

CU Boulder Students' Sense of Community on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine college students' sense of community on social media. I collected data by surveying 74 respondents who are at least 18 years old and are currently enrolled as students (undergraduate or graduate) at the University of Colorado Boulder. The survey questions assess the extent of participants' community ties. In the results of my research study, 64% of participants found communities through social media and 57% reported having a better sense of community while using social media. Most respondents agreed that social media is beneficial for advocacy groups and professional networking, but not many used social media for these purposes. Most respondents with marginalized identities considered social media useful for affirming their identities and networking with others who share those identities. Identity affirmation, networking, and activism are potential social media benefits for marginalized communities. Professional networking and engaging with advocacy communities/organizations are potential areas for students to expand their community ties on social media. The social media advantages of marginalized identity affirmation and the ability to find various communities on social media foster community building, whereas the social media disadvantages of shallow connections and inhibiting social interactions hinder community building among college students.

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KEY TERMS

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out; Anxiety that one is currently or will miss out on a fun, exciting event that others are involved in, often associated as an effect of viewing social media posts

SNS: Social Networking Sites, another way of saying social media

BIPOC: An umbrella term for people of color/non-white individuals, stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color

LGBTQ+: A broad term for individuals who do not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender, stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus

Cis heteronormativity: Assumes or promotes heterosexuality and genders that correspond with biological sex as normal

Cisgender: Individuals whose gender identity corresponds with their biological sex assigned at birth

LGB: Acronym for people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual

II. INTRODUCTION

Social media enables endless connections with others and is a powerful tool for spreading awareness and information. Several significant social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter (#BLM) ignited on social media with users sharing their experiences and the need for social change. Social media use significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as online communication forms replaced in-person activities (Lee et al. 2022; Wang and Deng 2022). College students are an important population in which to study social media relations. College represents a critical period in young adults' lives, allowing for independence, self-awareness, and social connections. Young adults spend significant time on social media, sharing their lives with others and making connections.

Little research on social media has been conducted in sociology. Much of the research on social media exists within psychological studies that focus on mental health consequences. The aim of my research study is to assess CU Boulder students' sense of community on social media. I surveyed students from the University of Colorado Boulder on my topic of community ties on social media. Community ties is a sociological concept, describing one's relationship with their community that will provide a better understanding of social media social relations and the effects of social media, in general. Previous psychological research studies have discussed social media's effects on individuals in general and within various larger populations (Erfani and Babak 2018; Kross et al. 2013). Because different age groups have different experiences on social media, it is necessary to narrow the population of my study to better analyze the relationship between community and social media. My study will begin to fill the gaps in the sociological literature on community ties and social media among college students. One theme in the literature is how individuals with marginalized identities have found social media to be useful to

affirm their identities, find community, and engage in activism. Advocacy communities, social movements, and psychological effects of social media have been the focus of the literature.

The focus of my study is guided by my research question: How does social media foster and/or hinder community building? My hypothesis was that social media can foster community building for college students with marginalized identities and students who experience social isolation. Additionally, I predicted social media to be beneficial in contexts like the pandemic in which social isolation is a large issue and engaging with communities is challenging. I hypothesized social media usage replacing in-person social interaction and the fear of missing out (FOMO) to consequently hinder community building among college students. I surveyed CU Boulder students to discover the social media advantages and disadvantages they experience in terms of community building. College students spend a lot of time on social media so the advantages and disadvantages of social media greatly affect them. Social media allows for unlimited connections across any distance, consequently resulting in many surface level connections. Although social media use among college students in general hinders community building through shallow connections and inhibiting in-person social interactions, it nevertheless helps those with marginalized identities to affirm those identities and network with others.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Ties

The existing research on community ties suggests that weak community ties, such as many connections that exist on social media, are beneficial for more information, perspectives from different social networks, and professional opportunities. Granovetter (1973) provides the original sociological theory on strong and weak ties, using a random sample of male residents from a suburb of Boston who have recently changed jobs. Granovetter argues that small-scale interactions manifest into the formation of small groups by developing larger social patterns. Findings of his study indicate that job opportunities and career information are more often communicated through weak social ties such as acquaintances than strong social ties, impacting greater employment mobility. According to Granovetter, weak ties are advantageous in providing professional opportunities and access to diverse information from different social networks. Liu and Robert (1972) agree with Granovetter that weak community ties offer greater access to new information and add that communication among groups with strong ties who are more likely to have similar attributes would not facilitate new information.

Two current research studies go beyond sociological theory of community ties and apply community ties to social media. Scientists from Harvard, Stanford, and MIT conducted a five-year experiential study on the impact of weak ties on LinkedIn professional opportunities (Brynjolfsson, Rajkumar and Saint-Jacques 2022). Their findings align with Granovetter's theory of weak ties, demonstrating that weak ties had a more beneficial impact on job mobility than strong ties due to the accessibility of new information and career opportunities. Lee (2022) surveyed young people's social media usage to assess their social media community ties in terms of civic engagement, measured by their involvement with political organizations and non-

political charitable organizations. Lee's analysis suggests that social capital, the accumulation of social media connections in which many are weak, makes it easier for users to connect their interests with their communities, fostering civic engagement on social media and access to more information. The results demonstrate a positive association between all types of community ties studied (Facebook friends, following users on Twitter, and Twitter followers) and civic engagement on social media.

Threats to Community on Social Media

The literature conveys many social media benefits for marginalized communities such as identity affirmation, activism, and networking, and professional mentors and opportunities. However, there are drawbacks overall and specific drawbacks for marginalized communities. Pickles (2012) conceptualizes social media as a communicative tool that can consequently be used to spread hate in his study on online hate of LGBTQ+ people. In his study, he discusses that the LGBTQ+ community has faced online harassment and hate speech on social media and acts of victimization can indirectly victimize other members of that same community online. Titanji's study (2022) on social media lessening disparities for women and BIPOC people also addresses drawbacks of social media: "Women frequently experience sexism and undermining of their opinions. BIPOC professionals are more likely to be harassed, targeted by bots, or lose followers for posts commenting on racism and social justice issues" (p. 225). Marginalized communities are targeted by hate speech and identity-based harassment online and offline and social media is no exception.

There are social media drawbacks that apply to all users, regardless of their identities. Photo sharing on social media can lead to social comparison, FOMO, and self-objectification by

presenting false realities for various social media users (Bradman and Gustafson 2021). Social media triggers feelings of FOMO and results in feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Harrigan et al. 2021). Harrigan conceptualizes FOMO as feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and sadness that arise from missing out on social encounters or events. According to Harrigan, several interviewees discuss the issue of social media making it easy to compare one's social life to others, resulting in FOMO. Helm and his coauthors conducted a study of 1,147 survey respondents 18-82 years old, finding that "social media use also predicted lower MIL [Meaning In Life] via higher emotional loneliness" (Helm et al. 2022). The concept MIL was based on the results of the Meaning in Life survey (Steger et al 2006) composed of absolutely true to absolutely untrue questions to statements such as "I understand my life's meaning" and "My life has a clear sense of purpose" (Helm et al. 2022). Helm argues that social media may be an effective tool for validating one's experiences by decreasing existential isolation but can greatly lead to missing others via emotional loneliness.

Bradman and Gustafson (2021) indicate that to strengthen friendships more private communication methods may be used instead of social media such as texting, phone calls, and in-person interactions. Thus, the strength of community ties on social media is limited. Bradman and Gustafson also assert that instead of forming or deepening friendships, it is more common to keep in touch with acquaintances on social media. Drawbacks of social media are frequently acknowledged and discussed through the lens of psychology in reference to mental health consequences and psychological well-being. More information on the psychological drawbacks of social media will be discussed in the social media users' well-being section.

Social Media Activism

Existing sociological research on social media is limited. The discussion of media in sociology started with mass media in older sociological studies and more recently has been updated with social media in association with social movements. The *Annual Review of Sociology* has discussed social media through the lens of social movements. Sociologists reviewed previous social media research and convey the importance of social media platforms for protest and global social movements (Caren, Andrews, and Lu 2020; Almeida and Chase-Dunn, 2018). Caren, Andrews, and Lu (2020) discuss the capabilities of contemporary social movements on social media in reaching wider audiences, mobilizing offline events and protests, and creating more connections between activists. Additionally, they argued that weak ties on social media were beneficial to spread new information and mobilize protest participation. Amenta and Polletta (2019) review research on social movements in terms of its broader cultural and institutional impacts. According to Amenta and Polletta, social media movements such as #MeToo and #BLM can influence coverage from larger media institutions and can importantly impact cultural shifts in public opinion. The sociological perspective of social media conveys how social media can be a powerful tool for social movements and group activism.

The sociological lens of social movements is important to understand the large impact social media has had on mobilizing social movements. #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) ignited on social media after the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, becoming a global social movement (Edrington and Lee, 2018). According to Edrington and Lee, social justice groups have used social media to instigate dialogue and extend their reach to the global public through powerful uses of photo-sharing, hashtags, and messages. Mundt, Ross, and Burnett (2018) conducted a case study of #BLM by interviewing administrators of BLM groups and using content from

public social media accounts. Their analysis demonstrates the social media benefits of forming community ties among activists and connecting the communities of various BLM groups to mobilize coalitions. Although social media platforms can be spaces to construct collective identity, limitations of social media movements were also addressed in the case study such as underlying financial interests of social media accounts and counter-activism to remove social media accounts of influential activists.

#MeToo also became a large-scale global social movement through social media. The collective power of social media collapses geographic barriers as demonstrated by the #MeToo movement (Jaffe 2018). Schneider and Carpenter (2020) also discuss the power of social media in the #MeToo movement through sharing identity-related issues, resources, and building momentum for protests. In both studies of #MeToo, victims of sexual abuse were not alone in their experiences and in fact a part of a vast global activist community of victims sharing their mutual experiences.

Social media has also fostered community for advocacy organizations. Smith-Frigerio (2021) conducted a case study on the social media usage of two mental health advocacy groups, Perinatal and Postnatal Mental Health Organization (IPP) and a national mental health organization (SNC). Smith-Frigerio examined 200 Facebook and Twitter posts and interviewed associated content creators from the organizations and a sample of their audience members. The interviewees were from the U.S., and most were white and female. Most of the content created for organizations was found to provide peer support and influenced audience members to engage with advocacy communities on social media.

Guo and Saxton (2018) conducted a study of advocacy organizations using a year-long sample of tweets from 145 organizations in 2013. Their findings demonstrate that a nonprofit

advocacy organization's ability to gain attention on social media is strongly associated with how often the organization communicates, the magnitude of the organization's network, and the number of conversations they participate in. Guo and Saxton also discuss some advantages and drawbacks of social media usage for nonprofit advocacy organizations. They convey how social media offers low-cost interactive platforms to educate, spread awareness, and connect with supporters and other organizations. However, they address the disadvantage of social media as a crowded informational space, impacting less attention towards the content from advocacy organizations. Hong and Kim (2021) use the responses of the 2018 American Trends Survey and investigate the social media impact on civic activism among the 4,316 social media users surveyed. Findings suggest that young, female, liberal, and white participants were more likely to engage in social media activism such as participating in social media groups with common goals for social change. Participants, in general, were found to engage in social media activism so they could express their views and connect with others.

Social Media Uses for Marginalized Communities

The literature on community and social media largely focuses on how marginalized groups can foster community on social media (Bun 2012; Greensmith and King 2020; Irgens 2022; Escobar-Viera et al. 2020; Titanji et al. 2022). Social media has provided marginalized communities opportunities for networking, professional opportunities, identity affirmation, and activism. Researchers interviewed LGBTQ+ college students 18-26 years-old from metro Atlanta, Georgia and found that the interviewees used all types of media to form community with other LGBTQ+ students and affirm their marginalized identities (Greensmith and King 2020). The interviewees were able to use social media to connect, find community, and combat cis-

heteronormativity. Social media provides a significant method of connection and socialization for queer individuals who often lack resources and support (Escobar-Viera et al. 2020). Escobar-Viera found that acquiring social capital on social media for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) young adults was found to be valuable for maintaining and forming connections. The concept “social capital” was operationalized in this study as the number of connections one has on social media, described as an intermediate step towards forming meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging for LGB individuals. Bun (2012) surveyed 232 African American college students about their Facebook usage. Maintaining relationships and marginalized identity affirmation were also common themes. Participants used Facebook to build racial identity and community on social media. Bun found that 98% of participants had Facebook and an extensive amount of Facebook “friends.” Findings also suggest that respondents used Facebook for pre-established relationships instead of meeting new people.

Social media has connected people of different backgrounds, genders, and racial identities. Marginalized groups have been left out of decision-making situations and leadership positions that more privileged individuals have occupied in their careers (Titanji et al. 2022). According to Titanji, social media can lessen professional disparities by offering women and BIPOC individuals social media mentors/sponsors and professional networking instead of more traditional forms of professional development. Titanji conceptualizes five significant roles social media users have embodied: the learner, educator, advocate, mentor, and networker. These roles exemplify how social media usage can provide opportunities and lessen disparities for marginalized communities. Twitter advocacy hashtags were also addressed in the study such as #LatinasInMedicine among other BIPOC professional groups that offer mentoring, professional connections, and information about opportunities that are important for lessening disparities.

Social media allows for professional networking such as on LinkedIn, which uses algorithms to provide users with more personal job postings. Thus, social media increases opportunities for students and job seekers to attain their career goals (Ruparel et al. 2020).

The popular hashtag #blackgirlmagic has fostered community building among black women and girls by promoting positive images and achievements of black women and encouraging love for black bodies (Irgens 2022). Irgens's study conveys how "online spaces have the capacity to be powerful information learning and identity development spaces for marginalized communities." Findings of the study indicate that #blackgirlmagic created a community of participants who engaged in activism to combat their oppression and affirm their marginalized identities on social media. Forming community ties with other social media users of shared marginalized identities, professional networking, engaging in activism, and affirming identities are all ways marginalized communities have fostered community building on social media.

Social Media Use During the Pandemic

Social isolation and increased social media usage are common themes in researching social media community ties during the pandemic (Cersosimo and Landolfi 2021; Lee et al. 2022; Wang and Deng 2022). Social media interactions were replacing in-person interactions due to COVID-19 risks. The pandemic has provided more social media activity to research and an interesting association between COVID-19 challenges and social media community relations.

The pandemic contributed to new forms of social isolation that made social media a critical form of human communication and social ties with others (Cersosimo and Landolfi 2021). Cersosimo and Landolfi used social media images posted by various anonymous people

during the pandemic, finding that many photos communicated the daily lives of social media users and conveyed a need for community ties during the pandemic. Another main theme they found was the use of memes and humorous images to cope with the difficulties of the pandemic. Their study uses a sociological perspective of analyzing the images as a tool for relationships, asserting that all current social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.) are useful to maintain relationships. Social isolation during the pandemic resulted in young adults spending more time on social media (Lee et al. 2022). Consequently, Lee concluded that young adults' excessive social media usage impacted a higher likelihood of depression and anxiety symptoms. Wang and Deng (2022) also address the increase in social media usage during the pandemic but convey different psychological impacts. They surveyed students from an American university on the west coast. Although social media enables connection and social ties between users online, they argue that the spike in social media usage during the pandemic resulted in social media fatigue of users feeling overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted. Out of the students surveyed, female participants reported greater social media usage and greater concern of COVID-19 than male participants. Additionally, FOMO was found to contribute to social media fatigue during the pandemic.

Social Media Users' Well-being

The literature on social media users predominantly comes from the field of psychology. The following psychological studies on well-being provide insight into the effects of social media. Erfani and Babak (2018) conducted a systematic literature review of studies among mostly young students from major academic databases on the topic of social networking site (SNS) usage, defined in the study as networked communication platforms that can enable content

sharing and forming connections, and its impact on psychological well-being. The term “psychological well-being” referred to various moods, judgments of an individual’s life, and social functioning. The results were mixed with both positive and negative SNS impacts on psychological well-being. According to Erfani and Babak, social media usage for non-social reasons such as ignoring offline daily activities is detrimental to people’s psychological well-being. Additionally, their finding that Facebook has opportunities to form and maintain social connections is associated with positive psychological well-being. However, another study reported negative results over time for Facebook usage. Well-being in two categories: how individuals feel in the moment and their life satisfaction both resulted in negative shifts over time (Kross et al. 2013). Kross demonstrated that excessive time on Facebook while ignoring other daily activities resulted in less life satisfaction. In another study, Yang (2022) found that SNSs allowed college students to maintain existing relationships, and SNS community engagement with on-campus friends for both first-generation and continuing college students were linked to improved social adjustment.

The literature on social media conducted through a psychological lens conveys the importance of social media impacts. There are mixed results of positive and negative social media effects regarding psychological well-being, but the presence of these negative effects is significant to have informed generations on the mental health drawbacks of using social media. Further research on mental health drawbacks of social media suggests that large amounts of screen time among young adults are correlated with mental health issues of depression and anxiety (Bettmann et al. 2021; Seabrook et al. 2017). According to Seabrook, Facebook usage increased depression and anxiety symptoms among college students. The frequent discussion of social media in relation to psychology and mental health dominates the discussion of social

media usage among young adults. Now that a review of the literature has provided context for my study, the next section will discuss how I conducted the study.

IV. METHODS

I utilized the data collection method of surveying for several reasons. Some questions respondents may not readily know, such as communities they may be a part of on social media. Students can look up this information while completing the survey without fear of interrupting the interview. Additionally, an interviewee might feel judged by my presence as another CU Boulder student to answer yes to sensitive questions such as regarding their social skills. I want my respondents to feel comfortable answering honestly and not optimally. I also have a significant number of fast questions in the form of check all that apply and multiple-choice questions that do not necessitate a deep discussion in an interview. Surveys are useful for collecting many responses, addressing people's attitudes and opinions, and answering What? When? Where? and How? questions instead of more in-depth Why? questions that are more suitable for interviews (Wellington, 2007). My survey is oriented toward researching participant opinions and views of social media. For example, one of my survey questions asks respondents whether they agree or disagree that social media is beneficial for professional networking. Instead of asking why? questions, I ask several different what? type of questions on participants' social media usage to determine what community ties they are making on social media and their overall sense of community on social media. Thus, I have selected surveying instead of interviewing for my research study.

Using the online survey tool Qualtrics, I surveyed participants to address my research question: In what ways can social media foster community and inhibit community building? I asked respondents this two-part question in the last two open-ended survey questions. I received approval from the University of Colorado Boulder's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to collect data through the survey. My survey consisted of a variety of questions of check-all-that-apply,

multiple choice, agree/disagree and fill-in-the-blank questions to research CU Boulder students' sense of community on social media, addressing the purpose of the study. Data was collected on participants' social media usage and various social media effects such as maintaining relationships, inhibiting social skills, and replacing in-person social interactions to better understand CU Boulder students' community ties and their sense of community on social media.

Individuals who were at least 18 years old and undergraduate or graduate students at the University of Colorado at Boulder were qualified to participate in my research study. My recruitment method was convenience sampling and snowball sampling. I utilized the networks of my social circle, campus job, school clubs, my classes, and the other sociology honors thesis students to distribute my survey to CU Boulder students. I then recruited individuals via snowball sampling by asking the other sociology honors thesis students to send my survey to their networks of CU Boulder students. Through the sociology program assistant, I was able to distribute my survey to the network of CU Boulder sociology majors. I distributed my survey via email, text message, GroupMe, and social media. My recruiting methods attributed bias in my sample towards Sociology students, impacting my sample to be mostly women-identifying students and more LGBTQ+ participants. The sociology honors thesis students in my class were all women and nonbinary students. The snowball sampling from their social networks may attribute bias towards this gender demographic and other honors students.

Before participants could start the survey, they were prompted to agree to the consent form of the research study. The first survey question was a yes or no question if the respondents met the qualifications of the research study and if they answered "no" the survey would be terminated. The anonymous survey took about 10 minutes to complete. Out of 97 survey responses, I was able to use 74 responses. The responses I deleted were from the 20 respondents

who ended the survey after the demographic questions, 2 respondents who did not meet the qualifications of the research study, and another respondent who had only completed 11% of the survey. Thus, 76% of responses were used, resulting in a research sample size of $n = 74$. I decided to keep 9 partial responses in my sample because 3 of them completed about half or more of the survey and 6 of them completed all but the last two survey questions, providing enough substantive answers to analyze their results.

I used the data tables, statistics, and total responses overall and for each survey question from Qualtrics to report my findings. Since the text was hard to read in the pie charts made by Qualtrics, I made pie charts on the free online design tool Canva based on my sample's demographics. I analyzed the results from Qualtrics in response to my research question and objectives of my study. I then exported the results from Qualtrics into Google Sheets to better analyze some of the questions. My spreadsheets in Google Sheets, one for all of the survey responses and one for each fill-in-the-blank question, were secured in my Google Drive student account with a password. I used qualitative data analysis to code the results from the fill-in-the-blank survey questions. My codes from student responses were distinguished with different colors based on common themes. An example of a common theme was shallow connections on social media in response to the open-ended question: In what ways do you think social media may inhibit community building? A participant's response may have multiple codes if they mention multiple themes. After I coded the data, I quantified the number of times themes appeared in student responses and calculated percentages of how many participants incorporated a given theme out of the total number of participants in my sample for a given question.

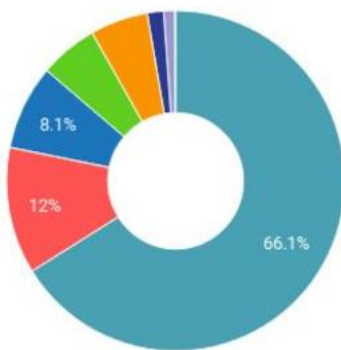
V. RESULTS/ANALYSIS

Demographics

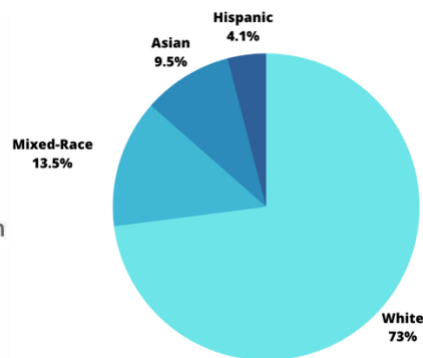
In the most current CU Boulder enrollment profile, a total of 36,122 students were enrolled in the fall of 2022, most of whom are undergraduate students and about 18% graduate students. My sample of 74 participants identified as belonging to one or more of the following racial categories: Asian, Black/African American, White/Caucasian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Hispanic/Latino. The race/ethnicity demographic question in my study was a check-all-that-apply question so students could select multiple racial categories with an option to fill in the blank if no categories applied. According to Figure 1 below, participants in my sample were 73% white, 9.5% Asian, 4.1% Hispanic, and 13.5% mixed race. In other words, participants who selected multiple racial/ethnic categories made up 13.5% of my sample so they were not counted multiple times for selecting multiple categories. According to CU Boulder’s Demographics and Diversity Report (Figure 1 population), 66.1% of the student population is white. My sample also represented a similar white majority population of 73%.

Figure 1

Race/Ethnicity Population (enrolled CU students):



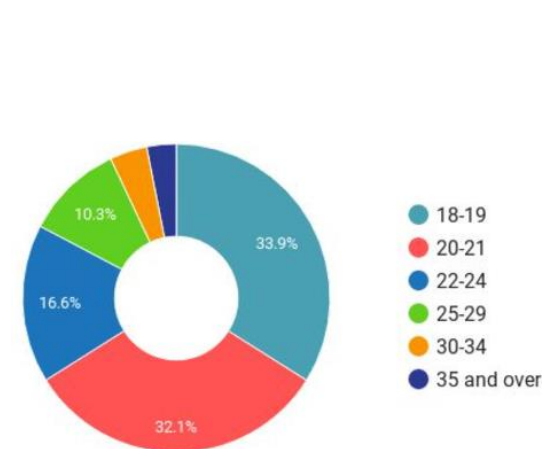
Race/Ethnicity Sample:



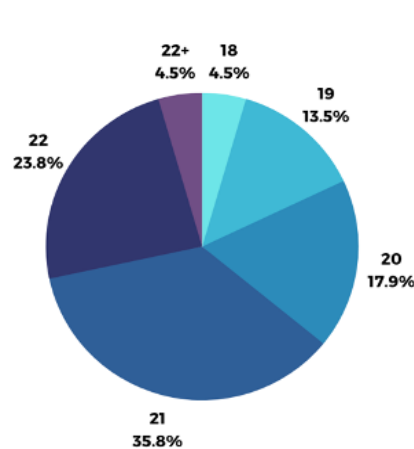
In Figure 2 below, the largest age groups in my sample are 21 and 22-year-olds, reflecting participants recruited from my student networks within my age group. The population of CU Boulder students consists of various ages, ranging from 18 to over 35. Not all graduate students have transitioned straight to grad school after undergrad, accounting for the oldest students in the population. Students who are 22 and older are 28.3% of my sample (the dark blue and purple sections), similarly compared to 34% of the population. In both the age population and age sample figures, 20–21-year-olds contribute a significant portion of CU Boulder students.

Figure 2

Age Population (enrolled CU students):



Age Sample:



In both the age and race/ethnicity demographics, my sample is mostly representative of CU Boulder’s student population. The third demographic of gender in my sample, however, differs significantly from that of the student population. CU Boulder’s demographics and diversity report only reports the binary gender breakdown of male and female students: 45.2% female and 54.8% male (2023). My gender demographics of students consist of the categories: cisgender woman, cisgender man, transwoman, transman, genderfluid and nonbinary/genderqueer. The results of my sample were 59% cisgender women, 22% cisgender

men, and 19% non-cisgender respondents. Of the non-cisgender respondents, every gender category above was represented in the sample with nonbinary/genderqueer as the most common. The CU Boulder student population has a majority of male students, while my sample has a majority of cisgender women students. If CU’s data had more gender options, the results would be closer to my results. Additionally, the 22% of cisgender men in my sample is significantly less than the 54% of male-identifying students in the population. The proportions of cisgender men and non-cisgender people are close in my sample. Whereas in CU Boulder’s Campus Culture Survey about 4.7% of the student population identifies as non-cisgender (2021), 19% of respondents in my sample identify as such. The greater diversity of gender minorities in my sample will be useful in addressing the topic of social media uses for marginalized identities. The difference in gender demographics in my research study compared to the population is important to consider when addressing the results.

Survey Question 1: How do you define community?

Table 1

Group	53
Share	17
Interests	15
Together	9
Values	8
Belong/belonging	5
Proximity	4

Table 1 displays repeated words in students' responses to the question: How do you define community? The most common word in participants' responses was "group", appearing in 53 responses. Interest was a common word to define community, suggesting a group of people would become a community with common interests. The concept of proximity counters the idea of social media communities since social media connects individuals regardless of distance. The most popular response indicates a group that shares something and has common interests. One respondent defined community as "a group of individuals that share something in common with each other" and another replied "a group of people who share values and a physical location." I also coded responses into three common themes: the theme of proximity/physical location (6), cultural identity (11), and similarities (43). An example of one of the 11 responses that incorporate the theme of culture/identity is "A group of people with similar background." The theme of similarities commonly consisted of similar beliefs, interests, and values. Respondents who incorporated the theme of similarities accounted for 58% of my sample. Other responses that did not incorporate similarities between individuals defined community in terms of how it made them feel such as supported. Social media or the internet was never mentioned explicitly in participants' definitions of community.

Have you used social media in the following ways? (Check all that apply)

Table 2

Survey option	# Responses
To maintain relationships with friends, family, etc.	71
To find like-minded people in terms of interests such as music, gaming, pop culture, etc.	53

To find events	50
To form new relationships (friend, significant other, etc.)	48
To support activist communities	43
Professional Networking (ex. LinkedIn, following business accounts, etc.)	39
To find and/or interact with profit or nonprofit organizations	28
None of the above	1
Total options selected	333

The next survey question assesses the ways in which respondents may engage with their communities on social media. I ordered survey options from most to least responses for better comparison. The most popular social media use “to maintain relationships with friends, family, etc.” agreed with 96% of respondents as at least one of the following ways they use social media. The second most popular option “to find like-minded people in terms of interests...” agreed with 72% of respondents and aligns with the popularity of interests in respondents’ definitions of community. Only 1% of respondents did not use social media in the given ways and 93% of respondents selected multiple social media uses. The most selected survey options convey participant engagement with inner circle social networks (friends, family, peers with like-minded interests), compared to outer circle social networks of everyone else on social media. I categorized responses with the terms “inner circle social networks” and “outer circle social networks” for better comparison of the results.

A follow-up fill-in-the-blank question was included next: Which ways have been effective in terms of community building for you? Maintaining relationships remained the most

popular social media use and finding like-minded people in terms of interests remained the second most popular response. The results were consistent with more answers to maintaining relationships than forming new ones. Only 3 people answered with professional networking and only 2 answered supporting activist communities as the least common answers, leaving no one responding interacting with organizations except for the 8 respondents who replied with all social media uses. All of the ways were effective for 11% of my sample compared to 23% of my sample who used social media in all ways in the previous question. Two respondents gave positive responses: “Social media has been one of the main ways I’ve found connections to people” and “I think most of the above ways have been effective in terms of community building for me. I’ve generally had a positive experience with social media.”

Overall, how has social media affected your sense of community? (Check all that apply)

Table 3

Survey option	# Responses
I have found communities through social media	47
I have a better sense of community using social media	42
Social media has been isolating	20
Social media has inhibited day-to-day interactions with others	13
Social media has inhibited my social skills	12
I have a worse sense of community using social media	7

Not listed: (fill in the blank)	9
Total	150

The top two most common answers and the least common answer suggest positive community building. Social media usage also has the drawbacks of causing social isolation and inhibiting social skills in Table 3. In the fill-in-the-blank responses to this question, one respondent replied, “I think in some ways it can keep past communities strong...” and another respondent replied, “social media replaces in-person interactions.” Two respondents commented that they do not use social media at all. One of them does not think social media would add to their community-building skills and the other chooses not to use social media due to FOMO.

Marginalized identities

A total of 32 participants in my sample have a marginalized identity in terms of sexual orientation, 18 in terms of race/ethnicity, 16 in terms of disability, 4 in terms of religious affiliation, and 15 in terms of non-cisgender identities. The categories were not mutually exclusive with a total of 52 participants with at least one marginalized identity (70% of my sample). These participants were asked whether social media has been useful in affirming at least one of their marginalized identities (option 1) and/or if social media has been useful in networking with people of at least one of their marginalized identities (option 2). Of the participants with at least one marginalized identity 46% selected both options, 32% selected only option 1, 15% selected none of the above, and 7% selected only option 2.

Strongly agree to Strongly disagree Questions

Most respondents agreed with the statement “I think social media is beneficial for advocacy groups” with 99% of participants who at least agreed somewhat (responded somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree). Most respondents also agreed with the second statement “I think social media is beneficial for professional networking” with 87% of participants who at least agreed somewhat. Strongly agree and agree were the most common responses to both statements. Thus, most participants in my sample consider social media advocacy groups and professional networking to be beneficial social media uses.

Social Media Use During the Pandemic

In my sample, 90% of participants experienced social isolation during the pandemic. About the same proportion of respondents (89%) agreed that the pandemic has affected their social media usage. Out of the 63 respondents whose social media usage was affected during the pandemic, 95% reported that their social media usage increased. In my sample, 56% of participants shared memes/humor to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Only 20 participants reported engaging with their community on social media more than before and just 13 participants used social media to share more about their daily lives. Themes of in-person interactions being replaced with social media interactions and maintaining relationships on social media were common regarding participants’ social media use during the pandemic.

In what ways do you think social media can foster community?

In the last two questions of my survey, I address my research question with open-ended fill-in-the-blank questions. I categorized responses into common themes for each. In my sample, 63% of responses incorporated the theme of maintaining and allowing for connections with other

people on social media. Examples of this theme include the responses “connecting people to others they may have otherwise never met” and “...it can also maintain connections that might be difficult to do so without it.” The theme of bringing together like-minded people appeared in 22% of responses and the theme of alleviating geographic/in-person barriers such as COVID-19 and geographic distance appeared in 42% of responses. Some responses incorporate multiple themes. The response “It’s easy to access and you can connect people from all different geographical locations and times to join together” suggests the themes of social media connecting people and alleviating geographic barriers. Four people (6% of my sample) discussed social media benefits for people with marginalized identities such as sharing similar experiences and supporting one another.

In what ways do you think social media may inhibit community building?

Three themes emerged from the last survey question: social media inhibiting/replacing in-person socialization (35%), shallow connections (11%), and online hate (27%). Example responses of shallow connections as reported by 11% of my sample include “...I’m not necessarily making true friends”, “it’s not always genuine interactions”, and “I think it can be incredibly isolating because it genuinely shows the most vain, fake, and greedy side of humanity.” Common ideas expressed of connections being fake, disingenuous, surface-level, and weak compared to in-person socialization convey shallow connections. Social isolation was another repeated response to social media inhibiting community building while only 2 responses included the drawback of FOMO. Some responses addressed limits to activism on social media: individuals with negative intentions infiltrating activist spaces, social media users posting the right things but not actually enacting change and using activist hashtags that are not sufficient to solve systematic issues.

VI. DISCUSSION

My study adds to the existing research on young adults' sense of community on social media. Little sociological research exists on my topic of community ties and social media among college students. My results have a mix of findings that reflect the literature and findings that are new that add to the literature. It is important that some results are new and even surprising. The results that do not reflect the literature are important for adding to existing research and informing people more about the effects of social media.

The results of my population's reported social media uses and the responses to the agree/disagree questions provide surprising comparisons. Most participants consider social media to be beneficial for professional networking but not as many would use social media for this purpose. Out of all the social media options selected only 11% were professional networking. This finding is surprising given that the most common age groups in my sample are 21- and 22-year-olds who commonly need to search for jobs during this time in their college careers. In the literature, social media professional networking has been particularly beneficial for members of marginalized groups through free and accessible social media professional support and mentors/sponsors (Titanji et al. 2022). In my sample, 62% of participants identify as women (43 cisgender women and 3 transwomen) and 70% of participants have at least one of the marginalized identities: race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender minority, disability, and religious affiliation. Even though social media platforms like LinkedIn and social media business accounts on other platforms provide anyone with professional connections and job opportunities, professional networking was not a common social media use in my sample.

The literature on the strength of community ties (Brynjolfsson, Rajkumar and Saint-Jacques 2022; Granovetter 1973; Liu and Robert 1972) conveys weak ties as beneficial for

access to new information and professional opportunities. My findings contrast with the literature on the strength of weak ties. Participants reported shallow connections as a way social media hinders community building. The theme of shallow connections among respondents demonstrates weak ties in a negative light as fake, surface-level, and disingenuous. The prevalence of shallow connections and these attitudes reflects the experience of college-aged cisgender women who make up most of my sample. The demographics of Granovetter's study on the strength of weak ties are middle-aged suburban Boston men which greatly differ from my sample. The demographic differences between these samples helps explain the different outcomes. The participants in Granovetter's study (1973) had already recently changed jobs and weak ties helped participants make their career changes. On the other hand, my sample of mostly 21- and 22-year-olds are expected to start professional networking to find a job post-graduation, but it is difficult to start professional networking without very much work experience. Thus, most participants in my sample were not engaging with professional networking on social media.

The social media usage of participants reflects community ties towards inner circle social networks rather than outer circle social networks. Engagement with professional, activist, and organizational communities on social media was not common in my sample as forms of outer circle social networks. Weak ties in the literature have access to more diverse information and perspectives than inner circles composed of strong ties (Granovetter 1973; Liu and Robert 1972). In my sample, 64% of participants found communities through social media and a little over half of participants reported having a better sense of community using social media. Social media is advantageous in my sample for finding communities, but participants were not receiving the benefits of engaging with communities outside of their inner circle social networks. These

finding provide an area for students to expand their community ties which could perhaps lead to more participants having a better sense of community on social media.

Existing research on the benefits of weak ties provides an explanation to why weak ties are not considered beneficial and are instead considered shallow connections in my study. More participants used social media to maintain relationships than form new relationships. The issue of shallow connections consequently makes forming relationships difficult. Social media usage for maintaining relationships was a common theme between the existing literature and my research study (Bun 2012; Cersosimo and Landolfi 2021; Erfani and Babak 2018; Yang 2022). Social media has allowed college students to maintain relationships back home while at college (Yang 2022). Social media across many different platforms was useful to maintain relationships during the pandemic (Lee et al. 2022). Maintaining relationships was the most popular social media use in my sample and a common theme in the literature. Additionally, maintaining relationships was a theme in my open-ended question for how social media can foster community. One respondent replied to this question stating that social media “helps maintain relationships between community members that are geographically separated.” They also address the theme of elapsing geographic barriers.

My sample’s engagement with advocacy communities had a similar comparison of results with professional networking. Almost all participants believe that social media is beneficial for advocacy groups but significantly fewer use social media to support activist communities. Out of all the social media options selected only 13% were supporting activist communities while 78% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that social media is beneficial for advocacy groups. Most respondents believe social media is beneficial for activism but not many are using social media for this purpose. Little community ties to outer circle social

networks such as advocacy communities were being made in my sample. Activism and advocacy communities contributed to a significant part of the literature on community building and social media. For example, the #BLM case study Mundt, Ross, and Burnett (2018) conducted demonstrates BLM activists forming and strengthening connections and using social media to construct collective identity among activists with a common purpose for social change. There is a difference between activists such as the BLM activists in the case study using social media to the extent of mobilizing events and coalitions with other groups and the occasional use of social media activism such as using hashtags. The limitations of social media activism participants address of social media users just using hashtags for activism and not enacting change convey weaker ties between activists than the more committed activists engaging with their communities in the case study. Additionally, participants may not be aware of many social media advocacy groups such as #LatinasInMedicine and mental health advocacy groups on social media like IPP. Participants discussed limitations of hashtag social movements but there is more to activism on social media than just hashtags. The magnitude and variety of content on social media can make it difficult for advocacy organizations to gain attention on social media (Guo and Saxton 2018). Participants are likely engaging with a large amount of content from inner circle social networks and social media content from advocacy organizations becomes buried in information.

The use of social media for forming new relationships remains inconclusive in the literature and my study adds to the discussion on social media connections and relationships. The literature demonstrates individuals with marginalized identities forming connections with one another and building community (Bun 2012; Greensmith and King 2020; Irgens 2022; Escobar-Viera et al. 202; Titanji et al. 2022). However, the research is unclear on the extent of these social media connections and how many of them could be classified as relationships. Bun (2012)

found that most of the black college student respondents had a large amount of Facebook “friends.” However, friends on Facebook are simply connections between users that consist of a wide variety of connections. Similarly, #blackgirlmagic has fostered a positive community through collective identity but the strength of connections between participants of the hashtag is unclear. My study specifically asked participants if they used social media to “form new relationships” and while some did so, maintaining relationships was a more common social media usage. While the literature provides research on individuals with marginalized identities finding community and connections on social media, not much research goes into depth on how many can form relationships or strong connections through social media. My research provides a comparison of how many people maintain rather than form relationships on social media that is not expressed as clearly in the literature on social media communities.

Similar to other researchers (Bun 2012; Greensmith and King 2020; Irgens 2022), I found that social media is useful for participants to affirm their marginalized identities. In the literature, social media provided a space for individuals with marginalized identities to affirm their identities, share experiences and engage in activism. Greensmith and King (2020) found that the LGBTQ+ students interviewed used social media as a space to affirm their identities and connect with each other. Most participants in my sample believed that social media is useful for both affirming their marginalized identities and networking with others in their community, while only 9 respondents (15%) selected none of the above. The section on social media uses for marginalized identities in my study suggests positive results to community building.

The pandemic section mostly reflects the literature. There were no unexpected results for respondents’ experience with social media during the pandemic. Respondents using social media to maintain relationships during the pandemic reflected the literature. Additionally, the social

media issues of social isolation and social media replacing in-person interactions in my sample were expected results. My hypothesis aligns with my result that social media hinders community building by hindering social interactions. However, my prediction in my hypothesis that FOMO would also hinder community building was not a common social media disadvantage discussed in my study. My study resulted in 90% of participants experiencing social isolation during the pandemic, reflecting the effect of social isolation during the pandemic in the literature (Cersosimo and Landolfi 2021; Lee et al. 2022). Social media usage increased during the pandemic in my sample and in the existing research (Lee et al. 2022; Wang and Deng 2022). My study reflects Cersosimo and Landolfi's study (2021) of social media users using memes/humor on social media to cope with the difficulties of the pandemic. However, one of their main findings that many social media users shared about their daily lives during the pandemic only applied to 13 participants in my study. Overall, people spending more time on social media, maintaining relationships, and sharing memes/humor were expected results that reflected the literature on social media usage during the pandemic. The theme of social media alleviating in-person barriers (the pandemic and geographic distance) in student responses to how social media can foster community was also not a surprising finding. It is important to compare my study to the existing research to discuss how my study provides some consistencies with previous research findings, fills gaps in the literature, and adds to the literature.

VII. CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate how social media fosters and hinders community building. My topic of community ties and social media among the 74 CU Boulder students I surveyed is important in understanding how social media is affecting college students' social lives and well-being. Social media among college students fosters community through affirming marginalized identities and giving students access to communities online but consequently hinders social interactions and creates shallow connections. The results provide critical insight into advantages to embrace and disadvantages to be aware of on social media. Most participants were able to find communities on social media, but their community ties were weak due to shallow connections. Most of the participants in my study with marginalized identities found both social media uses of identity affirmation and finding others with shared marginalized identities applicable to their experiences. My study conveys CU Boulder students' community ties being made more towards inner circle social networks than outer circle social networks. Community engagement with advocacy communities/organizations and professional networking are ways college students can expand their community ties to outer circle social networks.

My results both reflect and contrast with my hypothesis. The results did not provide enough to support my prediction that social media is beneficial for fostering community among people who experience social isolation such as in the context of the pandemic. In my sample, 90% of participants experienced social isolation during the pandemic, but less than half (only 20 participants) engaged with their community on social media more during the pandemic than before. Additionally, the social media effect of FOMO that I hypothesized would hinder community building was not very apparent in my sample. Only 2 participants included FOMO in their responses to how social media inhibits community building. However, my hypothesis and

results both express how social media usage inhibits/replaces in-person social activities hinders community building. Part of my hypothesis that social media can foster community for college students with marginalized identities reflects my findings in terms of identity affirmation and networking with others of shared marginalized identities.

Although my study will begin to fill the gaps in literature, more research on the topic is needed. Avenues for future research include considering specific social media platforms and their implications for fostering community. I did not investigate the effects of social media usage across different social media platforms because my research question was aimed to investigate CU Boulder students' sense of community on social media overall. Additionally, research on college students' sense of community from more universities across the country would be beneficial in providing more perspectives to the discussion. Different universities have different cultures across student life, academics, location, etc. For example, the impact of southern culture on a university in Georgia is different from universities outside of the south. I did not have many participants who identified as men in my sample, so more responses from men would also add more perspectives to the discussion. My study was also limited to 74 participants and would be stronger with more respondents. I had a significant amount of non-cisgender and LGBTQ+ participants which was a strength of my research, contributing more responses and perspectives to the questions on social media community building among people with marginalized identities.

More in-depth research on social media activism is another area for future research. My study involved participant engagement with advocacy communities and organizations but had less on social media activism discourse. Some participants in my study discussed #BLM and others provided insights about social movements on social media in general. Almost no one addressed #MeToo and there are more activist hashtags to incorporate in future research on

social media activism engagement among college students. Social media can be considered as a tool for expanding community ties. The research framework of social media as a potential space for fostering community allows for more insight into social media potential for community engagement.

VIII. APPENDICES

Appendix I

Survey Questions:

Are you a CU Boulder student at least 18 years old?

- Yes
- No

(If no the survey will be terminated)

What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

- Black or African American
- White/Caucasian
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Hispanic/Latino
- Not listed:

What is your gender identity?

- Cisgender woman
- Cisgender man
- Transwoman
- Transman
- Nonbinary/ genderqueer
- Genderfluid
- Not listed:

What is your age?

- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 22+

How do you define community? (Fill in the blank)

Have you used social media in the following ways? (Check all that apply)

- To find like-minded people in terms of interests such as music, gaming, pop culture, etc.
- To find events
- To support activist communities
- Professional networking (ex. LinkedIn, following business accounts, etc.)
- To find and/or interact with profit or nonprofit organizations

- To maintain relationships with friends, family, etc.
- To form new relationships (friends, significant other, etc.)
- None of the above

Which ways have been effective in terms of community building for you? If none state “N/A”

Overall, how has social media affected your sense of community? (Check all that apply)

- I have a better sense of community using social media
- I have a worse sense of community using social media
- I have found communities through social media
- Social media has been isolating
- Social media has inhibited day-to-day interactions with others
- Social media has inhibited my social skills
- Not listed:

Do you have at least one marginalized social identity?

- Yes
- No

(If no will skip the following two question)

Has social media been useful for you in affirming your marginalized identity and finding people of that same identity? (Check all that apply)

- Social media has been useful in affirming at least one of my marginalized identities
- Social media has been useful in networking with people of at least one of my marginalized identities
- None of the above

Which marginalized social identities do you identify with? (Check all that apply)

- Race/ethnicity
- Gender minority
- Sexual orientation
- Disability
- Religious affiliation
- Not listed:
- Don't know/refuse

The next 2 statements have the answer choices: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know/refuse

I think social media is beneficial for advocacy groups.

I think social media is beneficial for professional networking.

Have you experienced social isolation during the pandemic?

- Yes
- No

Has the pandemic affected your social media usage?

- Yes
- No

(If no will skip the following question)

How has the pandemic affected your social media usage? (Check all that apply)

- My social media usage increased
- My social media usage decreased
- I shared more about my daily life
- Shared memes/ humor to cope
- My in-person interactions were being replaced with social media interactions
- Maintained relationships on social media when in person was too difficult
- Engaged with my community on social media more than before
- Not listed:

In what ways do you think social media can foster community building? (Fill in the blank)

In what ways do you think social media may inhibit community building? (Fill in the blank)

Appendix II

Consent Form

Title of research study: CU Boulder Students' Sense of Community on Social Media **IRB**

Protocol Number: 22-0438

Investigator: Lillian Herpers

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating CU Boulder students' community ties on social media. I expect this survey to take about 10 min. to complete and I expect about 150 people to participate in this research study. Communities exist on social media in many forms such as activist groups, interest groups, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and student organizations. Previous research demonstrates that social media is useful for activist groups and marginalized communities in terms of spreading awareness, finding community, and promoting a cause. Social media can also be used to spread hate and inhibit positive community formation. With mixed research, I hope to discover the possible ways that social media can foster community and the ways in which social media hinders community building. The purpose of this study is to investigate college students' sense of community on social media.

Explanation of Procedures

In this survey, you will be asked questions about your sense of community on social media. The survey will help answer the following questions: Can social media be a tool for individuals to feel more connected to their community? In what ways can social media be harmful and/or beneficial to students' sense of community? The survey will consist of a few demographic

questions at the beginning followed by multiple-choice, check all that apply, and fill-in-the-blank questions assessing CU Boulder students' sense of community on social media. There will be no preliminary or follow-up participation in this research study. Participation in the study only involves completing the survey.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time, and it will not be held against you.

If you are a CU Boulder student, taking part in this research is not part of your class work or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

Risks and Discomforts

I foresee minimal risk for individuals who participate in this research study. Participants may recall negative experiences they have had on social media and the survey material may cause emotional discomfort. In the case that you experience psychological distress from participating in this study, you may access resources on the university's CAPS (Counseling and Psychiatric Services)'s website here: <https://www.colorado.edu/counseling/>

Potential Benefits

I cannot promise any benefits to you or others from your participation in this research. However, there are several possible benefits. You will be encouraged to reflect on your social media usage

and the extent to which social media serves you and your community needs in consideration of the survey questions. You might discover new ways in which you can engage with your community on social media, network with others, and form meaningful community ties. The survey will also ask you to consider possible strategies that can benefit your social media usage in the future.

Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including those on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

Payment for Participation

You will not be paid to be in this study.

Questions

If you have questions, concerns, complaints, or think the research has hurt you, you may contact my primary advisor, Dr. Leslie Irvine at 303-492-7039 or leslie.irvine@colorado.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signatures

By entering this survey, you indicate you have read and agree to the terms above and consent to participate in this anonymous research. Do you consent to participate in this research?

- Yes (continue to survey)
- No (skip to end of survey)

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