter in your head, but sometimes when you're on social media you can feel like you can say whatever you want cuz there's nothing like tied to you that you said those things. So yeah, you can feel like you have more power.

The notion of being detached from others is present in Rayan's response, but she also alluded that eighth-graders feel detached from their own words. This lack of ownership or accountability may allow students to feel more open to taking risks or posting content they would not share with individuals in face-to-face interactions. Ella acknowledged that some students might be detached, but others may just use that as an excuse for their actions “Sometimes people, um, type

faster than they can think. And so that just happens sometimes. But sometimes people are pretty purposeful for what they're doing and that's not always okay.” Ella’s words underscored that students take risks and, if questioned, will often use various excuses to conceal the true intentions of their post(s). The idea that “sometimes people are pretty purposeful” is another way students leverage social media for power. Social media may often be associated with immediacy, but Ella showed that some students are highly calculated with what they post and how they respond to others’ posts.

Are You Guys Actually Doing This Or Is It Just Me?

Social media platforms embed features that promote user interaction. Just as these features can provide power to individual users, groups of individuals can also harness this power. Participants shared how social media has caused issues that included entire friend groups arguing, individuals within a friend group experiencing issues, and groups of students using social media to target an individual. Aria noted how eighth-graders place a strong emphasis on the acceptance of their peers “...because you're influenced by your peers.” Aria shared that no one wants to be rejected by their peers, whether in person or online, which sometimes forces students to make difficult decisions. Ella shared how getting a phone can change one’s status in school “After I got a phone, some people were a little bit different towards me. I was like, oh, okay. That just changed my view on some people.” Social groups inherently have power, and groups can use social media to amplify their thoughts and opinions of others further.

Combining social media and school can make social decisions even more complicated. The act of asking friends to get together during or outside of the school day could trigger eighth-graders as it could cause unintentional stress due to the possible integration of social media. Participants shared how eighth-graders are busy with the combination of in school and out of

school commitments. When asked to join their friends, students must first consider all of their other commitments and then decide how their decision may be (mis)represented on social media.

Madelyn shared how she has experienced this tension:

sometimes it's hard to say no when your friends ask to hang out cuz it's like, what if they make inside jokes while I'm not there and then they bring it up at lunch and then it turns into this whole thing. So it's almost like you don't wanna be there, but at the same time you have like, you feel obligated to.

Madelyn's example showed how her friends might not realize the power social media and the group used to influence their friends' choices. Based on the response, it appeared as though Madelyn was speaking from experience when she shared how not being there could lead to social exclusion during future lunch conversations. The group could view or discuss social media posts that occurred while hanging out, furthering the divide between Madelyn and her friend group.

Participants shared that, though difficult, feeling pressure to be part of a group can be easier to navigate than feeling ostracized by a group of peers on social media. Chris shared how he had felt excluded by his friends in the past "I think that sometimes kids do feel left out because they can create secret group chats without them and like talk about hanging out without them." Chris shared that he found out that his friends had various groups, and his friends intentionally did not include him in some groups. Chris's example most likely had some form of impact on how he and his friends interacted while at school. Madelyn shared how she felt betrayed by her friends after viewing some of their social media posts:

I think sometimes if I see something on social media, like if there's people hanging out and they post a picture and they're like my friends. I wonder like oh they didn't invite me.

Like do they not like me anymore? Are they like mad at me for some reason? I think that happens to a lot of kids, and I don't like that I do it. It's kind of like natural instinct.

Madelyn did not share whether her friends (un)intentionally invited her, but the group's actions made her process feelings of rejection and betrayal. She noted how she does not want to immediately jump to the conclusion that her friends are leaving her out, but their images and the lack of communication make it difficult for Madelyn to ignore scenarios she creates surrounding why her friends left her out.

Ella shared how she had experienced being intentionally left out by her friends one day during class:

So if I can go off my own experiences, like people will be on their phones, like when the teacher's like, oh yeah, you can, like we're not really doing anything and they're all like scrolling on like social media and just like looking at stuff and all laugh together. I'm like, oh, what are you looking at? And they're like, oh, you wouldn't get it. It's just like, oh, like okay. It's just kind of weird. You're like, what am I missing out on? And they're all laughing really loud and they're having a great time and, I have no idea what they're talking about.

As Ella's recount exemplified, decisions surrounding social media excludes eighth-grade students from their friend groups. Ella stated that she did not have the platform that her friends were using during class. If social media was not allowed in this classroom, would Ella's friends still have alienated her? Social media provides another layer to the power already held by those in the group.

A final example of how participants categorized and discussed power is through the concept of coercion. Participants shared how students often make mistakes when engaged in

digital interactions, and their actions are misinterpreted, like face-to-face missteps. Multiple participants raised a difference in how sometimes students take those digital missteps and use them to their advantage. Participants also shared that sometimes even completely acceptable posts can be manipulated by others and used against them. Isiah shared how he has heard students using social media against some of his peers:

there has been instances where you accidentally say something embarrassing like who you like and stuff. And then people take screenshots after the text messages and say like, oh if you don't do this then I'm gonna share with all my friends and stuff.

When discussing power and how others can use social media to their advantage, Isiah's response summarized what some students must endure. In Isiah's example, the student could take a screenshot of the entire post or purposefully capture a portion of the message to inaccurately portray what was shared. While this example is powerful and could negatively impact the student who sent the text, other means of coercion could occur between students. Shared or leaked messages, images, and videos can cause significant harm to individual(s) and could significantly disrupt the learning environment. Emma shared how it is complicated, but the only way to combat those who are using power to attempt to control is to confront them "You need to be able to at least like confront them or pull them aside and be like hey I feel like this, um, is it true? Are you guys actually doing this or is it just me?"

Summary

This chapter presented the analyzed data from the focused ethnography and connected the themes that emerged to the research questions. Five focus groups were conducted, and 15 eighth-graders participated in this study. All focus groups followed the same semi-structured interview protocols and consisted of four main questions. Based on participant responses, I asked follow-

up and clarifying questions to gain richer descriptions from the participants. In addition to the focus groups, the study included the analysis of an artifact that each participant completed at the beginning and end of the focus group. I also spent time in less structured areas of the school, such as the cafeteria and hallways, to observe how eighth-graders engaged with social media and technology while being alongside their peers.

Descriptive coding was used for the first cycle coding. Using Dedoose, I (re)examined the collected data to develop parent and child codes. At the end of the iterative coding process, 11 parent codes and 28 child codes. In totality, over 630 applications of these codes were applied to the collected forms of data. Additional examination of the codes and the emergence of patterns led to constructing the five themes found in Chapter IV. The final chapter of this study examines the confluence of the identified themes from this chapter and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two.

Chapter V: Discussion

The rise of online social networking platforms has (re)shaped how individuals interact and navigate their physical and social worlds (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Dyer, 2015; Campbell & Park, 2008). Integrating smartphones and internet-capable devices (Long et al., 2021; Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Nesi et al., 2018; Dyer, 2017) into everyday life provides a multitude of opportunities to witness the collision eighth-grade students experience between the physical and digital realms. How has this infiltration of technology changed how students interact with the world? This chapter begins by reiterating the primary and secondary questions of the study and a summary of the findings. Next, the chapter will revisit the theoretical framework before transitioning to the discussion of the findings. Aligning with the concepts presented in Chapter II and Chapter IV, the discussion of findings has two main themes: examining how social media structures alter the school experience for eighth-grade students and how these structures influence eighth-grade students. After discussing the findings, future implications and recommendations are presented based on the findings of Chapter IV and the discussion within Chapter V.

Summary of Study

This study examined eighth-grade students within the site-specific suburban school setting and if social media has altered their school experience. One primary question and two sub-questions directed this study: (1) Does the confluence between social media and school cause a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting? (1a) How do eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school describe the convergence of social media and school? (1b) How does the influence of social media manifest during the school day? This study employed a qualitative approach to represent the participant's lived experiences and understanding of the

interplay between social media and school. Tatlow-Golden and Guerin (2010) argued for using qualitative methods when examining youth experiences since a child's perspective and experiences may not be accessible by scales. The collected and examined data was from a youth perspective, not through an adult lens. In addition to participant data and participant-submitted artifacts, I analyzed fieldnotes and observational data from less structured locations throughout Spring Middle School.

The first sub-question (1a) was answered by examining the data collected from the semi-structured focus groups and artifact analysis. The eighth-grade participants described the convergence of social media and school as powerful and confusing. While the magnitude of the convergence between social media and school may have varied based on participants, the overall consensus was that the ripple effects of social media do carry over into the face-to-face interactions that occur within the school day. The second sub-question (1b) was answered through the data collected from the focus group, artifact analysis, and the fieldnotes. The participants shared that eighth-graders' communication and consumption of social media could allow peers to strengthen their academic performance and social bonds. However, participants also discussed how the communication and consumption of social media could lead eighth-graders to shift their focus away from academics and cause disruptions that could unfold during the school day on social media or in person. The main research question (1) was answered by analyzing the collected data sets. While the extent to which the confluence between social media and school is highly fluid and individualized, the data showed that the confluence between these two forces has altered the school landscape.

Applications of Theoretical Framework to Findings

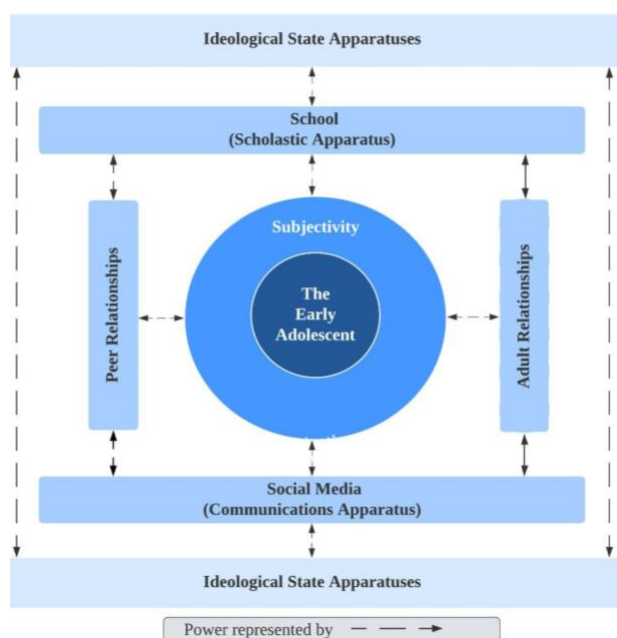
Critical theory guided this study, specifically how critical theorists have questioned and critiqued the relationship between technology and society. From a critical lens, the concepts of structures, subjectivity, and power were used to crystallize the interpretations of the collected data. Figure 5 depicts how these concepts are essential in understanding how the collisions

between social media and school could alter the school experiences of eighth-graders. The arrows in Figure 5 symbolize the interactions of power. Louis Althusser (2001) argued that the Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) is potentially the most powerful ISA and that the power of any ISA comes from how it functions (p. 145). Backer (2018) noted how Althusser's philosophy focuses on struggle, a development of the geological problematic that understands society as a formation, a balance of forces where each force engages in contestation.

Feenberg (1990) described how the reciprocity between production and application of technology within a capitalist society could be viewed as "the ambivalence of technology thus reflects the ambiguity of a design process which condenses both social and technical goals" (p. 45). Feenberg (2008) argued for a critical theory of technology that acknowledges the dialectic of functionality and implementation of technology. Narrowing the focus down to the individual level, the center of Figure 5 depicts the eighth-grade student. Axel Honneth's Theory of

Figure 5

Visual of Theoretical Framework



Recognition merges critical theory with psychology to examine how everyday interactions shape subjectivity. Lovink (2019) argued that when looking at the convergence of technology and subjectivity, interpellation can be extended to examine the idea of “becoming-user” (p. 28). While Figure 5 oversimplifies the structural relationships for the sake of this study, the figure depicts specific structures and the interplay between these various structures. An examination of these forces will be used to understand better how the experience of school could have been altered for eighth-grade students.

Summary of Discussion of Results

This section is broken into two themes: (1) Structures, Still Holding Strong, and (2) Struggling to be Recognized. While the concepts of structures, subjectivity, and power are apparent in both themes, the first theme emphasizes structures and power. In contrast, the second theme emphasizes subjectivity as a product of structures and power. The following two themes overlay the findings of this study with the theoretical framework and the current literature discussed in Chapter II.

Structures, Still Holding Strong

This section examines how eighth-grade students are impacted by social media platforms' structures and the superstructure, specifically the Ideological State Apparatuses. The Communication Ideological State Apparatus and the Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus continuously inundate eighth graders with implicit and explicit messaging, thus reinforcing the dominant ideology.

Infiltrated, But Not Overthrown

News outlets have frequently conveyed that social media is causing irreparable damage to the youth. Schools across the United States have tried a variety of strategies to help students

create a balance between school and technology. These strategies range from dedicating lessons or units on how to responsibly integrate technology to school districts placing bans on students possessing personal devices during the school day. This study examined whether social media was a disruptive force for eighth-grade students during the school day. If it was disruptive, to what extent did social media alter one's ability to learn and experience school?

In order to examine this question, it is essential first to revisit the theoretical framework of this study. From a Marxist stance, our current capitalist society is built on the concept of the relationship between the base (modes of production) and superstructure (legal-political and ideological). Althusser (2014) argued that within the superstructure resides the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Althusser (2014) emphasized how the Scholastic ISA remains the dominant ISA since replacing the Religious ISA:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most 'vulnerable', squeezed between the family state apparatus and the educational state apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). (p. 251)

While Foucault (1990) preferred the dispositive (dispositif) concept, Foucault also acknowledged the Scholastic ISA's influence on society. In discussing how the State seized control from the religious sector and started to enact exercises of power, Foucault (Gordon, 1980) underscored how the Scholastic ISA injected ideology into pedagogy "morality taught in primary schools, that is, the gradual imposition of a whole system of values disguised as the teaching of literacy,

reading, and writing covering up the imposition of values” (p. 20). The Scholastic ISA’s ability to reproduce the dominant power is entangled within every aspect of the current educational system. The findings of this study were analyzed to examine whether the rise of social media has redirected the youth's attention to such an extent that eighth-grade students could no longer hear the Scholastic ISA’s continuous drumming.

In Chapter IV, I shared that 53% of the focus group participants stated that social media impacts their school day, and 40% indicated that they were unsure. The collected data suggest that the Scholastic ISA has been infiltrated, but to what extent? In examining the level of infiltration, I again turn to the focus group data as this most accurately represents how eighth-graders perceive the two apparatuses. When asked if social media usage in school causes a distraction, Isiah shared:

I think if you manage like your time properly, like for like homework and doing like your schoolwork, then like you don't get like self-prioritized and on your phone, like social media, then you're fine. But if you like, spend too much time on it and you're getting like bad grades let's say, and then not doing as well, like not understanding the concepts, um, then that could be like a big problem.

The ambiguity in Isiah’s response aligns with many of the participant’s responses regarding social media and school. Isiah acknowledged that many students might become distracted by social media, but the overall impact on school performance for the majority of students is minimal. However, this quote also provides a nuanced view of how Isiah is caught on the ISA battlefield. Isiah’s wording could highlight how he believed that the school is the ISA on the defensive and that social media is the ISA on the offensive. Isiah’s entire account centered around managing time, with a focus on school. He positioned homework and schoolwork as the

main objectives, and once completed, students could move into ancillary objectives such as social media and self-selected priorities. Next, Isiah discussed how ignoring the demands of school could evoke punitive measures such as bad grades. Isiah concluded by sharing how the Scholastic ISA has drummed into him the importance of coursework, “not understanding the concepts, um, then that could be like a big problem.” Isiah acknowledged the power of the Communication ISA, but his response indicated that the Scholastic ISA still holds as the dominant ISA.

Shamil also discussed how social media and school compete throughout the school day, and this battle can even be seen outside of the regular school day:

when mixing school and social media [there] needs to be a middle ground, um, where students can post on social media. But, um...they should like, they should be focusing on their studies at school and their homework instead of posting all day.

Shamil articulated how he believed there should be space for both apparatuses. However, based on Shamil’s response, his use of the term middle ground does not seem to equate to equal space for social media and school. Like Isiah, Shamil emphasized how school has prepotency over social media as Shamil noted that eighth-graders' main priority should be their studies. The following response from Mona shows how the Scholastic ISA continuously adapts in order to retain its dominant grasp:

I agree with that because recently I had a health project, and I did the same thing with like a group where I've like Snapchat them and like asking them questions on like what I should do. And I think it helps, um, a lot for like people who like are busy and like they can communicate with their group members that they cannot do like whatever part or, um, like any ideas that they thought like after school.

Mona's example highlighted how the Scholastic ISA's reach extends beyond the physical school setting. The rise of technology has only allowed the Scholastic ISA to become further entrenched in the everyday life of eighth-grade students.

The Communication ISA has indeed made its way into the Scholastic ISA. However, based on Mona's comment above and the findings shared throughout Chapter IV, the converse could also be stated as the Scholastic ISA leverages the connectedness that the Communication ISA provides users. While the media may portray social media as this all-consuming, overwhelming force, I believe the findings from this study bring to light that the Communication ISA complements the Scholastic ISA. In addition to reaping the benefits of the Communication ISA, Althusser (2013) also noted how the Scholastic ISA works intimately with another vital ISA responsible for the molding of the youth:

It [Scholastic ISA] is coupled with the family just as the Church was once coupled with the family...the school (and the school-family couple) constitutes the dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the apparatus playing a determinant part in the reproduction of the relations of production of a mode of production threatened in its existence by the world class struggle. (p. 252-253)

This concept of the school-family relationship should not be overlooked when discussing the Scholastic ISA's ability to drum ideology and then eject students into various modes of production (Althusser, 2013, p. 251). Foucault (Gordon, 1980) also argued the need to critically examine how power is exerted through the superstructure:

What I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State. In two senses: first of all because the State, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the

whole field of actual power relations, and further because the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth. True, these networks stand in a conditioning-conditioned relationship to a kind of 'meta-power' which is structured essentially round a certain number of great prohibition functions; but this meta-power with its prohibitions can only take hold and secure its footing where it is rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power. (p. 122)

Here Foucault stated how no apparatus could function at its total capacity without the assistance of other apparatuses. For this study, the power relations between the Communication and Scholastic ISAs work in conjunction with the State to reproduce values embodied through family, technology, and knowledge. The network of power relations is what continues to reinforce the Scholastic ISA's stronghold. The Communication ISA has infiltrated the Scholastic ISA, but based on the findings of this study, it has many battles ahead before it can overthrow the Scholastic ISA as the dominant ISA. However, as highlighted in the following subsection, the Communication ISA's presence has caused a level of disruption regarding how eighth-grade students experience school.

The Drive Towards Social

This section will examine how structures within a capitalist society reinforce the yearning eighth-graders' experience towards social media. Feenberg (2010) argued that our current capitalist society emphasizes one's possession of technology; technology is a signifier of one's identity (p. 10). I observed eighth-graders at Spring Middle School walking around with the

newest phones on the market. Spring Middle School's staff shared that students will come to the office stating that they lost expensive technology such as Apple Air pods and designer earbuds that cost well over \$150. Feenberg (2010) articulated the relationship between technology and society as a strange loop, entangled hierarchy, and paradoxical since technology and society are unstable and are constantly adjusting to the demands of each other. Society is influenced by the latest technology, which in turn, influences the next iteration of the technology's design and so on. The features of a phone or social media app are altered and marketed so that the old versions appear obsolete.

In addition to possessing the most current phone or Air pods, social media platforms are signifiers for eighth-graders. Only one of the participants in this study, Shamil, stated that they did not have any social media accounts. Though Shamil did not belong to any social media platforms, this did not make him immune from the struggles that could occur due to the presence of social media during the school day. Shamil shared how social media has reshaped his school experience "I also like always see people with their phones whether it be social media or others things... I guess like widespread across, especially [in] the cafeteria and bus." While Shamil does not have to deal directly with the distraction of social media, he does have to navigate how others are distracted around him. Fuchs (2016) argued that social media is built in such a way that users are often subjected to various forms of alienation "on the cultural level, objective and intersubjective alienation means that attention and online visibility that enables meaning-making are asymmetrically distributed so that everyday users are at a disadvantage and celebrities and powerful organisations at an advantage" (p. 172). The intentionality behind this asymmetrical distribution inherently positions the elite to remain at the forefront. In Shamil's response above, he shared how social media has disrupted his social interactions at school.

Shamil's experience of alienation is rooted in the lack of access to social media. In contrast, Chris described how social media's constant bombardment of content from influencers created a sense of alienation. Chris shared his perspective on why students mimic trends and celebrity influencers "kids are like influenced to follow what the big creators are doing. Like, especially with trends on like TikTok or Instagram, they just feel like they have to do that too so they can be like cool or whatever." The division that social media establishes between an average eighth-grade student and celebrity influencers has the potential to create a sociological form of alienation. As users engage with social media, they are provided opportunities to feel connected with others. However, engaging with social media can produce feelings of comparisons or a sense of individual versus group collective.

In both instances, this feeling of exclusion could lead eighth-grade students to consume more social media to fill the void. Emma shared how she knew peers who tried to fill this void "once you like start looking at social media a lot...people can get addicted to like just like going on social media and like scrolling through it for hours and hours." Aria shared how she has struggled with her consumption of content on TikTok:

I know a couple of times I deleted TikTok, but I used to be like really active on it and I had like watched TikTok instead of studying and then it was 10 o'clock at night and I still had math homework to do.

Emma and Aria provided examples of how eighth-graders can become accustomed to spending much of their time on social media platforms where they can be passive consumers or active producers. Social media is designed so that even if users are not posting content, their content consumption is recorded and tracked to retain their engagement with the specific social media platform. Internal feelings could provoke this yearning to return to the digital realm, but the

yearning could also be a product of social media platforms' marketing strategies and embedded features. Does the drive for social media come from a desire for recognition or is this drive the result of capitalist production?

To examine the interdependence between the social media platform and eighth-grade students, I will reference how Foucault (2003) laid the foundation of his "how of power":

I do not think that it is ideologies that are shaped at the base, at the point where the networks of power culminate. It is the actual instruments that form and accumulate knowledge, the observational methods, the recording techniques, the investigative research procedures, the verification mechanisms. (p. 33)

To follow this genealogy of power, Foucault underscored the significance of the instruments that form and accumulate knowledge. Applying this concept to social media, one could argue that algorithms successfully accumulate knowledge of the platform's users through various forms of digital surveillance. Algorithms could also be seen as effective instruments in helping users form perceived knowledge. During Focus Group 3, Ivy stated "the algorithm like kind of like changes what you see sometimes." Ella expanded on Ivy's comment when she shared how she viewed the influence of algorithms on her social media:

it's like computerized. So it's just kind of basing off like, oh you viewed that so let's put that back on your feed...it's just like kind of a bunch of different posts or videos that like show up on your feed, and it's really conflicting sometimes.

Daren then summarized how he had been directly impacted by algorithms "I totally agree with that. I feel like it can suck, suck you in a lot with the algorithm." Each of the three responses above acknowledged the presence of social media algorithms and the power algorithms hold regarding the manipulation of one's experience with social media.

Upon further examination, all three responses include some connotation of an altercation. Ivy's use of "change" shows how she understood that encounters with specific social media content are not random but purposeful. Ella used "conflicting" when she described what posts or videos appear in her social media feeds. The use of the term conflicting referred to Ella's visual experience of seeing the varying content on her social media feeds. However, it could also be applied to the internal feelings of conflict that arise from the consumption of content. Daren's concise comment stating that algorithms "suck you in" aligns with succumbing to the engagement features embedded within each social media platform. Whitson (2013) argued that algorithms and the implementation of gamification function as convenient, supportive, and fun for the user end but function as mechanisms for surveillance for the corporations and the State. This continuous surveillance and iterative curation of personalized digital content allow for subtle adjustments that make the user yearn for more while always retaining hegemonic stability.

Struggling to be Recognized

This section examines subjectivity as a product through the relational exchanges between structures and power. Feenberg's (1991) Critical Theory of Technology and Honneth's (1996) Theory of Recognition are applied to highlighted findings discussed in Chapter IV. The presence of social media within the school day has altered how eighth-grade students at Spring Middle School present themselves in everyday life in the physical and digital realms. This continuous social displacement between the physical and digital realms could create a sense of ambiguity for eighth graders, thus altering how they interact with their peers.

The Social Swerve

In *De Rerum Natura* (Bailey, 1922), Lucretius captured Epicurus' argument on how atoms can randomly break or swerve from their course of trajectory:

they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion.

For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused (p.113)

In his later work, Althusser proposed “atoms themselves, which, without swerve and encounter, would be nothing but abstract elements, lacking all consistency and existence” (p. 169). The concept of a swerve, be it random or initiated by force, can be applied to the confluence between the Communication Ideological State Apparatus (social media) and the Scholastic Ideological State Apparatus (school). The reverberations from the collisions between these two apparatuses can be seen in students' daily lives. Adding to Althusser's theorizing on the swerve and the role ISAs play in modern society, Feenberg (2008) noted how enmeshed our lives have become with technology “It is the everyday lifeworld of a modern society in which devices form a nearly total environment. In this environment, the individuals identify and pursue meanings” (p. 56). Feenberg (1991) argued that the use of technology should be examined through not a substantive nor instrumental lens but rather through a critical lens. In discussing the importance of a critical theory of technology, a critical approach acknowledges certain concepts within substantive and instrumental theories while rejecting their overarching stance toward technology. Feenberg (1991) stated:

Critical theory argues that technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term, but an "ambivalent" process of development suspended between different possibilities...On this view, technology is not a destiny but a scene of struggle. It is a social battlefield, or perhaps a better metaphor would be a parliament of things on which civilizational alternatives are debated and decided. (p.12)

Throughout this study, the confluence between social media and school has been understood as a scene of struggle. The ambivalence that Feenberg described aligns with Marx's (2004) definition of struggle and the definition used in Chapter I of this study, "an antinomy, right against right, bearing the seal of the law of exchanges in which tension presents itself between two or more apparatuses."

To illustrate how the concept of the swerve captures the ambivalence of technology, I will draw on my observations and participants' experiences regarding social interactions that occur in one of the ventricles of middle school social life; the hallways. Throughout my time in the field, I frequently observed groups of students talking while passing around or gesturing toward a phone. As an observer, I was unaware of what the eighth-graders looked at and discussed on their phones and personal devices. Still, through observations, it became apparent that there were times when interactions within the digital network drove in-person group social interactions. Ella described how this occurs throughout the school day "people will be on their phones... they're all like scrolling on like social media and just like looking at stuff and all laugh together." Ella's words and the example of students walking in the halls showcase a social swerve originating from the digital void. This swerve, a swearing-together, fostered communication between peers and promoted in-person dialogue. Ella highlighted how the swerve bridged the in-person and digital realms and promoted a sense of temporary social singularity.

Another regular occurrence I witnessed was groups of students walking down the hallways talking while students within the group missed parts of the group's conversation due to being engaged with their phones. Social interactions within the digital network interrupted the physical group dynamic. Shamil shared how phones could alter how people interact during

school. “I think that in the hallways, in the cafeteria, and everywhere like that, um, phones and social media are used a lot.” In this example, the swerve appears as a swerving-apart, adding tension to the social exchanges. The above two examples highlight how this social swerve has the potential to disrupt traditional in-person communication and potentially add to the social struggles and ambiguity of eighth-grade peer interactions.

Feenberg (2008) argued that, when examining technology, the critical theory of technology provides a more accurate representation than more traditional theories, as the critical theory of technology considers the dialectic between the functionality and implementation of technology. The expansion of technology throughout modern society provides students with ever-evolving opportunities to engage. During one of my observations in the cafeteria, I focused on interactions between four eighth-graders eating breakfast. Students at Spring Middle School are allowed to enter the cafeteria before the start of school and have approximately ten minutes to buy and eat breakfast before the start of school. During this observation, two eighth-graders entered the cafeteria together on their phones and sat down at a booth. Both were engaged in their respective digital and physical networks. While outside my knowledge of whom the two were conversing with on their digital networks, both students talked to each other and held separate social interactions in the digital realm.

After about two minutes, two additional eighth-graders sat at the table. These two students did not have their phones out, and the original students put their phones away. All four students started to socialize exclusively in the physical network. Within a few minutes, the two students who started at the table began to swerve into a level of engagement that placed them in both the in-person and digital spheres. The two students showed how it was within their realm of comfort to shift between swerving-together and swerving-apart as they were concurrently

interacting with their peers at the table while also investing in the interactions transpiring on their devices. The students appeared to be together in the physical realm while separated in their respective digital realms.

After a few minutes, all four students had their phones out, and the physical conversations ultimately came to a halt. About a minute before the bell rang, all four students left. The four had minimal in-person conversation as they parted ways, but all four remained on their phones. The only break from technology occurred when each student grabbed their backpack and looked at the cafeteria table to ensure all their trash was cleared.

This observation illustrates how the social swerve conjures Feenberg's (1991) metaphor of the social battlefield (p. 12). Feenberg (2010) cautioned that modern society accepts the illusions presented through the implementation of technology, which can cause one to disassociate their actions from the potential consequences. In the above scenario, the students' experience of school was altered due to the presence of phones and social media. As noted at the start of this subsection, it is not the swerve that causes unrest for the students but rather the combination of the swerve and the encounter. While this social swerving was not limited to eighth-grade students, I observed eighth-graders comfortably blurring their digital and in-person social interactions throughout the various locations within Spring Middle School. All four of the eighth-graders I observed that morning started their school day by hurling themselves into the digital and physical social realms in an attempt to further their feelings of recognition. This blurring of networks, coupled with a continuous swerve between digital and in-person social interactions, could produce a form of disorientation as one is neither fully here nor there.

Is it a Friend or Recognition Request

The collected data from the focus groups, artifact analysis, and fieldnotes all suggested that the infusion of social media within the school day has, to varying degrees, altered the experience of the eighth-grade students at Spring Middle School. Most eighth-graders come to school each day equipped with at least one internet-capable device, a district-issued laptop. However, many eighth-graders also come to school with a personal phone that can access social media on the school's network or their personal network. Participants noted how many students use social media during unstructured times, and some students even use social media during structured class time. Depending on the individual and their recent social interactions, the magnetism of social media could be a minor or significant distraction from the everyday expectations of school.

Honneth's Theory of Recognition (1996) stresses that for an individual to feel accepted, they must have experienced feelings from three overlapping spheres of recognition: (1) self-confidence, (2) self-respect, and (3) self-esteem. Hanhela (2017) highlighted that the Theory of Recognition postulates that the act of recognizing oneself and (re)formulating one's identity is an intersubjective process, where one attributes recognition through the reception from others (p. 1043). The data from this study highlighted how fluid and delicate the intersubjective process of identity is for eighth-grade students. Honneth (2006) wrote that "a recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves" (p. 111).

Aria articulated the struggle for recognition eighth-graders face when navigating school and social media "I don't know, it's just, it's weird because you try your best to not be weird." In addition to avoiding being seen as weird, participants noted that social media could be a struggle

because users can see how much attention their peers receive. Deidra reflected on how social media can sometimes be frustrating as it shows how certain people can post and get more of a reaction than others “I see all the people liking it. It's like hundreds of likes.” Being subjected to continually seeing the recognition of others could further one’s sense of social invisibility.

Fuchs (2016) argued how alienation negatively impacts the Honneth’s three spheres of recognition:

Lukács and Honneth show that alienation and reification in societies structured by class and domination bring about structures that are not controlled by all humans, but by the particularistic interests of specific groups. Alienated societies violate human essence in society. It denies humans recognition. (p. 215)

In relation to this study, participants shared how social media can sometimes make individuals feel excluded or ignored. This feeling of alienation can be the product of the actions of others, the eighth-grader’s perspective of how they are perceived by others, or the exposure to social media curated by the platform’s algorithms. This feeling of alienation has the ability to manifest in ways that are sometimes internalized or externalized by the individual whom their peers alienate. Chris shared an example of how this feeling of alienation can be internalized but significantly impact an eighth-grader’s school day:

people without social media, like they won't be able to see the latest news or trends so they might not be up to date with their peers that do have social media so they could feel less powerful or left out in the conversations and therefore even have lower self-esteem cuz of that sometimes.

Chris’ example was just one of many examples where participants shared how feeling excluded within the digital realm has led to negative feelings that alter the course of one’s school day.

Ivy shared how alienation can also manifest subtly through externalized gestures when she stated:

Like everybody is using Snapchat, and when I hear like, oh, there's drama between these people, and like when did it happen? Where did it happen? Oh, on Snapchat. Like what? And then, like people are breaking up and fighting on Snapchat. It's so weird. They're just texting with like a blank face.

Ivy's response highlighted how eighth-graders can sometimes be hurt by their peers, yet remain stoic in their externalized response. Deranty et al. (2007) described how members of the Frankfurt School viewed alienation as appearing in a variety of setting "Alienation can be traced just as much in cultural practices and everyday sociality as in the sphere of work. In other words, they were interested as much in the forms of domination characteristic of the everyday relations of the lifeworld" (p. 175).

This lack of recognition (Honneth, 2014b; Honneth, 2006; Honneth, 1996) produces struggles for eighth-graders as they navigate their social interactions. The analyzed data showed that social media could strengthen or damage Honneth's third sphere, self-esteem. Examples of digital interactions that could help build social esteem are supportive communities, positive peer responses, or acknowledgment of events or accomplishments. Eighth-grade students could have their social esteem sphere damaged by negative interactions, consistently being ignored, or purposefully being excluded. Mona shared how eighth-graders could experience bullying or be the recipient of negative peer interactions based on their social media posts:

I have seen it happen in school where...someone will be on social media during school...and then like during the day their friend will see it... And that kind of affects some people like with their grades and stuff and how like they focus.

The interaction Mona described could occur face-to-face without integrating social media. However, the reaction might be less severe since the audience may be smaller, and peers would be unable to share the interaction like they can on social media. Mona's example showcases how the feeling of disrespect is amplified through social media, which makes the emotions more intense.

In the example above, Mona's description illustrates how the Theory of Recognition shows the significance of self-esteem and disrespect. Self-esteem, the outermost sphere of recognition, involves the connection of oneself to others. Honneth (1996) uses the term "solidarity" to capture this feeling of togetherness and stated "the individual knows himself or herself to be a member of a social group that can collectively accomplish things whose worth for society is recognized" (p. 128). Mona shared how social media has been used to post hurtful messages about people. When the student finds out about their friend's hurtful post, their sense of solidarity is disrupted. This comment falls under what Honneth (1996) would classify as disrespect, which can lead one to question how this interaction in the digital realm temporarily altered their dignity.

Madelyn expanded on this idea when she shared how social media provides students with the opportunity to capture and (re)view hurtful interactions:

there's still even more power when you talk on your social media because it's there forever. Words are obviously always there forever when you're speaking too, but sometimes like you can, like people might hear you wrong or whatever, but when you're texting it's just there. It's in text. You wrote that. You sent it. It's there and it's not gone. Even if you delete it, the other person has it on their phone.

Feelings of shame can occur when any of the three spheres of recognition are damaged. The most intense feelings of share arise when one's self-respect is taken away, typically through brutal physical force. However, Honneth (1996) acknowledged that shame can occur when self-esteem is damaged and argued that shame, when appropriately deal with, can help individuals grow:

In the context of the emotional response associated with shame, the experience of being disrespected can become the motivational impetus for a struggle for recognition. For it is only by regaining the possibility of active conduct that individuals can dispel the state of emotional tensions into which they are forced as a result of humiliation. (p. 138)

In Madelyn's example, she focused on how text messages can elicit strong emotional feelings. Unfortunately, social media can also be the conduit for sharing private photos or videos, which could bring intense feelings of shame and humiliation. Whether it be the sender or the receiver, the ability to save and ruminate on previous digital interactions could cause eighth-graders to be privately or publicly humiliated. Madelyn reinforced how consequential the act of (re)viewing harmful content could be for eighth-graders and the downside of the permanence that social media provides users.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to note that this study has limitations regarding the methodology, analysis, and generalizability of the findings. The limitations of the methodology used in this study are tied to the theoretical framework. The limitations of the analysis are due to the small sample size, the duration of the study, and the emphasis on highlighting the participants' voices. Lastly, the generalizability of the study has limitations due to the selected design.

Limitations in Methodology

The first limitation regarding the methodology of this study was the small sample size of participants. This study's initial proposal sought 25-35 focus group participants. This range was selected as it represents slightly under 10% of the eighth-grade student population. After two recruitment phases, I received 20 submitted consent forms. However, two consent forms only checked off the first box acknowledging consent but did not include student or parent information. Three participants spoke to me prior to the start of the focus group and stated they were uncomfortable participating in the study. The study concluded with five focus groups and a total of 15 participants.

Another identified limitation was the duration of the study. The researcher collected data within a four-month window. This relatively condensed time frame meant that the study's results might reflect and be subject to recent events. While the researcher was unaware of localized events, this study occurred during the second school year without COVID-19 restrictions. The lingering academic, social, and emotional toll from the COVID-19 pandemic is still widely unknown. Since this study examined the confluence of social media and school, confounding variables could be traced back to students experiencing an abrupt shift to virtual learning during the pandemic and the fragmented transition back to a more traditional learning environment after restrictions ended.

Limitations in Analysis

The desire to allow the participants' voices to remain at the forefront of this study could be a limitation to the overall analysis of the study. Even though there was an emphasis on including direct passages from the focus groups and highlighting various examples pulled from the artifact analysis, I, as the researcher, was the one who held power and the ability to examine

the data and discuss findings. Participants did not receive a copy of the transcription of the focus group, nor were they involved in the coding process. Participant checks may have strengthened the study as the participants could have verified that the pulled passages aligned with the findings and presented themes.

Limitations in Generalizability

The results of this study cannot be generalized as the participant population consisted of one grade within one middle school. While each participant is unique and their lived experiences are varied, there are local and societal commonalities that cannot be ignored. With technology progressing rapidly, it is also important to note that the data and discussions presented in this study may look vastly different if the study were to be replicated in the future. Kolb (2012) stated that a researcher's sampling plan could be susceptible to potential biases in qualitative research. Implementing purposeful sampling was intentional as it aligned with the research questions. While the sampling plan may be free from researcher bias, the population of participants who agreed to be part of the study may present biases. The fact that participants had to give up part of their free time during the school day and be willing to talk about social media with their assistant principal with no incentive or compensation for their time might have caused eighth-grade students to reject the invitation to participate.

Lastly, my position could also be a limitation of the study. As an administrator, families and students may have willingly participated or avoided participation due to my role. By acknowledging that I held a level of insider status, I continued to reinforce with all potential participants that this was the researcher speaking, not one of their assistant principals. However, it would be naive of me to expect eighth-graders to bracket and temporarily suspend this differential of power. The social implications of being in a room with your assistant

principal/researcher asking questions about social media and school could have also deterred students from enrolling in the study. Other students may have had reservations regarding how their peers would perceive them if they found out they willingly participated in a study about social media and school. These are just two examples of how the generalizability of the study should be questioned, and the practical limitations of the results be examined.

Implications for Future Educational Research

The findings of this study provided answers to the research questions but also left plenty of room to further examine how the confluence of social media and school alter students' experience of school. While I attempted to keep the words of the participants in the foreground throughout this study, additional studies could include additional layers of participant involvement. A future study could provide the opportunity for participants to member-check the transcripts, memos, and fieldnotes. The incorporation of member-checking could strengthen how data is coded and analyzed, thus allowing members from the targeted participant population to be actively involved in the findings and discussion phases of the study.

When discussing qualitative data collection methods, Saldaña (2011) noted that “to live in the social world is to experience and reflect upon it daily... the complexities and ambiguities of being human are exactly what we need to document and report to contemplate the messy mysteries of it” (p. 31). Saldaña highlighted various qualitative data collection methods and reiterated that the collection methods should align with the study. When designing my study, I decided that my focused ethnography would include multiple modes of data collection. Individual interviews were intentionally excluded due to the nature of my role as administrator and researcher. I believe that researchers who do not have the same level of entanglement with

participants as I did would be able to gain a unique insight into how social media and school could cause struggles.

Integrating individual interviews could be an alternative approach to examining this topic through descriptive phenomenology design. This approach would also allow the researcher to meet with the participants multiple times to conduct interviews based on phenomenological interview protocols. Van Manen (2016) described what one is searching for when implementing a phenomenological design:

hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware the lived life is always more complex than any explications of meaning can reveal” (p. 19).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this design would allow the researcher to uncover how one describes the collisions between social media and school. This would shift the focus from examining the culture to examining the participants' lived experiences.

For a final suggestion for future research, I will bring up one of the many tensions that became apparent throughout the study. Unlike the suggestions above, this proposed examination focuses on the tensions I found in the literature. Conducting a quick literature search on social media and school produces an overwhelming number of results. However, much of the literature that first appears comes from fields that fall within the (post)positivist worldview. Literature from the social sciences consists of much of the initial results, though adjusting the search parameters yields literature that aligns with other worldviews. My intention behind noting this tension is not to argue for one worldview over another but rather to bring to light that worldviews are critical when understanding the totality of the literature. A (post)positivist and a transformational study examining how social media alters the school experience would have

different theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and data collection methods. Both approaches are valid and should be honored. However, the conclusions drawn from the two studies could be drastically different. This is why further examination could add to the current literature on whether the confluence between social media and students creates a struggle.

Implications for Future Educational Practice

This study examined the nuanced collective of tensions between social media and school that create the struggle for eighth-grade students. I quickly realized how unique of an experience I was about to embark on during the early formation stages of the study. Having the opportunity to facilitate a semi-structured focus group with middle school students might sound daunting to some. However, the participants' willingness to critically engage and be vulnerable strengthened the data set. Their responses showcased the depth of knowledge and accumulated life experiences middle school students possess. The results from this study suggest that students can be active members in future educational discussions.

Our society's dominant narrative is that adults know better than the youth. This biased perspective, known as adultism, can be a means to ends that do not fully meet the targeted audience's needs. Douthirt-Cohen and Tokunaga (2020) stated the importance and difficulty of suspending judgment when working alongside youth “adultism is systemically and repetitively reinforced in everyday life establishing adults more evolved, responsible, in charge, deserving power, and presumed competent” (p. 218). Through critical engagement and ongoing reflection, adults can better understand the students' perspectives. One of the recurring themes from this study was that we cannot view the youth's engagement with social media from a dualistic perspective. Youth, just like adults, struggle at times with social media consumption and reproduction. However, within this struggle are multiple access points where social media can

produce powerful and positive social interactions (Jaynes, 2020; Hodkinson, 2017; Antheunis, 2016).

Both Feenberg and Honneth argue that technology has the capability to propel society in a positive direction if society would abandon only capitalism. Within a capitalist society, it is crucial to understand how technology is influenced and manipulated by the superstructure. Due to the technology's rapid rate of change, a curriculum with resources tied to specific apps or technologies may not be the best approach when integrating technology education. Morrison-Love (2017) stressed that when discussing curriculum for technology education a transformative paradigm would serve as the most liberating worldview. Clark and Seider (2017) discussed how the integration of dialogic talk within the classroom allows students to strengthen their level of critical consciousness. Through these transformative practices, students are provided the opportunity to question and examine the social and political forces that influence the functionality and implementation of technology.

Kellner (2006) shared that teachers seeking to provide students with opportunities to engage with technology critically must question how technology influences the subjectivities of its users. Meabon Bartow (2014) summarized how learning could be enriched by educators allowing students to bring social media into the classroom:

teachers straddle compliance and the relational with social media, blending what seemingly must be with what can be. They step right into addressing the complex task of modeling and coaching civil behavior in shared public spaces. They blend the efficiency-promoting and relational-promoting aspects of using social media. They blend required content with increasing interaction by crossing boundaries—opening new spaces with different rules and ambiance and making them available all the time, any time, multiple

times. This frees up time and space in the school day, as well as making people and knowledge easier to access outside the school day. (p. 58)

The incorporation of social media into classroom instruction can present unexpected challenges as it has the potential to expose students to a variety of individualized views and (un)filtered voices. While uncertainty and risks are present when engaging with social media, having educators purposefully avoid discussions that include social media may be even more detrimental as it is such a prevalent force in today's society. Cutri et al. (2020) discussed how integrating social media into the curriculum provides teachers and students the opportunity to learn from other's areas of expertise and engage in a meaningful collective learning experience.

Bucher (2018) used the term technography to capture "a way of describing and observing the workings of technology in order to examine the interplay between a diverse set of actors (both human and nonhuman)" (p. 61). Providing students with activities that utilize a technographic approach would allow for "to develop a critical understanding of the mechanisms and operational logic of software... the 'how it works' and 'who it works for'" (Bucher, 2018, p. 61). There are benefits to integrating a critical analysis of social media into the classroom, not just in a language arts or social studies classroom. Rust (2021) noted how technography is aligned with Feenberg's Critical Theory of Technology as this concept encourages individuals to strive to examine and become more aware of how their lived experiences are entangled with their technological experiences. Kent and Lane (2017) argued that a dialogic-centered classroom that welcomes the critical examination of social media provides students with opportunities to make real-world connections to the curriculum as "a dialogically-focused classroom would push students to negotiate and discuss explanations for the actions and activities of others: that is, to understand dialogue in a radically different way to the linear progression of communicative

cause and effect suggested in textbooks” (p. 27). Discussing how the contributions of human and nonhuman actors play a role in the development of a specific narrative is one example of how students and teachers can collectively analyze the influence of social media on specific or general topics.

Conclusion

In Chapter I, I stated the driving question for this study, which was whether the confluence between social media and school caused a struggle for eighth-grade students in a suburban setting. Using critical theory to guide my theoretical framework, this study focused on how structures, subjectivity, and power altered how participants engaged with social media and school. Through the implementation of focused groups, artifact analysis, and fieldnotes, the findings in Chapter IV highlighted that the confluence between social media and school does cause a struggle for eighth-grade students. The collisions between social media and school create a constant state of flux that students must struggle to navigate. The term struggle is often associated with a negative connotation. However, throughout this study, the term struggle has encapsulated the antinomic, ambiguous, and ambivalent nature between two or more forces. This study found that the collisions between social media and school produces positive and negative social interactions for eighth-grade students. I hope the results of this study inspire curiosity in others to examine further how this complex battle between school and social media, and more broadly technology, alters how students experience school.

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Appendix

Appendix A: IRB Approval Documentation



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehinger Annex
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

Sep 23, 2022 10:37:11 AM EDT

To: George Weinhardt
Col of Education & Social Work, Educational Found. & Policy St

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2023-37 Notification alert: Examining how middle school students identify the struggle of social media and school

Dear George Weinhardt:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Notification alert: Examining how middle school students identify the struggle of social media and school.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix B: Classroom Introduction and Request for Participants

The researcher will read the following text verbatim to each of the four social studies classes. All students enrolled in these four classes are considered potential candidates for participation in the study, and informed consent will be electronically sent to their parent(s)/guardian(s). Participant assent will be sent to families who return the informed consent form.

Announcement Text

Good morning/afternoon. I appreciate [teacher name] allowing me to take a few minutes of your time today. As you all know, I am Mr. Weinhardt. Many of you may not know that I am in the final year of my doctoral program at West Chester University. Part of the requirements I need to fulfill is to defend a dissertation successfully. Does anyone know what a dissertation is? {Provide opportunity for student response}. A dissertation is an academic project that often includes some form of study. Dissertation can be traced back to the Latin word *dissertāre*, meaning to set forth at length. To dissert is to engage in discourse on a topic.

Each member of my cohort, or graduating class, has selected an area of focus. For the past two years, I have been reading books and analyzing academic research on topics such as prosocial behavior in middle school, the concept of authenticity in modernity (modernity is a fancy word for our modern era), and what factors contribute to the development of the self during the stage of early adolescence.

The learning I took away from these topics helped me decide on the focus of my dissertation. West Chester University has approved me to conduct a qualitative research study examining if social media causes issues or distractions for eighth-graders during the school day. My study is designed to capture and represent the participants' words and perceptions. To do this, I am looking for about 30 students to participate in the study. Participation will require

selected participants to meet with other participants in a small group setting and me during one lunch and {redacted] time. All of the information collected throughout my study will be made anonymous before being analyzed.

I want to stress that participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you can stop participating in this study anytime. If you choose not to participate or exit the study before the completion of the lunch and [redacted] discussion, there will be no negative impact on any aspect of your school experience at [redacted], nor will it negatively impact your relationship with me.

Does anyone have a question they would like to ask that the whole class would benefit from hearing? [Provide adequate wait time and answer any questions]. If you have a question that you are not comfortable asking in front of your peers, you can stop down to the office to ask me or share it with your teacher or parent. This afternoon I will send out an email to all of your parents/guardians stating that I came into class today to discuss this opportunity. Attached to that email will be an Informed Consent form, which needs to be filled out and electronically submitted if you are interested in being part of the study. This states that your parent or guardian is aware and willing for you to participate in the study. After I receive the Informed Consent, you will be asked to sign an Informed Assent form. This form states that you, as an individual, are aware and willing to participate in the study.

I appreciate everyone considering this opportunity. [Teacher name], thank you again for allowing me to take a few minutes of your class to share this information. I hope you all have a great rest of your day.

Appendix C: Parent/Guardian Introduction Email

The following text will be sent to all parent(s)/guardian(s) during the afternoon the researcher visited the classrooms and read the [Classroom Introduction](#). The Informed Assent form will be distributed to all participants who submit a completed Informed Consent form.

Email

Subject Line: Opportunity to Participate in a Research Study

Good afternoon,

My name is Gerry Weinhardt, and I am one of the assistant principals here at [redacted]. Today I spoke to four eighth-grade social studies classes about a study I am conducting at [redacted] as I am in my final year of a doctoral program at West Chester University. My research study aims to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. Participants will meet with me during one lunch and [redacted] period for approximately 45 minutes. During this time, participants will complete a short brainstorming activity and participate in a focus group discussion with four other participants. The study will be conducted between October and November 2022.

Please note that participation in this project is entirely voluntary. I made sure to be transparent with the students today that if, as a family, you decide to allow your child to participate, they can stop participating in this study anytime. If they choose not to participate or exit the study before the completion of the lunch and [redacted] discussion, there will be no negative impact on any aspect of their school experience at [redacted], nor will it negatively impact their relationship with me.

[Click here](#) to access an electronic Informed Consent form, which includes key

information, a project overview, and the option to submit electronically should you and your child decide to be a candidate for this study. Participant selection will be based on submission status. The study has been designed to include 25-35 students. By submitting the Informed Consent form, you acknowledge that you are aware and willing for your child to potentially participate in the study. After the Informed Consent is received, I will send out an Informed Assent form. This form states that your child, as the participant, is aware and willing to participate in the study.

I appreciate you taking the time to talk to your child about this opportunity. I believe our students have a lot to teach us about the world they are experiencing, and I look forward to learning from them.

Sincerely,

Gerry Weinhardt

Follow-up Email - 10.20.22

Subject Line: Opportunity to Participate in a Research Study at [redacted]

Good morning,

I wanted to follow up on an email I send out last week regarding a research study I am conducting at [redacted] as part of my doctoral program at West Chester University. My research study aims to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. The study will be conducted between October and November 2022. Student participants will miss one lunch and [redacted] period to engage in a focus group with four of their peers.

[Click here](#) to access an electronic Informed Consent form, which includes key

information, a project overview, and the option to submit the consent form electronically.

Participant selection will be based on submission status. The study has been designed to include a total of 25-35 students. By submitting the Informed Consent form, you acknowledge that you are aware and willing for your child to potentially participate in the study. After the Informed Consent is received, I will send out an Informed Assent form. This form states that your child, as the participant, is aware and willing to participate in the study.

I appreciate you taking the time to talk to your child about this opportunity. I believe our students have a lot to teach us about the world they are experiencing, and I look forward to learning from them.

Sincerely,

Gerry Weinhardt

Appendix D: Electronic Consent Form



Informed Consent

Project Title: Notification alert: Examining how middle school students identify the struggle of social media and school

Investigator(s): George Weinhardt; Dr. David Backer

Key Information:

My consent is being sought for a research study. I understand my child's participation is voluntary and my child is under no obligation to participate. The purpose of this research is to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. The time expected for my child's participation is about 45 minutes. The study will be conducted between October and February 2022.

Parent(s) or guardian(s) will understand the purpose, procedures, any associated risks and benefits, and protections associated with the study through the informative letter and letter of consent sent electronically by the researcher. Parent(s)/guardian(s) will be asked to electronically return a signed copy of the consent form if they agree to their child participating in the focus group portion of the study. The researcher will contact potential participants and notify the family of the date, time, and location of the focus group. Students whose parents have consented will be provided with an assent form before the start of the focus group. Parental consent and student assent are necessary for the participant to participate in the study.

The researcher is asking my child to complete a short brainstorming activity and participate in a focus group discussion with four other participants. Three instruments will be used to collect and analyze data for this study: focus groups, field notes, and artifact analysis.

The potential risks include, but are not limited to, loss of confidentiality, loss of privacy, loss of a G.O.A.L. period (study hall), loss of free time (lunch), discomfort with the content of questions, nervousness when answering questions, questions from peers regarding being selected as a participant of the study. Additionally, all participants will lose a lunch and G.O.A.L. period as this is when the focus group would occur. The potential benefits of the study are illuminating how early adolescents perceive the potential struggle between social media and school. The researcher will implement the following to minimize the risks noted above; storing consent and assent forms in a separate file and location. All other physical data and materials will be stored in a locked location. The researcher will not collect any student names, only demographics, and will utilize randomized coding for participants. All of the names of the participants of the study, data, and the list of code numbers will be stored on a password-protected computer, backed up to an encrypted flash drive, which will be stored in a lockbox/file cabinet. Additionally, participants will be reminded throughout the study that they are, at any time, able to discontinue the study without any form of consequences or repercussions.

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by George Weinhardt as part of his Doctoral Dissertation to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. Your child's participation will take about 45 minutes to listen to the researcher outline the ground rules for the focus group, complete a short brainstorming activity on the topic, and engage with other participants in the focus group. There is a minimal risk of potential discomfort with the content of questions or participant responses, nervousness to share during the focus group, and possible questions from peers regarding being selected as a participant for this study. Additionally, all participants will lose a lunch and G.O.A.L. period as this is when the focus group would occur. This research will help illuminate how early adolescents perceive the potential struggle between social media and school. As technology advances and increases the ability of individuals to access various forms of digital communication, the number of elementary and early adolescent social media users will continue to rise. While the concept of being socially connected at any time may raise concerns for some, there must also be benefits that the adult population may overlook

The research project is being done by George Weinhardt as part of his Doctoral Dissertation to examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting. If you would like your child to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this

consent form.

You or your child may ask George Weinhardt any questions to help you or your child understand this study. If you or your child doesn't want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any care you or your child may receive or the relationship between you or your child and George Weinhardt. If you and your child choose to have your child be a part of this study, you and your child maintain the right to stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. What is the purpose of this study?

*Examine whether the confluence between social media and school causes a struggle for eighth-grade students within a suburban setting.

2. If your child decides to be a part of this study, your child will be asked to do the following:

*Listen to the researcher outline the ground rules for the focus group.

*Complete a short brainstorming activity on the topic.

*Engage with other participants in the focus group.

*This study will take about 45 minutes of your child's time.

3. Are there any experimental medical treatments?

*No

4. Are there any risks to my child?

*The potential risks include, but are not limited to, loss of confidentiality, loss of privacy, loss of a G.O.A.L. period (study hall), loss of free time (lunch), discomfort with the content of questions, nervousness when answering questions, questions from peers regarding being selected as a participant of the study. Additionally, all participants will lose a lunch and G.O.A.L. period as this is when the focus group would occur.

*If your child becomes upset and wishes to speak with someone, your child may speak with a GVMS school counselor or participants can call their parents afterward.

*If your child experiences discomfort, your child has the right to withdraw at any time.

5. Is there any benefit to your child?

*Other benefits may include: illuminating how early adolescents perceive the potential struggle between social media and school. As technology advances and

increases the ability of individuals to access various forms of digital communication, the number of elementary and early adolescent social media users will continue to rise. While the concept of being socially connected at any time may raise concerns for some, there must also be benefits that the adult population may overlook.

6. How will the researcher protect my child's privacy?

*All focus groups will be recorded (audio only) and transcribed verbatim by the researcher afterward as part of the data collection process.

*All records will be private. Only George Weinhardt, Dr. David Backer, and the IRB will have access to your child's name via the consent and assent form.

*Your child's name will not be used in any reports.

*Records will be stored:

*Password Protected File/Computer

*The researcher will remove all identifying data from documents and replace names with code numbers. All data and the list of names and code numbers will be stored on a password-protected computer, backed up to an encrypted flash drive, which will be stored in a lockbox/file cabinet.

*Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

7. Does your child get paid to take part in this study?

*No

8. Who do you or your child contact in case of research-related injury?

For any questions about this study, contact:

*Primary Investigator: George Weinhardt at 484-574-7183 or gw588633@wcupa.edu

*Faculty Sponsor: Dr. David Backer at 610-436-2326 or dbacker@wcupa.edu

9. What will the researcher do with my child's Identifiable Information/Biospecimens?

*Not applicable.

For any questions about your rights or your child's rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- You have read this form and understand the statements in this form.

- You know that if you or your child becomes uncomfortable with this study, your child can stop at any time.
 - You know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and you think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.
 - Your child's participation in the study is voluntary.
 - You are providing consent for your child to potentially be part of the study.
 - You are aware that your child will receive an Informed Assent Form, which must also be completed prior to the start of the study. An Informed Assent form states that your child, as the participant, is aware and willing to participate in the study.
- ☐ I have read the above text and communicated this to my child.

Subject/Participant Signature (Student)

- ☐ I consent to being a candidate for the study.
- ☐ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate.

Please type student name below.

Witness Signature (Parent/Guardian)

- ☐ I consent for my child to be a candidate for the study.
- ☐ I do not consent, I do not wish to participate.

Please type parent/guardian name below.

Appendix E: Participant Focus Group Invitation

Subject Line: Focus Group Participation - [date]

Student Name,

Thank you for being willing to participate in the study I am conducting as partial fulfillment of my doctorate from West Chester University. You have been selected to participate in the following focus group:

Focus Group Number
[Date]

Please bring your lunch, as this will take place during your lunch and part of your [redacted] time. Remember your name will never be attached to any information or data for confidentiality purposes. My study aims better to understand my research topic from a student perspective, so I appreciate your support. I would not be able to do this without you!

Sincerely,
Mr. Weinhardt

Appendix F: Participant Assent Form



Assent Document for Research Involving Minors

This form is to allow the participant (8th-grade student) the opportunity to choose to participate in the below study. By signing in the space below and returning this form, both the individual (parent/ legal guardian) who signed the Informed Consent document and the participant (student) agree to be considered a candidate for this study. In addition to this document, an Informed Consent document for the student has already been completed and submitted.

Youth Participant Assent Form

I, _____, understand that my parent(s)/guardian(s) have given permission for me to decide if I would like to participate in a study examining if social media causes issues or distractions for eighth-graders within the school day. The researcher for this study is Mr. George Weinhardt. He is conducting this research study as part of his doctoral program at West Chester University.

I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary, and I have been told that I may stop participating in this study at any time. If I choose not to participate or stop participating, leaving the study will have no negative impact on any aspect of my school experience at Spring Middle School or my relationship with Mr. George Weinhardt.

Student Signature

Witness by Parent/Guardian

Date

Date

Appendix G: Focus Group Introduction and Questions

Focus Group Interview

The researcher will state his name, the purpose of the focus group (potential struggle between social media and school), and thank everyone for attending. The researcher will remind all participants that this entire conversation will be recorded via audio for a later transcription verbatim. The researcher will then hit record and restate what was already stated.

The researcher will ask everyone to introduce themselves as the code that is listed on the piece of paper they received. Lastly, the researcher will go over the ground rules for the focus group (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013): everyone should attempt to participate, all ideas are equally valid, there are no right or wrong answers, each person's view should be heard and respected, and confidentiality should be preserved, with nothing disclosed within the focus group or shared with people outside of the focus group (with the exception of parents/guardians).

At this point, the researcher will pass out a piece of paper (template on next page) and introduce the first portion of the focus group.

To prepare for our discussion, we will start with a short warm-up activity. Similar to brainstorm sheets you may have used in class, the center circle contains our topic for today's discussion, social media and school. Feel free to write or draw any and all thoughts that come to your mind regarding this topic. I will set a timer for four minutes. There is no set amount of ideas nor right or wrong ideas for this brain map or the discussion that will occur afterward.

- Would anyone be willing to share one or more of the words, drawings, or ideas you captured on your page?
- To what extent do you believe students authentically represent who they are on social media?
- How does this [mis]representation spill into social interactions within the school day?
- Has social media changed how students experience school?