CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK: AN EXPLORATION OF IMPACT ON COLLEGE WOMEN

Christine R. Sharry

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2

Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.7275/35988848 https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/2987

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
Connecting and Developing Through Facebook: An Exploration of Impact on College Women

A Dissertation Presented

by

CHRISTINE SHARRY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2023

College of Education, Educational Policy, Research and Administration
Connecting and Developing Through Facebook: An Exploration of Impact on College Women

A Dissertation Presented

By

CHRISTINE SHARRY

Approved as to style and content by:

_____________________________
Chrystal A. George Mwangi, Chair

_____________________________
Ezekiel Kimball, Member

_____________________________
Torrey Trust, Outside Member

_____________________________
Shane Hammond
Associate Dean for Student Success
College of Education
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to several people who have assisted me throughout this journey in different, but equally meaningful, ways. First and foremost, to my husband, who has been on this journey with me, often sacrificing time together while encouraging me to pursue my goals and to persevere through many challenges. Thank you for always caring about me, helping me advocate for decisions that focus on my well-being, and always being in my corner. Thank you for being the best partner to me and best father to our son, and for the love and laughter you bring into our home.

To my son, I thank you for the joy you bring into my life each day. I hope in the completion of this dissertation, I have demonstrated what resilience and hard work looks like and models my hope that you never give up on your dreams. Anything is possible. Thank you for motivating me to better myself and our family.

To my parents, I appreciate the love of learning that you instilled in me at an early age and for the consistent and unconditional love and support you have provided me. Your encouragement to pursue a doctorate and keep moving forward in my educational and professional journey has meant the world to me.

To my colleagues and supervisors who have supported me, including Dr. Emily Perlow and Dr. Gregory Snoddy. I am eternally thankful for the flexibility, encouragement, and environment provided to get me to this point and throughout my journey.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the long-term support and guidance of my advisor, Dr. Chrystal George Mwangi. The proposal, research, and writing process has been long and required the need to change the course of action, pivot, reflect, and revise my journey. Your encouragement along the way and your constructive feedback has made this process one I could never regret. I will always remember and appreciate your support as a teacher and advisor, and your encouragement as I encountered many life transitions—from getting married to becoming a mom. Your balance of challenge and support allowed me the opportunity to go through this journey in a time frame that was best for my well-being. Thank you for making an impact on me and how I see myself as a scholar and professional. Your dedication to your students and craft is noticed. Thank you for never giving up on me.

I acknowledge my brothers, in-laws, family members, and friends who have also assisted me along this journey providing support, thoughtful check-ins, and a gentle push when needed. It has made a great deal of impact in my academic journey and provided emotional support when I needed it the most. I always appreciated the confidence you had in my completing this doctoral journey—even when I had my doubts the day would come.

I would also like to acknowledge Peggy Isaacson in assisting me in editing my dissertation. Your sharp eyes and support were so valuable in adding to the final version of my dissertation.
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

ABSTRACT

CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK: AN EXPLORATION
OF IMPACT ON COLLEGE WOMEN

SEPTEMBER 2023

CHRISTINE REGINA SHARRY, B.S., SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY
M.S., CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Chrystal George Mwangi

Social media continues to change global society, while providing the opportunity to access information, but also build and sustain relationships with others. These online tools have become a part of everyday life (Greenwood et al., 2016) and have an impact on the way people interact, connect, and learn from one another. College students today have been surrounded by social media since elementary school (Alquist, 2017). Therefore, college administrators and faculty need to understand the impact of these online tools on students’ learning and development to ensure their success. All foundational student development theories were created when digital environments were non-existent. As a result, there is a gap in understanding the student experience.

This study examines the impact of Facebook, on cisgender women and their navigation towards self-authorship, as well as the gendered lens which participants use to explore digital spaces and their digital identities. Self-authorship was situated as the central identity development theory as it is tied to understanding self in relationship to others.
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

(Baxter Magolda, 1992), which was a natural link to the digital connections and exchanges college students have with one another on and offline.

Through a generic qualitative approach, I used digital observations, interviews, coding, and memo writing to observe and understand the experiences and reflections from eight cisgender undergraduate women. The findings in this study demonstrate that social media does impact how cisgender women view themselves in relationship to others and that their use over time evolves and shifts based on external and internal motivations and expectations. Key findings include four centralized themes (strategies for self-portrayal, social media’s impact on self, evolution of self, and connectedness and representation of self). While there was overlap between these themes, distinct ways in that they showed how cisgender women in college employ strategies for social media use, and how their perception of gender aids in the construction of their digital identity came forward. The study adds to the literature in understanding the impact social media has on cisgender women and calls for changes to practice and areas of research focus to support student success.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ................................................................. vi

**Abstract** .................................................................................. vii

**Chapter**

1. **Connections: Student Identity and Digital Spaces** .............. 12
   - Social Media and Women's Identity Development ................. 17
   - Statement of the Problem .................................................. 20
     - Purpose of the Study ....................................................... 23
   - Research Design Overview ............................................ 25
   - Significance of the Study ............................................... 26
   - Definition of Terms ......................................................... 28

2. **Ties to Identity and Digital Identity Development** .............. 31
   - Social Media ................................................................. 32
   - Impact of Social Media Use on College Students ............... 34
   - Digital Identity ............................................................. 39
   - Social Media and Universities ....................................... 41
   - Social Media and Student Development .......................... 45
   - Student Identity Development ....................................... 47
     - Perry and Cognitive Development ................................. 47
     - Focusing on Women .................................................... 49
     - Women's Ways of Knowing ........................................ 50
     - Josselson .................................................................... 52
     - Theoretical Framework: Baxter Magolda and Self-Authorship 56
   - Conclusion ...................................................................... 64

3. **Generic Qualitative Approach** .............................................. 66
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

Pilot Study.................................................................66
Qualitative Inquiry.......................................................68
Research Sample.........................................................71
Data Collection ............................................................74
  Individual Interviews..................................................75
  Digital Observations..................................................78
Data Analysis..............................................................80
Ethical Considerations..................................................84
Credibility and Trustworthiness........................................86

4. SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT UNFOLDDED........................................88

Participant Backgrounds...............................................89
Findings........................................................................94
  Strategies for Self Portrayal................................----------97
    (Mis)Identifying Values.............................................98
    Seeking Extrinsic Validation Strategically....................100
    Gendered Expectations and Extrinsic Validation............101
Social Media's Impact on Self..........................................104
  Impact of Constant Comparison on One's Identity..........104
  Impact of Online Conflict..........................................109
  Social Media Breaking Point.......................................111
  Positive Impact of Social Media on Identity..................112
Social Media and the Evolution of Self.............................114
  Posting with the Past and Future Self in Mind..............116
  Shifts in Social Media Use and Understanding...............119
Social Media, Connectedness, and Representation of Self......121
  Creating Connectedness..........................................121
  Impact of Social Media Relational Engagement on Self.126

x
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

Gendered Nature of Relationships Online .................. 130
COVID-19 Disruption .............................................. 132
Conclusion .......................................................... 134

5. MOVING RESEARCH FORWARD AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION .......... 137

Overview of the Key Findings ................................ 138
Discussion ........................................................... 142

Intersection of Social Media Use and Identity Development ...... 144
The Power of Relationships ...................................... 144
Strategic and Curated Content .................................. 150
Sense of Self and Belonging ..................................... 154

Cisgender Lens: Identity in Digital Spaces .................... 159
Bridging the Gap ..................................................... 165
Limitations and Implications for Future Research ............. 167
Implications for Practice ......................................... 173
Conclusion .......................................................... 177

APPENDIX A: CALL FOR INTEREST ..................................... 182
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ............................ 183
APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION SHEETS .......................... 186
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM ................................... 187
BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................... 192
CHAPTER 1

CONNECTIONS: STUDENT IDENTITY AND DIGITAL SPACES

Technology rapidly changes in our global society and evolves as each day passes. It provides easy access to information and resources, as well as people. Social media specifically, is an element of technology that has become folded into individuals’ daily lives (Greenwood et al., 2016). The ability to connect with one another and share information has become interwoven into daily routines through the click of a mouse or finger swipe on a cell phone. While access to technology and social media is a cultural norm in the United States, it has a clear impact on the way people interact, connect, and learn from one another. The 2021 Pew Research Center Study reported that 70% of people between 18 and 29 years of age, utilize Facebook. The same age range also are likely to use Instagram (76%) Snapchat (75%) and TikTok (55%) (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This age range also represents traditional college students enrolled in higher education. As such, while administrators and faculty are focused on educational delivery and degree attainment, focus must also be paid to the impact that the growing utilization of social media and technology has on a student’s ability to learn and grow. This influence alone has the potential to alter what learning environments can and should look like in the education arena, and what resources are needed to support the student experience.

Many universities are engaging with students online through platforms like Facebook or Instagram to advertise or promote what is happening on campus or share research or educational opportunities. These marketing strategies appear to focus more on
sharing information and helping reinforce institutional messaging. It is important that practitioners not only use online tools to communicate with students but do so in a way that supports the student experience (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). To execute this successfully, campus administrators need to not only understand how to use online tools, but to think critically about the impact these resources have on students as the ability for practitioners to engage students with social media successfully could have implications for student growth and development.

Due to the increased use of technology such as the Internet, there has been a heightened sense of attention given to the impact that it may have on student well-being and adjustment to college. Yang and Lee (2020) identified that the use of Facebook and Instagram with family and peers on campus was connected to a more positive adjustment to college. For example, being able to interact with other incoming roommates via social media in advance of move-in reduced uncertainty and helped make interactions less awkward (Thomas et al., 2017; Yang & Lee, 2020). An example like this helps highlight that social media does provide some benefits to supporting students’ transition into an unfamiliar environment and in creating new relationships. Having a support system on and off campus can help make a transition such as adjustment to college easier, but each student enters a new environment with different lived experiences, social networks, and connections. Understanding this and how social media can assist during transitions in life such as college adjustment is important, but understanding there could be negative implications is just as vital. Research has also shown that there are both positive and negative effects of the Internet associated with depressive symptoms, which could also be impacted by the role of social media contacts (Morgan & Cotton, 2003; Shensa et al.,
2018). Administrators need to pay attention to these findings as students’ mental health is directly connected to their well-being and their persistence and success within higher education.

Mills (1990) understood that technology was connected to how efficient student affairs practitioners can be in their field, supporting the student experience outside of the classroom. More than thirty years later, we not only need to understand how technology assists in an academic learning environment broadly, but also specifically how social media impacts students’ development, identity, and mental health in ways that can be used to create resources and programs to support student success. Cabellon and Brown (2017) shared that leadership educators need to consistently update their knowledge base surrounding technologies, create systems of access and equity, and model how technology can be infused into students’ learning in ways that minimize isolated learning and maximize on the ability to build community. However, because many student development theories were not developed during the era of social media, there is a gap in how student affairs practitioners are prepared to engage with and support students in ways informed by these theories. Research in considering new environmental factors such as social media helps narrow this gap but also assists in evolving student development theories to reflect the more current lived experiences of students. Understanding the impact of social media for example, helps extend foundational theories surrounding student development and would assist student affairs practitioners to more effectively engage with and support students through their lived experiences.
Through this dissertation study, I argue that students’ social engagement does not only take place in the classroom or in student organizations, but online as well. Social media allows for a hyper or heightened sense of connectedness as people can forge new friendships and networks online, as well as interact with those they already know (Ellison et al., 2007). An example of this is when newly admitted students join an incoming class-wide Facebook page. While these students have not even completed their high school experience, they are engaging in an online platform that allows them to make connections and begin to form networks before even meeting in person. Another example may be if students are assigned roommates over the summer, they may follow each other on social media, view one another’s profiles and learn about each other through their personal interests, photos, and posts. Without even communicating directly, they begin to share pieces of themselves with others and develop opinions about them in return.

Administrators and faculty know that students use social media, which is why colleges and universities create class pages and other online opportunities for students to connect and gain information. However, one can argue that this is done without looking at social media’s larger impact on student growth and development, particularly given that foundational student development theories were created prior to the use and integration of social media now seen in contemporary daily life. Other researchers are asking comparable questions about how social media impacts identity and raising the call to student affairs professionals to think about the impact of online identity connecting to current theories (e.g., Cabellon & Junco, 2015). Identifying and using technology with students is now a requirement, but the challenges for professionals can be keeping up with the ever-changing technology (Ahlquist, 2016). Junco (2014) shared:
The identity development models reviewed thus far focus exclusively on identity development in the offline world—the expression of and interaction within a community that leads to changes and movement along a developmental path. However, the emergence of online social spaces has allowed youth to explore their identities in ways not previously possible. (pp. 105-106)

Students learn through interacting with people and information both in person and online. Given the importance of social media in the lives of college students, I argue that social media may play a key role in how they construct self-identity, and both create and sustain relationships. Understanding the relationship between social media use and the identity development process is vital in continuing to understand the student experience. Additionally, universities also need to recognize the importance of understanding social media use by students and its impact on their identity, so that they can supply resources to students to support their success, growth, and development.

In this dissertation study, I specifically explored how cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self-authorship. I also investigated how cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces. The remaining chapter will focus on laying a foundation about how social media use intersects with identity development, the self-authorship process, and the gendered nature of digital spaces. Students use online tools to share aspects of themselves, both consciously and unconsciously (Junco, 2014). Social media provides a platform to share widely personal identities such as religion, political affiliation, and dating status, personal interests, humor, and current lived experiences. To date, there is a disconnect between student development research and how the social media tool that students use daily
affects their growth and development. Integrated throughout the chapter, I provide context that shows the importance of focusing on cisgender women in this study.

**Social Media and Women’s Identity Development**

The Pew Research Center noted that 86% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 use social media platforms (Smith, 2017). Women in this age bracket additionally use Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest more than men, and those with some college utilize Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Twitter more than those with a high school background or less (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2017). Specifically, women are utilizing social media on a regular basis and are a key demographic, with higher utilization in Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Michikyan (2020), engaged in a study of 175 women and examined social media’s role in psychosocial development. The study found that participants who had greater clarity of self were more aligned between their sense of self and their online presence, while those who were more confused had less clarity and were likely to present a falser sense of self (Michikyan, 2020). These findings demonstrate that women are not only using social media, but how it is used ties directly to the identity of the user and their sense of self. Thus, not considering the social media context within student development, particularly for women, presents a major gap that could influence the resources and environments created within higher education.

Yet, there is a need to expand upon women-focused student identity development research and acknowledge how environmental changes over the past forty years have affected how women form their identity. Ruthellen Josselon (1987) began her work in
1971 exploring identity formation in women, Belenky et al. (1986) began their research in the ’70s as well, impacted by the concerns they heard from women speaking of “gaps in their learning” (p. 4). While these foundational pieces are used and referenced in scholarly research and by practitioners today to understand student experiences, they were written almost four decades ago. Over the past 45 years, more women have entered the work force at higher rates, become more educated, and are even living longer (United States Census Bureau, 2017). While theories help us understand and support student experiences and development, we need to consistently think about the changing cultural and environmental context within those theories as they expand and evolve. Understanding how women learn and make relationships today in a faster paced and more technologically connected society will be foundational changes to explore in moving the current literature forward.

Social media applications such as Facebook, Yik Yak, Snapchat, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, among others, help people share what they are doing, thinking, and feeling in a public forum. When users utilize these tools and participate in this type of digital exchange they are creating and sustaining their digital identity, but also constructing knowledge about others, and—more important—themselves. A digital identity is an expression of images or information that an individual shares over an online platform about them (Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Stoller, 2012). It is through this public expression of self that individuals take control of what they want to share and how they do so. Social media is a key player in expressing one’s digital identity because of the social and connected nature of applications such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.
However, social media might also be important when it comes to personal development overall. Digital tools like Facebook are not only used to share information, but also for self-exploration and self-validation as it connects to sharing ideas, exploring new experiences, and exchanging opinions with others to participate in a larger conversation. In many ways the development of the self-online could be compared to entering college. The experience itself is full of opportunities for self-exploration and engaging with people who have different experiences, which ultimately impacts how one views the world. College is a time where students meet people with different backgrounds and beliefs and are challenged to begin to think independently. Online, students can interact with different people who can impact the way that they view the world and can explore distinct parts of their identity through different social connections. Understanding this relationship will be important in bridging informal theories to formal ones used by student affairs practitioners.

Understanding student development theories, including identity development, are important professional competencies for higher education administrators (Love, 2012). Formal theories themselves are meant to be both comprehensive and practical means to understand phenomena; however informal theories or theories created by oneself are important to be able to apply theory to practice (Love, 2012). Informal theories are often created from individual experiences and help to inform decisions rather than predict an outcome (Reason & Kimball, 2012). So much of the identity development process, according to theorists, is this journey of self-realization in relationship to others. As an example, Josselson (1987) defined identity as a:
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

Stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world. It integrates one’s meaning to oneself and one’s meaning to others; it provides a match between what one regards as central to oneself and how one is viewed by significant others in one’s life (p. 10).

Cognitive, intellectual, and behavioral among other theories have been developed over the years to explore one important question, “Who am I? (Jones & Abes, 2013). In many ways, identity development is a long-term process of self-exploration through experiences and reflection. A digital identity however is constructed while making strategic decisions about what people can observe both professionally and personally online (Ahlquist, 2016). Taking action or sharing information with the desire of a certain outcome is a strategic decision. However, the impact of that decision plays into the long-term process of personal growth found in identity development. An example of this might be a student who is feeling depressed but does not want others to think that something is wrong and so they continue to post only positive reflections of themselves through photos, quotes, or profile posts. The gap between personal reality and perceived reality by others online is a part of student development theory that is not accounted for. These small strategic decisions to post online are purposeful interactions and play a role in how people create and sustain relationships with others, understand themselves, and set a stage for how they want to be viewed by others.

Statement of the Problem

Facebook is a social media-based platform that allows for engagement between users and creates a space for them to intentionally share parts of themselves (relationship status, political affiliation, interests, etc.) with others. The social media platform is the second most popular and utilized social media platform, following YouTube, according to
the Pew Research Center (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Women have a lead in Facebook usage (77% versus 61%) and while people of all ages are using Facebook, those in the traditional college age range (18-29) are a strong audience with 70% use (Pew Research Center, 2021). The current research study focuses mainly on Facebook due to its wide use and longevity in the social media realm. June 2023, Facebook had 2 billion active daily users and 2.96 billion monthly. In addition, only 1.5% of those users were active desktop users (Aslam, 2023). The small business created at Harvard over the span of 19 years has become an international household name. The dissertation study was created on the intersection of identifying not only how long and widely Facebook had been used, but also knowing the growing trends in student enrollment.

In fall of 2020, out of 19.9 million students enrolled in higher education, 58% (9.2 million) of students enrolled identified as female (NCES, 2020). Enrollment trends however have varied between 2009 and 2020 when it comes to racial or ethnic diversity. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that during this timeframe, enrollment for American Indian and Alaska Native enrollment decreased, along with white and black students. However, Hispanic enrollment increased and Asian or Pacific Islander remained similar (NCES, 2020). As these demographics continue to grow and expand, colleges and universities, and the faculty and staff who support them, will need to know more about their largest population. Rather than trying to impart theories and support systems that were initially constructed for the male experience, a shift or at least a developed understanding of the student experience for women should continue to be explored. Thus, it is important to not only understand the developmental needs of women,
but also acknowledge the gendered nature of elements of society that are affecting them, including technology and social media.

For example, one reason for higher education to be aware of the impact of social media specifically on women is due to the increased chances that women may be harassed or bullied in an online space as well as that the online environment may impact their self-esteem or construction of self-awareness. Selkie et al. (2016) identified in their study focusing on cyberbullying, that many students have experiences or been bystanders to cyberbullying behavior. Impacts from this type of bullying even prior to college can impact the identity development of college students. Smith and Caron (2022) specifically studied the impacts of middle and high school bullying on current women in college. They shared that all the participants in their study experienced multiple forms of bullying (verbal, physical, exclusion, and cyberbullying), which had mixed impacts connected to social anxiety and lack of self-confidence but also positive gains and growth in being able to see how they have grown over time (Smith & Caron, 2022). Selkie et al. (2016) surveyed female college students and found that almost half of the participants experienced cyberbullying in some form either directly or indirectly. In fact, hate speech was the most common witnessed behavior, hacking into people’s accounts was the most common action taken and targets experienced unwelcomed advances (Selkie et al., 2016). Knowing that cyberbullying is a concern for women in college, resources and support need to be provided (Selkie et al., 2016). However, to create these resources, understanding the motivations of why people use social media and the way that social media impacts women’s lives and development in college is a crucial first step. Current research also highlights that there are gendered differences in the way that individuals
engage with social media. For example, women post more frequently in the About Me section, as well as include more photographs and reference alcohol, drugs, and partying more (Birnbaum, 2013; Kolek & Sanders, 2008). When observing that students are displaying risky behaviors specifically, administrators have a duty to address these concerns (Birnbaum, 2013). However, to fully address the concerns from a holistic perspective, one must understand how students are using social media beyond their actual posts and understand their motivations for its use whether it be for feeling connected to or validated by others, finding information, or building and sustaining relationships. An important element in building and sustaining relationships today is through the use of social media, however realizing this task might be differently approached given gender provides important insight into their developmental journeys. My dissertation research focuses on mitigating gaps in the literature and supports the idea that social media is connected to the identity development of cisgender women. The implications for this study have a direct connection to higher education and will call for both additional research and action.

**Purpose of the Study**

My qualitative study will extend the identity development work of Baxter Magolda (1992; 1999), Josselson (1987), and Belenky et al.’s (1986) in understanding women in college, their social media engagement, and the process of self-authorship. Baxter Magolda (1999) defined self-authorship as “An ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity”
For someone to achieve self-authorship, they must be able to understand themselves in relation to others, identify and accept the differences, and be true to one’s authentic self. Achieving self-authorship is important as it impacts not only the decisions people make, but how they interact, accept, and understand others. Achieving self-authorship cannot be done with self-reflection alone, as interaction with and understanding others is also important. Technology tools such as social media provide instant access to observe, connect, and share with others. I focus on the concept of self-authorship because either consciously or unconsciously, women are observing and creating knowledge when they engage in an online environment, specifically using social media outlets. They observe information and can begin to compare and contrast the information that they see to their own thoughts, feelings, and values, which does impact the ability to learn who they are in relation to others given the very nature of “social” media. While there are many theories that exist, self-authorship as a foundational reference will help serve as an example of an existing theory, which helps explain how students answer the question, who am I and how am I different from others?

The focus of this research will be to answer the question, how do cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self-authorship? How do women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces? While women today make up the majority of enrolled students in higher education (Arum & Roska, 2011; NCES, 2020; NCES 2017a; NCES, 2017b) my dissertation will focus on exploring the female experience utilizing social media and the impact that it has on the development of cisgender women in college, as they grow and find their own voice. Information about student identity development, social media usage, and their
intersection with the college experience will be explored to identify and fill existing gaps in the literature related to women in college. Given the nature of social media, the social aspects of how individuals engage both online and in person will be important to explore. The findings of this study will not only engage the role of social media in women’s ability to create and explore their personal and online identity, but also why technology should be considered and associated with student development theories. The implications for these findings extend beyond the classroom and practice of student affairs practitioners, but it also forges an opportunity to apply student development theories in ways more relevant for today’s generation of college students and more reflective of their lived experiences.

**Research Design Overview**

I have chosen to take a generic qualitative approach to this dissertation study. As the study progressed, taking on this style of research made the most sense to understand the students and their narratives. Listening to their lived experiences, observing their online activity and digital identities emerge, allowed for themes and stories to come forward which shaped the research, questions, and engagement of the participants and researcher throughout the study.

The study included the participation of eight cisgendered women who were enrolled in an institution of higher education in the Northeast with sophomore, junior, or senior standing. Participants supplied me access to view or to “be friended” through Facebook, as well as participated in at least two individual interviews. Through online observations, individual interviews, memo-writing, and analysis of the interviews
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

themselves, I developed themes and patterns, that show how social media engages with the way a cisgender woman constructs her identity, sense of self-authorship and navigate the gendered nature of digital spaces.

Through the individual interviews, I listened to the shared narratives provided to me based on my open-ended questions, but I was also then able to compare those narratives to the information and experiences shared by those participants in their online space. I investigated patterns or alignment with values and what was posted, I saw how the users actually connected with others in a digital space, and I examined their strategies for how they utilize social media through what they decided to post, re-share, or say nothing at all. Through these practices, I coded the interviews and observations and found the patterns that showcased not only that social media does impact the identity development process of cisgender women, but these same women also utilize social media while navigating their experience through a gendered lens to discover their own identity in a strategic and intentional way.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation study informs current student development research with focus specifically on the experiences of cisgender women. The findings also provide additional elements to consider when constructing and referencing student development theories, such as the impact of digital spaces, the construction and maintenance of existing and new relationships, as well as the impact of internal and external pressures tied to social media use on one’s sense of self. These elements impact both practice and research, while helping extend our understanding of how social media impacts the college student
experience. The research study was crafted to answer not only how often and in what way cisgender women students utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, but also how they feel it plays a role in supporting and sustaining relationships, impacts their growth and development on an individual level, and guides their journey towards self-authorship.

The study has implications for institutions of higher education and those who work with students. Understanding how students are using social media and how it impacts the way that they learn and make social connections is increasingly important for colleges and universities. For faculty, understanding how students utilize social media and engage with technology is vitally important to create a learning environment that is conducive to their life experiences. For faculty who focus on the education arena, this research also allows for greater context to include in curriculum and discussion to adapt learning and considerations to current lived experiences of students. As leaders in the classroom begin to understand how social media impacts learning and student development, it may also impact how they engage with students and establish relationships inside the classroom. Additionally, greater understanding may also alter how they adjust their practice in supporting and providing a supportive learning environment.

For student affairs practitioners, this study’s findings can help them understand how students participate and are engaged online, particularly related to their college experience and personal well-being. Understanding this is a change from past practices of practitioners in student affairs. In the 1980s before the surge of technology, staff in student affairs areas were the “gatekeepers of the student experience” helping “shape and control many critical experiences that prepared students for life on campus” (Dalton &
Crosby, 2013, p.2). Administrators and staff were in many ways the guide in introducing students to college (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). Today, many students have taken in their introductory information through websites and social media like Facebook, interacting online with the college before they even come for orientation (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). University administrators need to pay attention to these introductory virtual conversations, as they will continue to influence students once they arrive on campus. Engaging students through social media is one way to ensure that the correct information is being delivered to students.

Research trends also show that it is important for administrators to understand students’ online presence as they work to support the student experience, specifically students’ mental health and well-being. The following research will explore how social media not only provides an opportunity for connection, but can also create greater self-confidence, as well as anxiety. As students engage with social media, the instinct for comparison and a desire to meet external expectations impacts the development process. Within the context of this research, understanding how cisgender women specifically are communicating and utilizing social media will allow future practitioners to understand, develop, share, and promote specific tools and resources to support cisgender women in the college environment.

**Definition of Terms**

There are many terms and definitions that surround technology, social media, student development identity, digital identity, student development theories and self-
authorship. The following terms and definitions will help situate the terminology within the context of this study.

As previously mentioned, the focus of this study will be on cisgender women or women who identify with the sex that they were assigned at birth (Sutton, 2017). The decision to focus on cisgender women stems from acknowledging that women who identify as transgender may have different life experiences that impact how they use social media as a whole or their life experiences. My dissertation study does, however, leave room for the future exploration of how social media impacts the identity formation both on and offline for individuals who identify as transgender women as well as other gender identities.

Social media is another term that will be used throughout this dissertation. For this research, social media will include web-based or mobile applications that can be utilized to share information as well as engage with others where dialogue or information can be exchanged (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Davis III et al., 2012; Junco, 2014; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). My study will focus on the utilization of Facebook, which is a specific form or application of social media.

As individuals utilize Facebook or other social media platforms and engage with others online, they begin to create a digital identity. Within the context of this paper, a digital identity is defined as the direct or indirect expression of self, where one exposes publicly thoughts, interests, preferences, and personal information shared or exchanged online (Dalton & Crosby, 2013). Digital identity or personal branding can be seen through the lens of both the user individually and perceived by those who have access to
view or interact with the information that is shared by the user. The creation of a digital identity can be a strategic and personal process.

To help understand digital identity, the use of and explanation of student development theory will be referenced throughout the following research. Student development theories are both the foundational learning instruments for student affairs practitioners in understanding the student experience and are used in research to help provide contextual understanding.

Given that self-authorship is a key sensitizing concept explored in the research, its definition will mirror that of Baxter Magolda’s (1999) as the process of creating knowledge and an identity as an individual, accounting for but not relying on one’s environment to understand oneself. Within the context of the following study, the utilization of social media will be examined for its role in cisgender women’s understanding of not only herself, but her relationships with others both in person and online while in college.
CHAPTER 2

TIES TO IDENTITY AND DIGITAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

The following chapter will review literature on social media, and the impact of its use as users cultivate a digital identity. Additionally, greater context will be provided to show the impact of social media use specifically within higher education and strengthen an argument for further research while highlighting the relevancy of faculty and administrators understanding the impact of social media on today’s college student. The chapter will then begin to shift focus to the central themes tied to this dissertation research including developmental theories tied to understanding the experience of women and their journey connected to self-authorship as they navigate a gendered lens towards social media use.

The literature review will additionally highlight the evolution of and connection to developmental theories related to women and cognitive development. How students begin to identify personal knowledge will be explored starting with Perry’s (1970) foundational cognitive development. A shifting focus will then be made towards developmental theories associated with a woman’s unique development process such as Belenky et al. (1986) research and introduction of five categories in knowledge construction (silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge). A connection will then be made tying in the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) and Ruthellen Josselson’s (1987), to show how women’s relationships with others and their sense of self are unique and provide context to why self-authorship is positioned as a central theory of focus in this study. In exploring this connection,
implications and gaps within theory will emerge, strengthening the argument for this research.

My intent in this chapter is to assist in summarizing current literature on social media/digital identities and student identity development, but also to bring these two bodies of literature together. Identity development while about meaning making and understanding oneself in relationship to others (Baxter Magolda, 1992) has not accounted for social media and digital identities, which is also about meaning making, specifically self-representation through profiles (Caers et al., 2013) and engagement with others. My research is focused on starting to fill the literature gap tied to understanding the role that social media and digital identities have during the process of identity development. Specifically, this dissertation will add to the literature exploring specifically Facebook and its impact on cisgender women as they navigate towards self-authorship.

**Social Media**

Social media is not tied to just one application, but rather is a descriptor of any platform that brings people together within an online space. Additionally, social media can be thought about in many ways, because of the various forms or resources that are provided to the user. Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites as web-based resources that:

Allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

Individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 specifically lead the highest rate of social media usage. They have been surrounded by technology including social media and the internet despite barriers, including economic status or parental expectations (Brown, 2016a). In their latest 2021 report, the Pew Research Center noted that 84% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 utilize social media platforms and that number is followed by 81% of those between 30 and 49 years of age (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). These findings also highlight the highest impact, and the most frequent use of social media occurs by users who are in or have completed a college experience (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In terms of gender, women take the lead in Facebook use with 77% compared to 61% of their male counterparts (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Understanding this research highlights the call for understanding the impact that social media plays on students with different identities to understand motivations and impact on social media use. This dissertation focuses on cisgender women and the impact that social media use has on their identity development process and journey towards self-authorship as well as how they navigate the gendered part of that experience.

Understanding the impact that the use and exposure of social media has on college students specifically has implications for both practitioners as well as future research. Brown (2016a) has highlighted that some work in understanding the impact of technology and social media has begun, as Turkle (2004) explored what the computer is and how it was impacting users. Additionally, Boyd (2014) focused on teen social media use to assist in understanding pre-college behavior. Boyd (2014) explored the idea of digital affordances which impact behavior and action in online spaces, with one of those affordances being the ability to share instantly and widely which was not possible when communication was tied
to only in-person exchanges (Brown, 2016a). While some research has begun to emerge through dissertations on college students and their connection and development tied to social media (for example, Alquist, 2015, Brown, 2016b, & Eaton, 2015), more published research is needed to explore how social media impacts how students of different identities connect, build and sustain relationships, and create knowledge through the online interactions that they have with others. Foundational theories were created at a time when social media did not exist, and today technology changes daily. As researchers, the work to explore the impact and context for change in behavior due to social media will need to continue to be an area of focus and evolution as the digital spaces that users navigate change quickly (Brown, 2016a).

As the landscape of social media and technology changes rapidly, the way that individuals represent themselves may also change. Social media, as I have begun to share, is a wide network of tools and resources, with various methods for utilization and research. Within the following subsections, I explore the impact of social media on students and discuss how this intersects with the creation and development of their digital identities. Literature will also be reviewed on how social media impacts the university environment including how students learn and connect, and provide examples of impact for college administrators, faculty, and student life practitioners.

**Impact of Social Media Use on College Students**

The impact of social media on students is large and vast as they decide what to post widely and instantly online. The impact of these decisions is connected to their overall well-being and social capital in cultivating new and sustaining past relationships,
as their motivation for use has changed (Yang & Brown, 2013). The research in this dissertation extends the currently literature and addresses the intersection of strategic decisions based on relationships (social capital) and the navigation of multiple digital identities in the current experience of today’s cisgender women in the college environment.

In knowing that students today are consistently online and using digital technologies such as social media, educators and practitioners need to acknowledge how this impacts development in the adolescent years and beyond. The iGen for instance is the newest generation born between 1995 and 2012 and has grown up and engaged with social media and the internet in a way that is different from Millennials (Twenge, 2017). These are the students who are in college today and have had constant contact with social media. Additionally social media is helping transform the way in which students interact and build relationships. Students now are spending less time with one another in person, and are now socializing online, creating a record of their interactions (Twenge, 2017). In 2015, only about 56% of seniors engaged in dating, where in generations such as the Boomers it was near 85% (Twenge, 2017). Research such as this is capturing the idea that there is an impact on student’s development and growth based off the time that they spend behind a screen rather than in in-person interactions. My study takes into consideration the intersection or connection between digital spaces, personal relationships, and the strategic decision making made to form digital identities.

Today’s college students, use technology daily to communicate and connect with others (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). Research has also shown that Internet users have less
face-to-face interaction or communication in person (Nie, 2001; Twenge, 2017). Often students utilize their cell phone to stay connected with those whom they have built personal and digital connections with throughout their lives, as they have been using social media since elementary school (Alquist, 2017). While the demands of friendship often include connecting regularly in person, going places in person, and in-person conversation and support, the use of social media and the Internet may be having an impact on the perceived definition of friendship.

Much of the literature on social media and college students focus on capital, particularly the concept of social capital. Capital is the summarization of stored wealth in three different forms: economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 2011). By reducing in person communication, the expectations of how one communicates with friends may change and set new cultural norms and impact one’s social capital. Social media provides a digital landscape that allows individuals to connect with others and catch up with what their friends are doing at a speed and a bandwidth that would not be possible in person. The ability to make these digital connections in commenting on a friend’s post, or liking their status, has taken away the need to make a phone call or catch up with a friend over coffee. Whittaker and Gillespie (2013) suggest,

Social networking sites, with their tabulation of friends and metrics of page views, likes and dislikes are not just giving young people a stage for self-presentation; they are also providing structures of social recognition (p. 494).

As such, students are now engaging in a process of personal branding and digital reputation management, and how they go about this cultivation can be impacted by their developmental growth (Brown, 2016a; Junco, 2014; Qualman et al., 2015). These factors
all play a role in highlighting the impact of social media on the identity development of today’s college students.

In earlier research, Ellison et al. (2007) studied the connection between Facebook use and the creation of strong upkeep of social capital. The study found that students who reported low self-esteem and satisfaction experienced increased social capital if they used Facebook more regularly (Ellison et al., 2007). Ellison et al.’s (2007) work started to illustrate how social media platforms like Facebook are connected to how students see themselves in relation to others. Today, students continue to use social media along with other digital resources to build their social capital and networks throughout their college experience (Gross & Meriwether, 2016). In this study, the interaction of decision making, capital, and relationships are core connected to identity. The current literature, does not consider the multiple digital identities that a user holds and cultivates, not does it show the creation of these identities as an intersection of self-authenticity and external motivations, relationships, and behaviors. The research in this dissertation focuses on beginning this conversation.

Alquist (2017) shared that participants in their study used an “internal reflective checklist” to make appropriate decisions on what to post (p. 52). As students either intentionally or unintentionally make decisions on what to post based on a desire for sustained or increased social capital, they are strategically creating individual or parallel digital identities based on content, target audience, and motivation. These types of decisions or strategies are both layered and complex. When identity development was initially discussed, this wide range of electronic connection and communication was not established and therefore not considered when reflecting on the developmental stages that
adolescents move through to enter adulthood. Digital identities and social media make social capital more widely available, but also more complex to sustain. As such, the research is this dissertation is necessary to help begin to understand this new environmental factor that intersects directly with identity development and aims to address the impact that it has on cisgender women specifically as they navigate their journey towards self-authorship.

Other studies have also looked at the impact and motivations in using Facebook. Specifically, some research has identified that major motivations in using Facebook revolve around personal entertainment, cultivating relationships, and having an avenue to share or communicate one’s thoughts or experiences (Park & Lee, 2014). These motivations help in maintaining how one is perceived by others and provide a self-management tool connected to how frequently Facebook is used (Park & Lee, 2014). The Park and Lee (2014) study that was comprised of 59.8% (147) female participants, found that entertainment was one of the highest motivations for Facebook usage and managing the perceptions of oneself was another motivation for Facebook utilization showing the social capital that the social media tool can provide.

The search for and attainment of social capital as well and the desire to compare oneself to others, can also highlight some challenging and negative impacts of social media on student identity development and overall wellness of users, including cisgender women. Cingel et al. (2022) defined self-esteem as “a person’s subjective value of themselves” (p. 1). In their study users (college students) of Facebook and Twitter who had excessive or addictive use of the platforms, had lower self-esteem among their peers. The observance of others in relation to oneself, or comparison to others also had negative
impacts how a woman felt about her body image (Fardouly et al., 2017; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Not only are their impacts on body image and self-esteem but also a sense of connection. Facebook likes in Cingel et al.’s (2017) study also pointed to a positive correlation between the number of Facebook likes a person receives and an individual’s self-esteem, which seems to impact women in a stronger correlation than their male counterparts.

The research to date has shown that users of social media are impacted by its use and understanding that use is incredibly important as it directly relates to digital identity, student development, and the higher education arena. The research in this dissertation is important in adding to the conversation, specifically understanding the impact of social media on the identity development of cisgender women and how they navigate the gendered lens of their social media use tied towards their journey to self-authorship.

**Digital Identity**

One important area of research related to social media and identity among college students is looking at digital identities tied to social media. Ahlquist (2017) shared Rey Junco’s (2014) definition of digital identity as, “the conscious or unconscious process by which people try to influence the perception of their image, typically through social interactions” (p. 56). Marc Prensky (2001) introduced students as digital natives, as they have been surrounded by technology at an early age (Brown, 2016a). Students create a digital identity and share what is important to them with others through interacting online, building a personal profile, and connecting with others in passive, or very direct ways.
Identity itself is a word with multiple definitions and meanings. Järkälä and Berki (2013) define identity as, “the combination of essential qualities which characterize and differentiate a person from others” (p. 5). There are many types of identities that have been examined in student development theory such as gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. However, there is one that has not been widely included in this body of scholarship - digital identity. Oversight of how one is perceived, and which identities are shown begins with the creation of a profile (Järkälä & Berki, 2013). As students engage with social media and share things about themselves, they are creating a personal brand or a digital identity, which is always changing (Stoller, 2013). Whether the interaction with social media is connecting with friends, scrolling through platforms like Facebook, or sharing a photo of a current event, the way students learn and construct knowledge is evolving. Brown (2016) noted that, “in order to understand the developmental experiences of these emerging adults, examining the impact of digital and social technologies on their lived experience is essential” (p. 60). A part of understanding digital identities is exploring how interactions and decisions online can influence exchanges or relationships in person (Brown, 2016).

There are both strong and weak digital identities (Maia and Valente, 2013). Weak identities are, “Virtual characters, avatars, or fakes, which play digital roles with not significant impact on the subjects’ lives” (p. 58). These are not the identities specifically being focused on in this study, although they may have some impact if participants have both. However, strong digital identities are used to support individuals’ lives outside of a digital reality (Maia & Valente, 2013). Brown (2016a) also shared however that as students made decisions and navigate their own journey through self-authorship they
begin worrying less about the validation of others and build confidence in their own
digital identity. The question at hand is how and to what impact do these digital identities
support or intersect with the identity development process both on and offline. The
research within this dissertation helps extend the understanding and impact of cisgender
women. The interactions that students have behind the screen have a direct impact on the
way they view themselves and how others see them. The research and this dissertation
begins to assist in unpacking the role social media has in the journey towards self-
authorship and the identity development process for cisgender women.

**Social Media and Universities**

Colleges and universities support the learning, success, and growth of students.
Taking on such a task does not only require that colleges or universities obtain faculty to
teach and mentor students to obtain critical thinking and core functional knowledge, but
also support systems such as Student Affairs staff who connect with students outside of
the classroom to help bring theory to practice. However, college faculty, staff, and
administrators are also challenged in both teaching students the impact of their digital
footprint and including it in learning outcomes (Stoller, 2013). To be successful, all
functions of the college must understand the current landscape of the student experience,
which include social media use.

Just as researchers need theoretical and strong conceptional frameworks to move
theory and research forward, practitioners and administrators need solid assessment data
to show that programs and resources are having an impact on the student experience to
verify learning goals are achieved and survey the college landscape. Theory is a tool
taught to practitioners during their graduate programs or early in their careers to help provide a framework to understand the developmental journey of students. However, “Student development theory has become more complex at the same time that administrators face more complex demands in practice” (Torres et al., 2019, p. 646). As such, the need to identify changes in the student experience and back that up with data and research is incredibly important to provide additional context and understanding of the day-to-day experiences of students. In fact, Torres et al. (2019) shared,

The pace of theory evolution has accelerated at the same time that the practice of student affairs has also evolved to incorporate features of 21st century postsecondary education, including increased regulation and accountability, decreased funding, and the influence of digital technologies on nearly every aspect of administrative and academic life. (pp. 648-649)

If student affairs practitioners and researchers continue to base research off of foundational theories that have not evolved to account for a full understanding of the student experience, including the role and influence that technology has on students, all stakeholders are missing out on vital opportunities to support students fully along with their success. My dissertation study focus on the intersection of digital identity and self-authorship, while considering the gendered lens that cisgender women use to navigate life both offline and behind the screen. The findings in this study look to fill the gaps of previous research, help identify areas for future research and a better understanding of how to support today’s college student in their development toward self-authorship.

Often students hear only what not to do on social media, but understanding how to support its use to enhance the student experience is vital and should be an area of focus (Ahlquist, 2017) A challenge to that is adapting to the constant, changing evolution of technology, which presents true challenges to how the university functions to respond to
student needs (Ahlquist, 2017). Gross and Meriwether (2016) proposed that student affairs professionals could use digital data as a way to identify outcomes tied to the student experience and provide ways that universities could identify and incorporate social media use into their practice and outcomes including social media policies in student handbooks, measuring social media use across the institution, and using social media to identify trends and address student concerns. These ideas and frameworks begin to open up ideas and ways that universities should not just respond to social media use but engage in this environment where students are present every day.

While universities are tasked to keep up with providing state of the art technology for students to use, there is also a responsibility of campus administrators and faculty to help create and develop critical thinking and other skills that will help students navigate life both inside and outside the classroom. One goal that should be incorporated into learning outcomes specifically is to think about the implications of what students share online. The information that is posted may be searched and have implications for students later in life (Stoller, 2013). Ahlquist (2017) shared their yearlong study that looked at the perceptions of social media by student leaders and how they make meaning of their use of digital spaces in college. The result was a model created including six pillars for digital leadership education that accounted for the role that technology plays and the positive impact it can have (Ahlquist, 2017). The pillars included reflection, exploration, feedback, experimentation, collection reflection and application (Ahlquist, 2017), which not only considers the implications for what students share online but helps them develop the critical thinking skills we aim to develop both inside and outside the classroom. These
types of research studies will help further innovate and bring additional knowledge to current student development theories (Torres et al, 2019).

I have understood research at its core to be an exploration of a concept, idea, or question that in some way is accessed either quantitatively or qualitatively to identify a finding. Gross and Meriwether (2016) highlighted that there is importance in understanding digital data, and to make that meaningful we must be able to measure and access student engagement. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) did not begin to ask about technology until 2003 and most questions focused around student and faculty engagement. Since then, this assessment tool has expanded to ask 44 campuses questions connecting co-curricular experiences to social media use and student involvement (Gross & Meriweather, 2016). The same researchers defined digital data as a reflection of “student behavior, attitudes, demographics, opinions, and experience; they exist and electronic form and can be accessed or downloaded for analysis” (Gross & Meriweather, 2016, p. 79). The research in this study reinforces these ideas through cross functional assessment and not only adds to the literature, but provides specific focus on the cisgender experience of women.

The focus of cisgender women enrolled in college in this study is due to the fact that college students in general and women are the leaders in social media use (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2021). Focusing on a majority population in higher education and social media use allows for a natural connection and opportunity to explore the impact of social media on the identity development process on cisgender women in college to explore their path to self authorship and how they see themselves in relation to others.
The results of this study lead to future areas of research surrounding different college student populations and identities.

**Social Media and Student Development**

Student development theory has been a tool used to assist researchers and practitioners understand the student experience and development during the transition from adolescence into adulthood and create resources to support growth (Evans et al., 2010). These theories have taken years to identify, understand, and share amongst those in higher education. However, practitioners and researchers must not be complacent in understanding foundational texts, but instead continue to learn and explore how understandings of theories continue to change and evolve over time to better inform research and practice. For example, Abes et al. (2019) shared their perspective that there have been three waves of student development theories. The first wave was founded in the perspective that the things college students experience or could experience could be anticipated, and that those in the college environment could create an atmosphere that could help shape how students' progress in their development while in college (Abes et al., 2019). These theories were also created at a time where most students in higher education were male (Evans et al., 2010). The second wave began to introduce social identities, acknowledging different identities such as gender, race, sexuality, etc. Abes et al. (2019) continued to share the third wave introduces critical theories that have helped to reexamine student development theory and elucidate greater inequalities.

Understanding the progression of student identity development and working to examine and identify gaps, will continue to help campus practitioners guide the creation
of programs and resources, as well as the support that is provided to students as they enter a new environment. For example, student development theories have focused on in person interactions between individuals and fail to capture the changing demographics of students within higher education (Cabellon & Junco, 2015) and their lived experiences. Foundational theories help explain or describe student development, but many were not created at a time when social media existed or consider the evolution of personal technology use (Brown, 2016). It is important to explore how technology and digital spaces impact student development, and apply these findings to foundational theories (Brown, 2016) or identify new emerging concepts to fully understand and support student growth and development.

While research done by Jones and Stewart (2016) and Abes et al. (2019) have identified how theories have evolved based on systematic structures, and acknowledging different identities, no formal theories have acknowledged a digital environment and world that students now utilize to build and maintain relationships online, as well as represent themselves to others. Research in this area is just starting to grow (Junco, 2014). The gaps identified between identity development and digital identities call for further research that could impact and further evolve existing student development theories as student environments shift and evolve over time. The following research within this dissertation is focused on identifying these types of connections, specifically tied to the impact social media has on cisgender women and how they use social media to construct their digital identity, self-authorship, and perceive or navigate the gendered nature of these digital spaces.
Student Identity Development

Student development theory is a tool that supports the work of student affairs practitioners. Many are required to learn about the various cognitive, behavioral, psychosocial and/or ethical theories during graduate preparation. Love (2012) suggested that, “Theories are sense-making devices – they attempt to explain, predict, and control” (p. 180). Knowledge and understanding of student development theories provide a common language for practitioners and researchers to come together. While theories are often turned to as helpful guides, the exploration of understanding the student experience has called for many theories to build off of one another as researchers wish to fill gaps in current literature to understand new student experiences. An example of this is the evolution of Perry’s (1970) work in cognitive development, which has been the foundational work of many theories such as Belenky et al. (1986) focus on woman, as well as Baxter Magolda’s (1992) work, on self authorship which will serve as the framework for my study.

Perry and Cognitive Development

Formal student development theory at its very core “describes public, conscious, explicit, and organized conceptions of defined and related phenomena” (Love, 2012, p. 179). One of the founding cognitive developmental theories was created by William Perry (1970), who focused on how students see and process their surroundings with different perspectives. I believe that cognitive development theory is important to my study because of the direct and indirect experiences and observations student have during
their use of social media and how it impacts their understanding of both themselves and their environment.

William Perry was a professor and counselor at Harvard (Love & Guthrie, 1999). His foundational research focused on understanding the experiences of students by creating an instrument called A Checklist of Educational Views (CLEV) in 1954 and 1955 to identify students along different dimensions (Perry, 1970). Perry (1970) later identified nine positions in student development. These stages laid out the process of student growth from reliance on others to self-actualization.

The fourth position is *late multiplicity* where students move from a dualistic view of right or wrong into an exploratory phase. Here, knowledge is not either correct or incorrect, but rather is contextual with some information perceived to be better depending on the source (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Students can identify that there are options, and begin to place their own experiences, thoughts, and opinions into their decision making process. Many students experience this as they enter higher education and are exposed to many different people from different cultures, religions, backgrounds, and experiences. As students meet people who have conflicting ideologies, they begin to be challenged and find their own positioning. —Position five focuses on identifying that what people know and value is contextual (Perry, 1970). As students continue to grow and develop, they move into relativism in position six, where authority exists, but is now open for “analysis, evaluation, and the requirements of contextualized evidence” (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 12; Perry 1970). When students move into this phase, they begin to ask questions, think critically, and challenge thought processes to analyze the information and come to a
conclusion. It is at this point that students start to think about what facts are presented to them, what make sense, and identify their own sense of right or wrong. Students begin to identify personal commitment, “as distinct from unquestioned or unconsidered commitment to simple belief in certainty” (Perry, 1970, p. 10). The final four stages focus on commitment in relativism, as the student continues to identify that they should have the ability to change a choice and share where they stand with others (Love & Guthrie, 1999).

Perry’s work was a foundational piece of research that began to identify how students move from being dependent on others to having a more independent mindset. The findings of his research support understanding how students make meaning and construct knowledge (Evans et al., 2010). His theory, while having strengths, has also been critiqued to have some weaknesses, including the “lack of inclusiveness of Perry’s samples” as they were widely white males at prominent institutions (Evans et al., 2010, p. 96). The weaknesses in theories such as Perry’s work helped to identify areas for new and more inclusive research such as the development of theories that emphasize the experiences of women.

**Focusing on Women**

Many student development theories emerged from a singular lens of identity, the white male. Perry for example, created studies that were made of predominately white upper-class males at Harvard and Radcliffe, which were elite institutions (Love & Guthrie, 1999). While the outcome of these theories provided foundational understanding of the college experience, the outcome, one could argue, did not take into account the
experiences of those from other socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, or genders. Other theories have emerged that identified this gap such as the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity that acknowledged multiple social identities such as “race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, religion, and social class” that play different roles in one’s life depending on life experiences (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 54).

As time has evolved, researchers have acknowledged that the experience of women may be different from those of men. Belenky et al. (1986) began their work when they identified female students had complaints about their student experiences. Focusing on women and being thoughtful of their experience has important implications for the services, programs, and support that are provided for their success. Baxter Magolda (1992) shared that women have the tendency to construct knowledge and create, maintain, and sustain relationships differently than their male counterparts and are commonly more relational in their approach to learning. Understanding intellectual growth, in general, as an institution is vital to supporting the educational experience of students (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Therefore, one might be able to conduct a reasonable argument that they will also interact and utilize technology differently with potentially different objectives for their personal, social, and professional lives. The following portion of this literature review is to acknowledge the previous work done around identity development focused on women to help create a framework for the current study and findings, as well as position the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) and the concept of self-authorship as a central area of focus within this study.

Women’s Ways of Knowing
Belenky, et al. (1986) identified five perspectives that women utilize to construct knowledge and view authority. These researchers identified the lack of presence of the female voice in theories, surrounding intellectual development, and focused on expanding the work of Perry (Belenky et al., 1986; Evans et al., 2010). Belenky et al. (1986) interviewed 135 women in their study over five years; 90 of those participants were enrolled women at six different institutions and the rest were from other family agencies.

In their research, Belenky et al. (1986) discussed five “major epistemological categories” (p. 15) including silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Silence was described as a position where women were depending on others to make decisions and did not see themselves as independent (Belenky et al., 1986). Received knowledge was another category that described women as individuals who learned by listening and still did not believe that they could construct truth from their own experiences, but rather authorities (Belenky et al., 1986). It is not until women move into subjective knowledge that they begin to view themselves as authorities of their own life and identify their own knowledge from experiences (Belenky et al., 1986). While, “women who rely on procedural knowledge are systematic thinkers,” and gain knowledge through interacting with existing systems (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 127). Finally, in constructed knowledge, women can see that context and personal experiences are important in identifying truth and knowledge, and acknowledge themselves as a part of the process (Belenky et al., 1986). These categories identified how women view themselves, believe that they take in information, as well as share and construct knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986).
The work of Belenky et al. (1986) is connected to that of Josselson (1987) who believed that a woman’s identity is connected to her personal choices, priorities, and individual values. These authors began to identify the uniqueness of a woman’s voice, and the need to understand how the experiences of women impact their growth and development.

**Josselson**

Ruthellen Josselson (1987) worked from the ideas of Marcia Baxter Magolda on identity development and honed in to specifically focus on the identity development of women. Josselson (1987) believed that women differ from each other in many ways, especially in how they see themselves as unique and how they see themselves in relation to others (Josselson, 1987). Just as Baxter Magolda discovered four statuses of identity formation, Josselson took those statuses and developed different pathways such as, identity foreclosure, achievement, formation, and diffusion (Josselson, 1987). Her work began in 1971, by identifying and understanding the personal growth and identity development process for women (Josselson, 1987). She did this by interviewing sixty women over three years from four different colleges. Josselson (1987) was able to identify four different groups, who approached the challenges of adolescence differently.

The first were *foreclosures*, which are women who find comfort in the relations that they have rather than the challenges they conquer. “The foreclosures were women who could not psychologically leave home” (Josselson, 1987, p. 34), and while they can be described as hard working and capable, they often retreat to their family or loved ones, looking to them for guidance. Josselson (1987) explained that there was a strong
connection between self-esteem and being a good daughter, as such girls looked to their parents for support and protection. It was also identified that while going through adolescence often, children begin to turn to their peers for the support or assurance that was once provided by parents. These interactions help shape the student’s ego and begin the separation process from one’s parents. Foreclosure women are unable to build relationships with others because they cannot find or build trust with those outside of their family unit (Josselson, 1987), which results in a closer connection and reliability on parents or those perceived in authority.

Another phase is identity achievement, which is where women begin to shed their childhood identity and come into their own (Evans et al., 2010). The one aspect that differentiates foreclosures and identity achievement is independence (Josselson, 1987). While foreclosures stay rooted and identify who they are by those around them, those in identity achievement are willing to take small challenges to explore parts of their identity, providing independence. Often this independence allows one to feel more personal gratification rather than focusing on only making others happy (Josselson, 1987). Connecting with people outside of one’s family such as friends introduces new opportunities for self-exploration and constructing knowledge (Evans et al., 2010).

The Moratorium phase tests and helps individuals find new identities, often challenging women to take additional risk in the unknown (Josselson, 1987). In Josselson’s (1987) study, the women participants during this phase, “struggled with the great questions of life and told their stories in the most sensitive and insightful ways” (p. 107). Women in the moratorium phase are asked to navigate the guilt they may feel from
being like their family on their own terms, separating in some or many different ways, especially from wanting to be seen as “a good girl” (Josselson, 1987). Those in the moratorium phase are able to reflectively speak about their experiences and feelings (Josselson, 1987), which could be connected to the important role of relationships in the lives of women. However, those in the moratorium status also face other challenges. Josselson (1987) explained that women in this status often take large risks in transforming themselves into something completely different, which often can scare them and force them back to how they originally defined themselves.

Finally, identity diffusion can be seen as being in a state of no crisis or commitment (Josselson, 1987). Erikson thought identity diffusion was experienced when individuals do not turn to the self, but rather society to create an identity for them (Josselson, 1987). Women in this group are most unhealthy and least able to function out of all the statuses (Josselson, 1987). The women in this status are not able to learn or gain from relationships with others such as in the moratoriums, and with low self-esteem and a lack of identity they are unable to identify strong commitments in their life, which results in anxiety and lack of direction.

Identity development research focusing specifically on women is crucial to understanding the resources needed to support their ability to succeed in higher education. Josselson (1987) said, “If we know a women’s identity status at the end of college, we can predict reasonably well the course of her early adulthood, which, we may suppose, will in turn predict her middle adulthood” (p. 168). Being able to ensure that students, specifically women, are able to exit higher education after degree attainment
with a better understanding of self in relation to others may have a direct impact on not only social or family relationships, but the work done during their professional career.

Critiques of Josselson’s work have centered on if her studies are still applicable since, “psychosocial development is very much influenced by societal conditions and norms” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 63). My study responds to this critique by identifying new social conditions and norms such as the use of social media. Acknowledging that many student development theories were created at a time when the majority of students were male (Evans et al., 2010) and that student development theories like Josselson have failed to capture the changing demographics of student culture (Cabellon & Junco, 2015), the following study addressed these two gaps in current literature while introducing new cultural norms. Exploring how the use of social media impacts a woman’s identity development process, both online and offline, allows for continued understanding of the student experience, as well as opens up new areas of research.

In reviewing the work of Perry (1970), Baxter Magolda (1992; 1999), Josselson (1987) and Belenky et al. (1986), commonalities in the importance of learning through relationships with others were identified. However, as each theory was connected or developed from one another, the journey to how students construct knowledge and the potential differences in gender came forward. While Josselson (1987) worked off of Baxter Magolda’s research and identified how women see themselves differently as well as how they relate to others, the theory today does not take into effect the changing technologies and environments that students are exposed to over thirty years later. These
theories are important concepts that provide a basic foundational understanding of the student experience in my dissertation study, which were observed and explored.

**Theoretical Framework: Baxter Magolda and Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda’s theory of Self-authorship built off of the work of Perry to address gaps in his work and is based on her research focusing on cognitive development (Bock, 1999). Baxter Magolda moved forward and expanded on Perry’s work as well as made connections with the work of Belenky et al. (1986) to examine differences in gender (Bock, 1999). She understood that patterns are not directed, but rather connected to gender and that this connection is what can help in understanding differences as well as similarities in the ways students develop (Bock, 1999). Self-authorship is positioned as the framework of this dissertation study because of the core questions of the theory in understanding oneself in relation to others. The study findings not only provided relevancy to the self-authorship theory but assist in expanding the literature to include context for the student experience today both in person as well as in digital spaces.

Baxter Magolda (1992) understood that knowledge expands and is altered as students engage with different people and are exposed to different experiences. One change in working from Perry’s theory was altering the way she understood the patterns of reasoning or knowing associated with gender (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Baxter Magolda (1992) found that, “Patterns are related to, but not directed by, gender. Although women in the study use some patterns more than men (and vice versa), none of these patterns was employed exclusively by one gender or the other” (p. 22). Gender is one aspect of one’s identity, but it is an important one because although Baxter Magolda saw
the fluidity of patterns and that gender did not dictate the pattern that one would follow, commonalities did emerge among those of the same gender. These patterns help in understanding the preferences and the way that both women and men construct knowledge.

In her 1986 longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda (1992) worked with 101 traditional-age college students (80% were 18 years old and 97% were white) who were involved on campus academically as well as in co-curricular activities. The theory itself moved students through different stages of knowing, from absolute to contextual knowing and focused around an answer to the questions: Who am I? Who am I in relation to others? These questions are at the core foundation of self-authorship.

The first phase in the theory of self-authorship is absolute knowing. Here students see knowing as certain. Similar to Perry’s belief about basic dualism, absolute knowing leads students to think that knowledge is only made up from absolute answers (Baxter Magolda, 1992). For students to move into the next phase, they need to identify that knowledge is not full of absolutes, and no one in authority has all the “truthful” answers (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Many students identify this through hearing or learning about the experiences of others. In the absolute knowing stage, Baxter Magolda was able to identify two different patterns (mastery and receiving) that connected to gender. Women were found to utilize the receiving pattern; took a personal style to obtaining information, interacting and listening to others to help process and take in information. While inversely, men utilized the mastery pattern more, which is described as having a preference for listening and conversing, being critical of those in power, and anticipating
that the interactions with those around them will aid in their ability to obtain knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

As students begin to move away from absolute knowing, they move into transitional knowing where peers and evaluation play a key role (Baxter Magolda, 1992). As Baxter Magolda (1992) was able to identify patterns in the first phase, the same is true for transitional knowing as both the interpersonal and impersonal patterns emerged. The patterns also had connections to gender. For instance, interpersonal pattern students care about the perspectives of those around them, as relationships are vital to how they learn. The relationships that are present encourage the sharing of ideas and opinions that help students engage in the learning process (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Women were found to lean towards an interpersonal pattern of learning in Baxter Magolda’s (1992) study. “Interpersonal-pattern learners emphasized collecting other’s ideas, being involved and learning practical material as their role” (p. 117), being connected to and interested in the ideas of those around them.

Impersonal pattern students however, focus on challenges more than relationships and focus on learning as an individual activity (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Baxter Magolda (1992) found that more men were connected to the impersonal pattern as it was a continuation of the mastery pattern in absolute knowing. In “the impersonal pattern of transitional knowing, learning is still individually focused. Although impersonal-pattern students intensify their interest and participation in debate with peers, the purpose of these exchanges is still to master learning” (p. 123). The impersonal learner still turns to the authorities, as they believe that they will be able to provide the best guidance and
answers to learn the most (Baxter Magolda, 1992). It is in the best interest of self-
knowledge that separates the impersonal learner from the interpersonal.

The research begins to show that women naturally lean towards understanding
and processing information through their relationships and experiences with others
(Baxter Magolda, 1992). While the research does not take technology into account, I
argue that it is important to investigate where gender and technology may intersect with
student development. Technology provides an opportunity for students to create,
cultivate, and sustain relationships online and with multiple people at the same time. If
women’s relationships are connected to the way they learn information, then the
interactions that they have online may be just as important and meaningful as the
relationships and interactions that they have in person. The findings in this study, were
possible due to the empirical nature of the research and allowed for further exploration of
the self-authorship framework as it relates to the experiences of cisgender women in
college.

After students have begun to transition away from absolute and transitional
knowing, they begin to move into independent thinking, understanding that authorities do
not hold all the answers. Students begin to identify themselves on a more equal playing
field with those previously viewed as authorities and begin to think individually. Those
identified as independent knowers identify the importance of being open to new ideas and
acknowledge that people may believe different things and that is okay (Baxter Magolda,
1992). As students move away from absolute knowing, they begin to understand that
there may not be a single correct answer, but rather perspective plays a large role in
understanding and creating both universal and personal truths. Moving towards independent or personal thought is an important developmental step in self-discovery. Taking this step involves people identifying their unique voice and consequently not being as worried about how other people will reach them (Baxter Magolda, 1992). In this phase, those individuals who thrive in building relationships with others are able to find their own voice in collaboration with others and those who prefer to learn more individually are challenged to listen to others (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

As students begin to validate their own thoughts and opinions in relationship to others, they are able to move towards contextual knowing. Evidence and expertise begin to play a role in who may be an authority in any area and no longer are simply instructors or advisors (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Baxter Magolda believed,

Because evaluating existing knowledge is essential to make valid judgments, the ideas of others are considered more carefully than they were in previous ways of knowing. The credible opinions of others must be integrated into one’s own view, whereas previously they could coexist dependently. (p. 188)

This level of understanding was often not found until after college in Baxter Magolda’s (1992) study, but is a key indicator that learning is a lifelong process. The more individuals are exposed to different experiences and more individuals, the greater amount of context that they can consider expanding and altering the ways they indicate knowledge and understanding.

How students learn has a direct impact on higher education, as the main purpose of college is matriculation and degree attainment for many students. Baxter Magolda (1992) was able to show the transition of students moving from absolute learning to
contextual knowledge that is possible as students begin to learn more about themselves in relationship to others. Baxter Magolda (1992) was also able to identify some differences in this evolutionary journey between both men and women. The study itself was not focused solely on academics, and therefore outside or co-curricular elements were also at play. Baxter Magolda (1992) found that “life beyond the classroom intensely involved students. They were consumed, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, with roommates and other relationships. The success of these relationships often affected the students’ perceptions of themselves and the quality of their academic work” (p. 296). One major difference between having a traditional residential college experience and high school is that rather than going to school and going home to one’s family where absolute knowledge was born, students live with, learn with, and socialize with other students. In many ways, the students or peer relationships take the power from one’s family due to constant interaction. These interactions are different because all students have been exposed to a different set of “truths.” Baxter Magolda (1992) found that the relationships among peers were a source of diverse perspectives, which was not found in the classroom. Identifying the importance of peers and knowing where those interactions take place enforces the argument that social media needs to be reviewed.

One thing to note as a critique for Baxter Magolda’s theory is that it was focused on privileged white students at Miami University (Evans et al., 2010). Not taking into account students from different socioeconomic status or racial and cultural backgrounds is a limitation, as the theory is not representative of all students. Given shifting demographics of college students, focusing on privileged white students in many ways
could be focusing on the minority rather than the majority of those attending a college or university.

Social media has a direct connection to peer-relationships and provides a medium for students to learn from one another, as well as connect beyond the in-person manner that was considered when the theory first originated. While Baxter Magolda’s framework of Self-Authorship identified that there are differences in gender patterns in the way students view or experience knowledge attainment, increased focus is also needed in understanding women specifically, given the scope of this study. For example, the work of Baxter Magolda, continues to assist in furthering research focusing around self-authorship and the experience of students while addressing some of the limitations of the original study. As an example, King et al. (2022), completed a four-year longitudinal study based on the Wabash National Study focused on self-authorship, and while they identified the limitation of the original study including on white college graduates, they worked to explore patterns by gender and racial or ethnic background. Hernandez (2016) examined self-authorship using critical race theory and Okello (2018) looked to transition from self-authorship to self-definition through black feminism. Brown (2016a) specifically addressed both digital spaces and self-authorship exploring the experiences students have tied to validation, self-worth, and independence. These studies identified the importance of and validated self-authorship as a foundational theory but adjusted and reframed their research to better reflect the student experience today. The findings in this dissertation study do the same.

Gender and technology are two areas that serve as examples of the changing landscape of higher education. Student development theory was created at a time where
most students in higher education were male (Evans et al., 2010). However today, more women are enrolled in college than men (Arum & Roska, 2011; NCES, 2017a; NCES, 2017b). Most student development theories have been created from foundational theories originally rooted in psychological contexts, developed into second wave theories identifying social identities. These have since evolved into a third wave that acknowledges oppression and larger systemic issues (Jones & Stewart, 2016). As students navigate their identity development journey, these waves have shown that gender and the intersection of other identities is impacted by larger systems of power. The current study is focused on responding to gaps in the literature surrounding both gender and technology in student identity development. Through exploring how technology, specifically social media, impacts how cisgender women in college construct their identity online, we may begin to understand and examine the role of technology as students navigate towards self-authorship. Women are currently the majority of students enrolled in higher education between 18 and 24 years old. Between the 2010 and 2020 data no changes have occurred, with women still accounting for 44% of the student population and having a higher percentage of participation across White, Black, and Hispanic identities (NCES, 2020). Having a greater understanding of how women navigate the identity development process is vitally important as some practitioners and researchers have foundational knowledge that was constructed with the female experience or identity taken into account. Finding how foundational theories such as Josselson (1987) can be expanded upon and identify how gender and technology intersect with one another has a great opportunity to inform research and practice moving forward. The study also looks at how these participants navigated the gendered component of social media use and its impact on the identity
development process. The implications for this research have the capacity to update understandings of the student experience, which has impacts on the programs delivered and support provided by practitioners.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I argued that while student development theories have been a tool to assist researchers and practitioners, they can fail to focus on the changing demographics of students within higher education (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). Two of these changing demographics relate to gender and individuals’ social media usage, and as such, this research will focus on how college women use social media to construct their identity online.

My review of literature on social media, particularly with college students and higher education demonstrated that colleges and universities need to understand the impact that social media is having in the lives of students. Administrators and faculty, need to be able to not only position the impacts of social media use within foundational theories to support the student experience, but we also need to begin to accurately be able assess student use of social media and its impact within the higher education environment.

I also provided a brief review of theories associated with cognitive development such as the foundational work of Perry (1970) and drew connections to the research of Belenky et al., (1986) as they identified five ways in which women see reality and create conclusions about knowledge. I then reviewed the work of Ruthellen Josselson (1987) who believed that women differ from each other, especially in how they see themselves
and how they connect with others. Josselson’s (1987) work intersected with that of Baxter Magolda’s, but focused specifically on women and pointed out that there has been nearly thirty years since a theory has been focused on women’s identity development in college.

The review of this literature allowed me to highlight the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) who focused on self-authorship, a theory which is positioned as a critical part of my research framework. I focused on Baxter Magolda’s (1992) self-authorship concept, which identified that there are patterns connected to but not directed by gender.

In conclusion, the literature review in this chapter worked to bring two bodies of literature together, specifically in discussing meaning making by ways of identity development and how users utilize social media to represent themselves, and some of the impacts and strategies tied to those decisions. As we understand identity development to be a centralized way for researchers and practitioners to understand and support the student experience and journey towards adulthood and self-actualization, we also need to address the intersection and impact of social media in that process to represent today’s current student experience. In bridging these bodies of literature, I have built a solid framework, but also an argument for why the research in this dissertation is not only relevant, but vital to supporting student success, growth, and development within a higher education setting.
CHAPTER 3

GENERIC QUALITATIVE APPROACH

The focus of the dissertation was to answer the question, How do cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self-authorship? as well as How do cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces? As a researcher, I needed both flexibility and personal interaction in order to understand the impact that social media has on the development of college women today. I focused on looking at how cisgender women students use social media and how their social media use relates to their identity. The following chapter will explain the methods and decisions made to engage my research question using a generic qualitative inquiry approach.

Pilot Study

The research methodology for this dissertation has been refined and revised to build from a previous study that I conducted in Fall 2015, which was focused on examining the research question, How do students’ use of social media applications impact their sense of self-authorship? Using grounded theory, the research focused on the digital observations and interviews with three female college students at a four-year private institution in central Massachusetts. All participants shared that they had been utilizing social media platforms since the 7th or 8th grade. They agreed to participate in three interviews each and allowed me to observe their social media interactions by friending them on Facebook.
The findings of this research study showed that social media did appear to influence participants’ self-authorship process. While students searched for authenticity, they also relied on the interactions that they had online, comparing how their thoughts, opinions, and experiences differed or were similar to those they observed. The participants also overwhelmingly shared that they experienced pulling, or a process where they attempted to pull away from forces of authority in their lives such as parents and family, but also looked to others for validation. Pulling helped them navigate deciding what to share online and connected to the different identities that they had as well as the audiences that their social media platforms contained. Social media allowed participants to tell their personal stories to others in a strategic way. These findings connect closely to Baxter Magolda’s (1998) work surrounding the concept of self-authorship.

Although a constricted timeline and small sample created limitations for this pilot, the findings that emerged were useful in designing the current study. For example, the pilot informed the sampling structure of the current study. While the findings from this pilot study were helpful in identifying how social media can play a part in the process of achieving self-authorship, it was not intended to focus specifically on women. Even though the participants all identified as women, my original intention was not to recruit an all-women sample. Yet, given my experience with the pilot study, moving forward into this dissertation, I decided to intentionally recruit cisgender women in order to make my sample more focused on a particular identity explored by students in college. Knowing that women are the majority in college and identifying a difference in the way they build and sustain relationships (Josselson, 1987), narrowing the sample to focus on one gender
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

was appropriate. My dissertation provided the opportunity to intentionally look at and understand how women are using social media during their college experience, why they use it, and how it impacts the way they connect with others, construct knowledge, and learn about themselves.

Additionally, being able to understand the experience of women in utilizing social media and the impacts that it has on their identity development process can inform resources that colleges and universities can create to support these students. Working from the pilot study allows the opportunity to build from an existing inquiry, but also dig deeper into intentionally attempting to understand the impact that social media can have on women.

From the previous pilot study, I experienced memo writing and reflective journaling being vital in capturing what I observe and think, as well as the “in the moment” ideas that come forward through observations and interviews. I continued to use these techniques within this dissertation study. The pilot study also helped inform the interview protocol for the current study. I learned that checking in with the participants throughout the study was vital in building relationships and establishing trust with the participants, but also provided an opportunity to ensure that what I perceived to be observing online reflected participants’ perspectives. I also learned that a longer period of time for observation would be helpful as this was a limitation in the past study.

Qualitative Inquiry

The study was framed with a generic qualitative lens. Muzari et al. (2022) highlight that qualitative research is characterized as, “humanistic, naturalistic, and
holistic in dynamic social realities” (p. 14). The participants in this study needed to share narratives on their own experience and describe their use and engagement with social media. The observations and stories shared not only humanized the participants, but allowed for a holistic perspective to be developed as digital identities were discussed in relationship to the identity development process. The research questions within this study required the opinions, reflections, and stories of the participants (Percy et al., 2015) in digital spaces as they discussed their use of social media over time and how it impacted their identity development, while using a gendered lens. The research approach itself capitalized on observation and research data including semi-structured interviews, online observations, memo writing, and coding, while also paying attention to the individual experience of the participants. Generic qualitative approaches traditionally use methods that gather information from participant reflections and thoughts about external environmental factors (Percy et al., 2015). The participants in this study often shared not only information about themselves, but their perceptions of others and the perceived expectations other had of them. The research and emerging themes, came from not only the data, but the interpretation of how the data came to live in participant use of social media, their description of how it played a role in their lives, impacted their thoughts and opinions, and reflections on their individual use within the context of a digitally global environment.

Generic qualitative approaches are mainly recognized for their flexibility (Liu, 2016). Through interviews, I created relationships with the participants where I was able to observe their body language or voice fluctuations, which at times meant just as much as the information that they posted online. The interviews themselves were supplemented
by digital observations and reflections through memo writing. These observations and memos were important for analysis and data collection, but also in understanding how or why students engage with social media on a daily basis. The approach allowed for follow-up or flexibility in the questions that I asked during the semi-structured interviews. It also allowed me to be flexible in my methodology (Percy et al., 2015) as I experienced significant challenges tied to IRB approval when I began, as well as needed to adapt to the research process during a pandemic. I needed flexibility to engage participants during the pandemic by adding questions tied to the impact they felt due to COVID-19, as well as adjust the lens in which I looked at the frequency and content of their social media posts if applicable.

In my dissertation, participants were asked about their behavior on and offline, and were challenged to reflect on their perceptions of their own actions and how they construct knowledge and sustain relationships online. In taking an epistemological approach through constructivism, I sought to understand the experiences of students through listening and observing them, which allowed me to identify my findings (Schwandt, 1994). Examples of this work include the coding of transcriptions for the interviews. I listened to participants speak about the importance of relationships online in regard to how they interact with others and have those interaction reciprocated. I was then able to observe how the participants reacted to those who connected with them on social media, responded, or acknowledged the post in some way. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) shared that, “theory does not precede research, but follows it so that it is grounded on the data generated by the research act.” I was not focused on identifying a theory from
the findings of this study, but rather to gather data that could assist in addressing gaps in current literature, as well as gain insight into resources needed to support student success.

Through data analysis the findings provide guidance for the practice of current administrators and suggests future research in identifying how cisgender women in college engage in and are impacted by social media as they move towards self-authorship, along with other students of various identities.

Research Sample

To understand the impact that Facebook has on cisgender woman’s identity development, I engaged in purposeful sampling, focusing on a particular population with specific characteristics (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) tied to social media use and domestic status. As such, I required that all participants be students who identify as a cisgender woman, be enrolled as a full-time undergraduate who has attended college for at least one year and was a traditionally aged college student (ages 18-22). The observation period lasted four months for each participant, given that is the length of an academic semester (September – December).

Participants were asked to join the study if they utilized Facebook at least once a day for at least five days over the past year and have been using social media for at least four years. These requirements ensured that each participant was an active social media user and was utilizing social media with an already constructed digital identity. Restricting participation to those who meet these qualifications helped ensure that each cisgender woman had experience in both engaging and observing others within a digital environment. Facebook is a social networking site (SNS) and is identified as a worldwide
platform where users create a profile that shares personal information and then share content and engage with others through this social network (Caers et al., 2013). As users create profiles, add interests, and engage with others, the information presented on the users’ walls is curated by the information others share with whom they are connected, as well as content identified as possibly interesting to the users through algorithms. Facebook was chosen as the SNS to be reviewed in this study as it is a platform that has been around for over a decade, ensuring that exposure to the site was possible and would allow for participants to be able to reflect on their use over a longer period of time. Additionally, Facebook allowed for appropriate security measures to ensure the confidential participation of the participants in this study.

An additional requirement of the participants was that they identified as domestic students within the United States. In a pilot study, one of the students was an international student who expressed social media as an important tool in staying connected to her family abroad. Having a participant from another country with different social norms and experiences with social media adds a layer of complexity to the findings that would be important to consider in future studies. Asking participants to be domestic students from the United States provided a narrower scope to more deeply understand this exploratory study.

Eight participants were identified between January of 2019 and March of 2020, who represented six institutions where IRB approval was additionally granted. These participants had class standings from sophomores to graduating seniors and studied a wide range of majors such as film, computer engineering technology, and occupational
therapy. More individual narratives and further information about the participants will be provided in the Findings Chapter. Overall, participants were recruited throughout the central Massachusetts and Connecticut region via email. As a researcher, I utilized my professional network to communicate my interests with colleagues who could share my call for participation with their students (Appendix A). This form of purposeful sampling combined with a snowball strategy to help ensure that I was able to recruit participants and build credibility through the relationship that students have with their campus administrators (Palinkas et al., 2015). Through this outreach, I narrowed down potential participants by asking that they have had Facebook for at least four years and that they log on at least once a day (Appendix A). I had implemented my pilot study’s sampling strategy in the same manner; this process worked well as students were contacted initially by an individual they know rather than a direct email from an external researcher, which might not be read.

Through the research process, the ability to obtain participants was challenging. Through the IRB approval process, it was identified that I would need to gain IRB approval from each institution where I wished to engage participant interest. Unfortunately, doing so yielded a lot of effort for not a lot of output in terms of participant interest. At the beginning of this research process, I anticipated having twenty participants, and once I found that this would not be realistic without extensively extending the process in my research, I realized that I needed to reframe my approach, and focus on a smaller number of participants. The timing of this research was also impacted by the arrival of COVID-19 with a few students participating during the time of the pandemic. It was a major challenge, as students, administrators, faculty, and staff
were navigating so much uncertainly. I attempted to keep the time expectations at a minimum for the participants, realizing that four months would seem like a big commitment.

**Data Collection**

Once the participants were confirmed, data was collected in two primary ways throughout the study: digital observation and interviews. I engaged with eight participants, and conducted two interviews with each of them, with an optional check-in meeting in the middle of the study. At least 16 interviews, digital observations, coding, and memo writing. allowed patterns to emerge from the data. “Generic qualitative data collection seeks information from representative samples of people about real-world events and processes, or about their experiences” (Percy et al., 2015, p. 79). Being able to identify patterns through personal narratives and digital observations brings forward not only patterns but valid findings, as they are not contrived from theory, but lived experiences.

Prior to starting data collection, the first digital interview with each participant took place to formally introduce the research study, answer any questions that they may have had, and review the participant consent process. Following the formal introduction and the signing of the consent form, I asked that the participants accept a friend request from me on Facebook to give me general access to see their posts, walls, photos, and interests. The accounts that I used were generic, created specifically for this research and to not affect or influence participants based on of my own digital identity. I had to create multiple accounts to assist in ensuring that participants from the same institution could
not identify one another. From the point of confirming my request and the completion of the first interview, observation and research began immediately as well as information gathering through memo writing, interviews, and online observations. I was also able to adjust my semi-structured interviews as appropriate to explore these themes more. An example was when I asked participants what I had been noticing as a theme across central media use and asking their thoughts on that statement. All transcriptions and digital observations were reviewed twice for accuracy and memo writing took place throughout the research and analysis process.

**Individual Interviews**

One type of data collection key in qualitative practices is interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). I conducted three individual semi-structured interviews via video chat (Zoom) where the participants were seen so that observations could be made about their expressions or body language throughout the interview. These served as field notes in a way, or an opportunity to remember details, the environment, and interactions to consider as part of the research data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). My use of these observations was important when it came to noting even my own reactions (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), identifying when a memo or concept might need to be written, and assisted in providing context to the transcriptions that were being recorded.

These interviews took place at the start, middle, and end of the research process for no more than 60 minutes each. Each interview focused on questions developed in my interview protocols and what I observed in participants’ Facebook posts. It was important to connect multiple times throughout the research process so that the data observed could
be compared to information shared in each interview. Each interview had a semi-structured interview protocol informed by literature, such as women’s identity development theory and self-authorship so that responses among the participants could be compared. There were questions, such as how does identifying as female impact your use of social media different than others? Or how does your environment or culture impact who you are or how you see yourself assisted in unpacking how participants learned information about themselves in relationship to other people, and how do they perceive the environmental impact on their individual growth or sense of self (see Appendix B for interview protocol). The question allowed participants to showcase how they understood themselves and their relationship to others, acknowledging the power or authority others may have in how they understand and take in knowledge. However, each interview also included additional questions specific to each participant to allow for a natural conversation and for the participant to share their experiences and thoughts as well (Creswell, 2014).

The first interviews focused on getting to know the participants and their engagement with social media. In the first interview, participants were asked to define who they are and what their values are, how long and how often do they use social media, or when they decided to post something, what do they consider? (see Appendix B). Reflective questions were also used to ask each participant how their use of social media has changed over time. Their responses helped in comparing what they shared with what was observed as well.
The second optional check-in interview was completed by six of the eight participants and focused on social media utilization. Questions such as how the participants form relationships and asking how social media use impacts this in any way helped share, how the participant constructed knowledge and relationships with others. The participants were also asked what type of recognition they look for through social media and how important that was to them to show how they liked to receive recognition (See Appendix B). This interview was optional in an effort to minimize the time requirements for the participants. In having a check-in interview, I was allowed the opportunity ask any follow-up or to clarify questions I had between the first interview and during the digital observations, as well as to check in and ensure that the participants were doing okay.

The third and final interview focused on how the participants felt they interacted online, and what types of reactions they have to others, as well as what they hope to see from their digital connections. Questions from this interview focused on whether they were open to others’ views and, if so, how do they respond when they might disagree or how do they learn from using Facebook? (See Appendix B). These themes, among others, shared how the participants in the study reflected on their own utilization of social media, how they learned and created knowledge, as well as how they interacted with others through their digital identity.

Each interview’s being a semi-structured format (Creswell, 2014) allowed for flexibility in asking questions related to their Facebook posts and to my digital observations throughout the study. I asked participants to reflect on how their use of
social media has changed since they first began its utilization. I was also able to use the data collected through the observations to compare what they shared with what I saw and was able to ask questions that arose from similarities or differences, as well as to ask for further clarification. Participants were asked what strong identities play a role in their lives and how they felt these impacted the way that they engage or use social media. The interviews were recorded and kept for additional observation and memo writing, and assisted with transcription through both Zoom and a personal recording device. The recordings were kept on a password protected computer as well as uploaded to the UMass Box system and One Drive. The recordings were also shared with Rev.com to assist with transcriptions. The recordings will be erased after the conclusion of this dissertation research and graduation of the researcher, while findings and transcriptions will be kept on a personal password-protected computer and UMass Box for as long as access is provided to the researcher.

**Digital Observations**

The second method of data collection was digital observation. Observation is particularly important in qualitative research, as it allowed me to take a deeper look inside each participant’s use of social media and identify congruency or conflict observed in how they reported their use (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). I not only was able to observe the participants’ facial expressions and body language as they shared their reflections and narratives through the interviews, but I also was able to observe their digital presence and interactions. Both digital observations and in person observations through video interviewing the participants, allowed me to view the visual or physical responses to
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

questions as well as the alignment to personal values and conversations to the participants’ digital footprint.

To support the process of observing the participant wall posts, photos, and digital identity, standardized observation sheets were used that included both a checklist and an area for structured notes (see Appendix C). Rallis and Rossman (2012) believed observing was a systematic way to note and record events, encounters, and behaviors. The observation sheets were important in digital observations because the data was unique to the individual. These observations were generally collected to ensure that I was able to observe patterns in posts within a weekly cadence, knowing that Facebook participation of at least once a day for five days was asked during the participant recruitment process. Once provided access to their Facebook pages, I reviewed previous posts to learn more about what those individuals had posted in the past and explored the evolution of the material that was shared as part of the interviews to assist with memo writing.

The research process helped identify what information was shared online, how many friends and networks the participants interacted with, the type of information they posted, as well as how frequently friends interacted with them online. Through observation, I paid attention to the types of posts and pictures that were shared, as well as what the participants shared about themselves online. These observations and interviews happened at parallel times as, “interviewing, observing, and studying material culture are the primary ways to discover and learn in the field” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 168).
The number of posts the participants made and the number of posts made to their wall by others was also captured, along with the photos posted and tagged within the content of those messages. I made note of the number of friends they had, their likes, interests, and other profile information posted. Each post (text or image) was logged into the observation sheet with content and an identified category of the post (examples: political, social justice, representation, feminism, question, food, social), along with the type of interaction (picture, text, video, etc.) and any general comments made through my observations of both friends and the participants themselves. It was through these observations that I was about to align posts with values shared in the interview process and explore patterns in participant engagement. Over the course of the study I was able to see the eight participants connected with over 4,000 people, sharing their gender, relationship statutes, where they lived, their birthdays, where they had visited, their favorite movies, tv shows, and more. Collectively, the participants shared over 3,100 photos on their social media pages—spanning their account use as currently shown as well. These frontline observations show the breadth of use participants had in just one social media platform and elevates the awareness of strategy and connection participants sought.

**Data Analysis**

Memo writing, specifically analytic memos were used to support my personal reflections across the data to help make connections and identify differences through analysis and results (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Written memos after each interview and following observations and the coding process were also a reflective outlet to explore
ideas about what I was observing and thinking, and any questions that arose and led to new data (Creswell, 2012). In writing these memos, I identified not only what I found, but what I thought and felt. The practice was helpful in acknowledging bias or identifying more questions that arose. Rossman and Rallis (2012) shared that qualitative research can be interpreted and that researchers should think about how they will engage in the research process. Transparency and reflexivity have been important in highlighting how the data was taken in, observed, coded, and analyzed throughout the data analysis process, as it is important to ensure that the researcher examines their own role and positionality within the research (Rossman & Ralli, 2012). The memos were logged as evidence of the information gathered and an explanation of how I processed the data, including my observations of each participant.

Interviews were transcribed and coded through NVivo to identify themes and patterns described in the next chapter and to share the interplay between social media and the identity construction of cisgender women in college online. My analytic process was important to help filter data and create patterns connected to the research question (Galman, 2013). I used a constant comparative analysis, which is the process of comparing new data to data already collected in the study (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Boeije (2002) shared that a core principle in qualitative analysis is comparison, and that tools of qualitative research such as memo writing and coding aid in that process. Using the constant comparative method allowed me to use comparison across all the tools that I used including memo writing, coding, and digital observations. Using this approach, I was able to triangulate data from the interviews and digital observations as well as information gathered across all participants to identify themes and validate the
findings of this study. As constant comparative analysis derived from grounded theory it is also utilized across other qualitative approaches (Boeije, 2002; Fram, 2013). While there are three types of coding in grounded theory—open, axial, and selective—(Fram, 2013), I used only two (open and axial) in my research because I was not looking to identify or develop a theory from my research questions or findings, but rather seeking to understand the data in a way that provides a framework for understanding the impact of social media in a methodical way.

Open coding is the first step in the constant comparative approach and supports qualitative data organization by identifying board themes to formulate the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). Open coding provided an opportunity to look at several aspects of the data, whether it was words, sentences, or chunks of data connected to concepts associated with the research question (Galman, 2013). All open codes were defined and included in NVivo and were sorted by nodes or how they could be found within the data itself (Galman, 2013). Examples of the codes I utilized were:

- Communication
- COVID
- DEI
- Expectations
- Feminism
- Judgement
- Major
- Passion
- Relationships
- Self-Portrayal
- Social Media Comparison
- Social Media Reflection
- Social Media Strategy
- Social Media Use
- Values
I developed these open codes mostly from an inductive framework, focusing on creating theory from the data collected (Williams & Moser, 2019) by identifying and sorting patterns. Some codes were also deductive, such as self-portrayal, feminism, and relationships, as I knew these were key foundational areas tied to self authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992) and Josselson (1987) work, which were the central and supporting frameworks of this study. While I categorized the type of post made through digital observations (example, social, food, feminism, social justice) they were not included in the formal coding process including NVivo. The categories that I identified through the observation sheets (see APPENDIX C), were used to help inform the interviews that I had with the participants as well as triangulate the data during the data analysis process.

I engaged in axial coding both during and after open coding, which focuses on reducing the data and creating emerging themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). In this process, I focused on creating categories, formalizing large data amounts into smaller more digestible information (Charmaz, 2014). As I triangulated the data, I noticed patterns began to emerge, where there were similar narratives or themes that came forward. Hearing the narratives and reflections shared by the participants, I began to understand the evolution of their social media use, what they considered when they posted something, and the consistent ties to connection and relationships. I started to unpack how these findings and observations translated to their digital identities and identify the impact on their identity development process.

Once I had reviewed and synthesized the data, the open codes were compiled and reduced into similar areas or categories (Galman, 2013). An example of this was social media strategies (open code) often tied to participants, as they would share what they
thought about when they made a post, and how those posts would impact them—or others’ perception of them—so I grouped them together under the axial code self-portrayal. As another example, social media comparisons (open code) were often tied to other open codes such as judgement and expectations, and so I grouped them together under the axial code impact of self. Ultimately, the open codes were reduced to four axial codes representing the themes of the study that will be discussed in the next chapter:

- Self-Portrayal
- Impact on Self
- Evolution of Self
- Connection and Representation of Self

These central findings reflect the importance of relationships, personal and external expectations in digital spaces, strategies employed for social media use, and impact that social media use had on the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

A strategic decision that was made in recruiting participants was to not engage any students in the study that I work with at my own institution. Moving in this direction was guided by not wanting to impact the working relationships that I have with students, but also my duty to report any actions or concerns that I could witness in potential interviews as well as online posts that would be connected as my own role as a university administrator. As a researcher, I want to ensure that I am reducing any possible harm and want to protect those who might feel that they cannot act independently (Rallis & Rossman, 2012).
In wanting to be able to provide confidentiality to the participants in the study, I also needed to find my own balance in expressing any concerns that might have arisen with a participant if I witness or observe any high-risk behavior or posts concerning their mental health. I did provide a contact sheet at the start of the study to each participant with off- and on-campus contact information for their counseling center or similar resources, if they felt they needed their support at any time throughout the study. No main concerns emerged, however, through the interviews or digital observations.

In anticipation of working with students for this research, I sought and received IRB approval through UMass and the consent of the institutions that the participants attend through their individual IRB processes. After approval was granted, I connected with each participant and shared with them what participation in this study would mean, as well as what they could expect and allowed them to answer any questions prior to reading and signing the consent form. Additionally, to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, I used pseudonyms for the participants to protect their identity. All information gathered in the data collection process including the interviews used pseudonyms, as their names have not been stored in files or interview transcriptions. The key for pseudonyms were kept in a separate code book stored on a password-protected computer and the UMass Box system and One Drive.

As a way to show my appreciation to the participants for their support throughout the research project, I offered a digital gift card at the conclusion of each interview and a larger gift card to raffle off to all participants who completed the study. I also offered to sit down with the participants to reflect on their personal use of social media and its
impacts following the study if it was of interest to them as a part of the consent form (Appendix D). I offered this in the call for interest to allow space for individual reflections, questions, or discussion following their own participation in this study. I appreciated the time that the participants took to participate in this study and wanted to offer them something beyond a gift card, but an opportunity for continued reflection and growth if interested.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

As a researcher who identifies as a cisgender woman, I acknowledge that my own experiences may impact the way information is presented or has been analyzed throughout the research process. I am further removed from the college experience and had different perspectives based off of my own age, and need to be cautious of these feelings and thoughts as I interacted with my data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Through memo-writing and active listening during interviews, I have needed to be aware of my own thoughts, perceptions, and biases. For example, I needed to reflect and be aware of my thoughts and opinions of how I see students utilize technology on my own campus as well as my theory of how social media has impacted students’ growth and development. Utilization of tools such as a codebook, supported me in being both reflexive and transparent as a researcher and is a well known approach in qualitative work (Oliveira, 2022). In writing rich descriptions and moving through multiple steps in coding the data, the credibility and trustworthiness of the research increased.

I have increased the credibility of my research through the triangulation of data to ensure deeper understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By both observing online
behavior and interviewing participants, there has been multiple ways to code, observe, and understand data, allowing for thick and rich descriptions to be used. Quotes and shared narratives are embedded into the findings to provide rich, thick description as I moved towards answering the research question. Additionally, I engaged in member-checking during data analysis, bringing information back to the participants to ensure that what I was observing reflected their truth or what they have shared in interviews was understood correctly (Charmaz, 2006).
CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT UNFOLDED

In my data analysis, I bring forward themes, personal stories, and reflections on how cisgender women in college navigate self authorship online and explore how they perceive the gendered nature of identity in these digital spaces. The participants, while similar in identifying as cisgender women who use social media regularly, came to this study with individual lived experiences, varied relationships and uses for social media, as well as different values, passions, and interests. Their individual experiences have shaped not only who they are, but how they interact with, and understand the impact that social media has had on their lives.

Four key themes (Strategies for Self-Portrayal; Social Media Impact to Self; Social Media and Evolution of Self; and Social Media, Connectedness and Sense/Representation of Self) emerged through multiple interviews with each participant, coding, memo writing, and digital observations and are central to understanding not only the findings, but the implications and impact on future research and higher education. These themes strongly connect the participants’ strategic judgement and decision making in what they decide to share online to correlate with their ideal self-portrayal in different digital spaces. Often, participants identified what would be shared widely versus with a smaller group of friends based on content, and their audience reach through different social media platforms. They all discussed the impact that social media has or does play in their lives including touching upon frequency and a presence of anxiety from use, the impact on relationships, and they self-identified how their use of social media has
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

time changed over the years based on social norms and personal growth. All participants
shared how they use social media to stay connected with friends, family members, and
colleagues, but are also keenly aware of how their digital identity is created, perceived,
and shared with others either separate from or in line with their personal identity and
experiences offline.

While participants had some shared experiences, in the following section, I
provide a brief overview of each participant as both an introduction of each woman in the
study and to help set the stage for how the findings were examined and understood across
participants. In addition to learning about the participants’ individual backgrounds, lived
experiences, and reflections on their own social media use, the following information will
help provide additional context for the findings of this study.

**Participant Backgrounds**

While the participants all met the requirements of the study, they each provided a
unique perspective, approach, and utilization of social media with their own stories to
share. The following is a brief introduction to each participant using pseudonyms with
background information, including their own personal social media use. This information
about the participants is helpful to provide a situated context for their stories and
participation in this dissertation study.

Carly is a 21-year-old junior, studying Health Science and Society Policy with a
minor in Afro and African American Studies. She expressed a passion for the American
Health Care System and is wanting to go into the public health sector to impact how
minoritized communities intersect with this system and wanting to make improvements in
its access and utilization. She identified that she uses Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat the most and logs on maybe three times every day. On Facebook, her posts tended to be more social in nature, although she did include some posts tied to political or social justice topics and overall posts aligned with her personal life and interests. She shared that she is the oldest in her family with two younger brothers. She is from Boston but was born in Haiti and has also lived in Canada.

Sophia is a 20-year-old student from Long Island, New York, studying Industrial Engineering. She identified herself as growing up in a very female centric environment as both parents are feminists, had experiences such as participating in Girl Scout camps, attending an all-girls high school, and later joining a sorority in college. She shared that she has felt a push to be surrounded by strong women and embrace the strong woman’s stereotype. However, she also shared that there are struggles being a woman in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, and as such she values being a person who takes action, and is relationship driven, but also wants to preserve her own identity and inner strength. Sophia did not post much personally on Facebook throughout the study; most interaction was her being tagged by others. She was transparent in that she too feels that she shares the least on this platform because people her age are using it less frequently. If she has something she wants older relatives to see, she is more likely to post on Facebook as she is more conservative on that digital platform.

Whitney is a senior, studying Psychology and Criminal Justice. She attended a vocational high school and has a certificate in Design and Communication. She described herself as someone who loves to travel and shared that she is currently in the process of
becoming a dual citizen in Ireland. Whitney shared that she has been using Facebook since she was 13. Nine years later, she described her use on Facebook to be “every day, every hour.” Whitney is also a student who is affiliated with a sorority on her campus, which posts announcements on Facebook, so she frequently gathers information, shares updates, answers questions, and communicates with her peers using the online platform. She was starting to prepare for graduation and identified herself as a cheerful person who enjoys working with and helping people.

Grace identified herself as an outgoing sophomore who was affiliated with a sorority on campus and is a busy student leader on campus. She is an Education and History major and enjoys the opportunity to be a leader and take charge, but also wants to ensure that people feel included. She believes she would like to pursue a career in teaching at the middle or high school level, with the potential of following an administrative leadership track. She also shared that she uses social media when she has free time, usually at night before bed. She also uses Facebook to post “cleaner photos,” so her family can see what she is up to while away. Grace shared that she has made many different connections through social media, both meeting her partner online and her first-year roommates through Facebook.

Yasmeen is a sophomore Occupational Therapy major who enjoys the chance to engage with friends and listens to music. She also holds leadership roles on campus, such as being a resident assistant and enjoys being active through weekly Zumba sessions with her friends. She shared that family and friends are important to her and she values school, which is tied to her passion and desire of having a successful career as an occupational
therapist. Yasmeen started using social media in middle school and describes her use of social media to be about an hour or two each day. While she shared that she does not personally post a lot, she does engage in replying to other people’s posts. The reflection aligned with minimal posts found through digital observations and when there were online postings, it was usually tied to family and relationships. These relationships were one of the things she listed as a top value in her life. Observing the alignment between the values Yasmeen shared such as family and relationships and what she did post online, showed how participants online identities can align in an authentic way with life beyond the screen.

Eliana is a junior studying Computer Engineering Technology and enjoys playing video games and using social media. She values friends and family the most, followed by people being supportive of her and pushing her out of her comfort zone. Professionally, she has an interest in going into computer coding or software and installing systems onto computers. Eliana reflected on the increase in her social media use due to COVID-19 and having more time to spare. She shared that when she posts, she does not really look for approval or a certain type of reaction from those who follow her, as her posts are usually social in nature.

Hana is a senior who is interested in pursuing medical school following graduation. She identified herself as an open-minded person, but also someone who holds onto her religious values. She tends to keep her friends circle to individuals who have similar belief systems to minimize conflict and she values personal balance and wellness. Hana shared that she uses social media every day, maybe for three hours. Her perception
of social media was that it is a great way to build and renew relationships and stay in contact with friends.

Lulu is a junior, originally from a suburb in Maryland. She moved to the Northeast for school because she wanted to leave her state and was looking for a larger campus. With a Films major and Marketing minor, her goal after college is to write or direct films since they have been a big part of her life growing up. If that does not come to fruition, she is also exploring marketing movies, which aligns with her minor. Lulu shared that she uses Facebook for events. As an involved student, her co-curricular organizations often post events, so she likes to be informed on what is taking place. She considers herself a little outspoken and not afraid to share her opinion but willing to hear others too, even though she is not easily swayed. Her friends, family, and academics at this point, are what she values the most.

The participants in the study represent individuals with shared gender identity, age range, domestic status, and use of Facebook. But they all also represent differences in additional identities, lived experiences, political opinions, personal values, and uses of social media. As college students, some went through actively learning to navigate life through a pandemic and others were getting ready to transition to graduate school or a full-time job. All of the participants were students in a higher education environment and were exposed to social media as early as middle school. The stories highlighted in this chapter are tied to the evolution of individual participants’ social media use, reflections, and transitions of use, which I also bring together to demonstrate patterns about the impact of social media. These similarities and differences all help strengthen the findings
in this study, as well as highlight the breadth of reach and impact that social media can have in how cisgender women in college navigate self-autorship in digital spaces and how they perceive the gendered nature of identity online.

Findings

Findings were developed from individual interviews and digital observations, which led to narrative stories, participant reflections shared during the interviews, and memo writing by me as the researcher throughout the research process. Here I present four central themes from the data: (1) Strategies for Self-Portrayal; (2) Social Media Impact to Self; (3) Social Media and Evolution of Self; and (4) Social Media, Connectedness and Sense/Representation of Self. However, before moving into these themes, I highlight examples of participants’ shared experiences with social media use more broadly, which also consistently emerged throughout the study. While these examples intersect with the four themes that are presented, I highlight them first to provide greater clarity on how social media interacts with the identity development of the cisgender women collegians in my study and provide some additional context to the themes in my findings.

Participants often discussed when, why, and how they were using their social media. It was acknowledged across all participants that they did not rely on one form of social media to stay connected, communicate their thoughts or experiences, or gather information that was important to them. Participants on average shared they used social media throughout the day and used the online medium to stay connected to family and friends. For example, Whitney shared that she has cousins in Ireland. Growing up, it was
hard to connect via phone because of the cost, but now that she has Facebook, they stay connected and even have a cousin group chat through the platform. Eliana shared this in her first interview:

The great thing about social media is how you’re able to connect with people who don’t like live where you are … it’s like crazy how you don’t see them every day but then it feels like you’re with them every day.

These opportunities to connect with friends and family allow for instant and constant connection if desired. It allows for people far away to remain close, as well as strengthen relationships through digital exchanges. To understand identity development and roles that different relationships play in that process, knowing how a digital platform can enhance or withdraw a feeling of connection is extremely important, which are ideas that will connect with the central themes shared later in the findings.

The time of year also played a role in what was seen as valuable to post. Sophia for example, shared she did not use social media as often during the summer than in the school year as she did not feel she had anything exciting enough to share on a large social platform beyond the day-to-day activities of being at home and going to work. Participants not only wanted to share about their own individual experiences and identities, but also are projecting what they feel others want to know about in relation to their experiences or identities. These strategic decisions impact how they employ strategies for self-portrayal (a theme discussed later in this chapter), but also how they perceived what others would find interesting or valuable to know.

Social media was identified several times as a medium to fill down time. Grace shared in her first interview that, “Pretty much every time I have like downtime or free
time, I’m usually on social media.” Grace continued to share that she is involved in many groups that use Facebook to provide updates, so she utilizes it to stay up to date. She also uses Instagram a lot and at night usually reads Twitter. Although participants like Grace saw some of her use of social media as personal and relaxing in quiet moments, she was also being fed with information, opinions, and experiences during that time that are based on algorithms. Algorithms are created based on use and browsing history and present the user with information they may find interesting. While this can be a helpful tool for the user, it also limits what the user is exposed to and the information that they see and learn.

The subsequent themes within the findings of this study (Strategies for Self-Portrayal; Social Media Impact to self; Social Media and Evolution of Self; and Social Media, Connectedness and Sense/Representation of Self) are central to identifying how cisgender women in college navigate self authorship in digital spaces. As well as how they perceive the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces. It is important to acknowledge that as digital observations, interview transcriptions, coding, and memo writing took place, these themes did not emerge as individually unique observations. Overlap in these findings within these themes often did take place. For example, participants frequently spoke to strategic decisions for how they would want to be viewed. These accounts or narratives often not only emerge under strategies for self-portrayal, but also social media’s impact on self and self-representation. In the findings below, this type of connection and sense of data repetition shows the close relationship and impact that social media can have on oneself. However, I also discuss the themes individually to provide greater clarity to readers and rich descriptions of each.
Strategies for Self-Portrayal

A central theme in the study was the strategic ways in which participants navigated social media to support their digital identity and how they wanted to be viewed by others. Participants chose to be more liberal or conservative on what they posted based on the social media platform and who was on it. These decisions played into how they wanted to be portrayed to specific audiences. For example, Hana shared that Facebook is usually an engagement platform for her family, so she likely would not post anything that she would laugh about with friends or anything with inappropriate words because there are older people that she would not want to upset. However, on Twitter, her following audience is mostly friends, so “anything goes, basically.” The same sentiment was true for other participants, like Sophia who shared that she knows who uses each platform and that is how she decides what and where to post. Participants also thought about future target audiences and the impact it could have on their careers. Yasmeen shared in her first interview that, “I always think that when I post, I have to think about how it will affect my professional career,” and she wants to ensure that whatever she posts, she is comfortable in doing so. Each of these examples showed strategic judgement on current and future relationships that impact the perceived identities of the participants.

Strategy is a large component of social media use, specifically around creating profiles, identifying posts to make or share, and identifying target audiences. As an example, Grace shared that she does not interact with people on Facebook that she does not know, but on Twitter she is more likely to put herself out there and re-tweet or respond to others’ posts. She went on to share that there would be things she would put
on Twitter that she would not post on Facebook because, like Hana, she has more family on that platform. Making these intentional decisions helps shape different digital identities across varying audiences and platforms. Additional strategies that emerged were surrounding content. Participants shared that Instagram was a place where they posted lots of pictures and Twitter appeared to be a location for thoughts. With each decision on where, when, and how to post, these participants were enacting strategic actions based on desired outcomes for their target audience. Some of these strategies are done with great intentionality, but a driving force that for each participant in making these decisions was embedded in their understanding of self in relationship to their values and their relationships with others. As they navigate their digital identities and move toward self authorship, understanding what they value and how that aligns with their digital identity needed to be explored.

(Mis)Identifying Values

It was clear in speaking with the participants that they valued family and relationships, which appeared to be a key driver in what they decided to post and on what platform. However, when asked to share what their top three values were (to understand the other motivators that impacted their strategy) many participants shared characteristics of themselves rather than their own values. The values they identified were not tied to motivators of personal action, but rather how they see themselves or believe they are seen by others. Some examples of their self-identified values were:

- Academically focused
- Able to understand self-worth
- Cheerful
In looking at these self-perceived values, many of them are adjectives of how they see themselves, but also how others see them such as ray of sunshine, cheerful, extroverted, academically focused, or a natural leader. They do not represent values that motivate their actions or share their approach to making decisions. Other descriptions—such as being able to understand self-worth or being open minded—start to open a pathway to sharing values centered around self-awareness. Developmentally, the participants might not have had or taken the opportunity to deeply reflect in this area and consider how their daily actions in person and online are driven by the intrinsic personal values that they hold.

Participants showed that their lack of clear self-identified values tied into their social media use strategy, which is led by extrinsic perceptions rather than self-authenticity. For example, many participants spoke about the importance of their family. However, participants also shared that they did not post the same material across each social media platform based on the target audience, also using family as an example. While participants employed strategies for how to share pieces of their identity, their beliefs, or passions, in some ways they are also not allowing for an authentic representation of who they are fully to everyone. To not offend or cause conflict, they are
creating a strategy for how they want others to see them based on not only their values, but the perceived values of others.

**Seeking Extrinsic Validation Strategically**

Participants acknowledged in interviews that they frequently thought about how they would be perceived by others when they posted something on social media or would compare themselves to others with what they viewed as well. These actions are often connected to seeking extrinsic validation, which impacted not only what they posted, but when they posted as well. Participants identified a difference in their use based on the seasons of the year or changes in their lived experiences. Their strategies were directly connected to how participants desired to be more interesting to the external viewer of their page. For example, Grace shared that in the summer she does not post as much, because she did not like her photos. At school they would,

> Get dressed up and take really fun photos together and post them. And like when I’m at home, I just had like photos like because of day trips or things like that. So, I do not really, I don’t like to post that I do not think people would be interested in.

She went on to share that certain photos that she sees online bore her, and she tries to avoid posts like that. Not wanting to appear to be boring or post anything beyond fun creates a self-induced pressure that participants did not describe in their in-person interactions with others. Online, users can be seen by a wider group of people beyond their close friend or family circle, allowing for an extension of self to be seen by others in a more public domain. The digital environment while providing that opportunity, also allows for a greater sense of pressure to post something that ensures users appear
interesting, accomplished, fun, connected, and engaging to others. These factors of consideration for the participants in this study, are examples of what goes into the creation of strategies for self-portrayal and impact one’s ability to be authentic in online platforms like Facebook.

**Gendered Expectations and Extrinsic Validation**

Participants identified the feeling of pressure to post things that were authentic, but also aligned with how they wanted to be seen by others. Understanding the impact of gender in relationship to extrinsic validation adds another layer of complexity. Participants shared that while what they posted could be important, the quality of the post and how it is perceived is equally important particularly as related to gender stereotypes that were both reflected in the physical (e.g., images) and personal. As an example, Carly in her first interview spoke about when she looks at other people and their social media pictures, she pays attention to what people are doing and how they look, specifically how, “The camera person got it so well,” because when she takes pictures, the camera person does not do the same for her. When I asked Carly if there was pressure for what people are putting online, she said yes. She followed up sharing, “cause right now it’s a trend to be, um, slim, or slim-thick like have curvier bodies.” She felt when posting pictures of oneself, angles and how people present their pictures make a difference, and she was not alone.

Participants in this study reflected about, when they were posting, how the quality of the content would be perceived to others and its gendered relationship to
themselves. Hana shared when asked how being a woman impacts her use of social media,

I think when it comes to certain topics I would be more conscious of them....I just have to make sure that, oh, I’m looking at it as a woman, but then also be impartial so that I’m not like, making biased decisions or saying something that wouldn’t necessarily not be fair, or selfish, so I would say I would just be a little more conscious depending on what it is about and depending on what I have experienced personally when it comes to that.

Other participants like Whitney shared that she reflects on what she posts and how that content could be perceived through gender stereotypes, she reflected that, “I have to be kind of careful how I post it, because sometimes, you can get a lot of shit for being a woman and posting stuff.” She shared she has members of her family who are connected to the police force, and she had fun when they took her to a shooting range. She shared the feedback online that she received from men, was judgement. She continued to share that mental health and counseling is important, and people respond with, “Oh, like, do you post that cause like, you’re a girl, so you have a lot of emotion.” While she works in a counseling setting and wants to advocate for its importance, she feels like people cannot really see what she addresses, because they see her gender first.

Whitney was not the only participant who noted that there is an explicit layer of gender bias that one experiences online. Eliana, when asked how identifying as female impacts her use of social media different than others, she shared she felt that there was an “unspoken thing,” that at the top people were viewed as male, female and then by their sexual orientation summarizing that, “People will take that small part of you into account for everything that you do.” She shared that, “If you’re just like cisgender female, people
are like, okay so we’ll just take it as you’re just female plain and simple, blah-blah-blah, you react this way and this way.” These types of stereotypes or biased perceptions impact the strategy employed by women to post on social media as they know their target audience is not only women, but people of many other identities. They are also aware of the pressures of women feel on social media. Lulu spoke about the pressures felt regarding body image and how people compare themselves to one another. She chooses not to post photos of herself, for example on a beach in her bathing suit because she doesn’t want to contribute to that type of comparison and make people feel bad about their body image. Through listening to the participants, it was clear to me that not only were the women concerned about how they physically looked but felt pressure to also address how others would perceive them beyond any physical nature of their post. At the core, while social media provides a very public forum to be visible, it can be hard for people to be truly seen as a whole person.

Given the participants’ narratives, it is clear that identifying as a woman and using social media comes with an additional lens and plays into what the cisgender women decided to post and where, as they constructed their strategies for self-portrayal. There is pressure to not only relay the content one wishes, but to do so in a way that makes them look interesting or appealing to others and requires them to forecast how others will respond. How people will respond can also be impacted based on social and cultural norms at the time, in this case as related to gendered norms.

In analyzing how participants were identifying and utilizing different strategies for self-portrayal, it became clear that all participants paid attention to how they wanted
to be seen by others and what they believed other people wanted to see. In identity development as students move towards a greater understanding of self, listening, watching, and reflecting with others is a part of that journey. What used to happen in person is now also taking place in multiple online environments. The findings show that students generally wanted to be seen and acknowledged in a positive way while sharing their lived experiences, which takes strategic action. That strategic planning can come with both positive and negative impacts on oneself. In the next theme, I will present the ramifications that participants in this study faced regarding the impact of social media on self.

**Social Media’s Impact on Self**

As the findings highlighted the strategies in place for self-portrayal, they also showcased that the impact of social media on the construction of identity is multi-faceted and has several layers. Indirectly and directly, participants showed intentional strategy in their use of social media in the curation of their digital identity. As an example, Sophia shared, “the online portion of my identity is a little bit more curated than who I am. Like, it’s a portion of my personality, but it is not reflective of everything that is going on.” Participants reflected on their careful use of social media, and considerations for the positive and negative impacts it had on their lives tied not only to social aspects of engagement, but the personal impacts on mental health and overall well-being.

**Impact of Constant Comparison on One’s Identity**

Social media, in an effort to bring people together, also widens their glance into the day-to-day activities of people's lives. Having the ability to see what everyone is
posting can create an environment where it is hard not to compare oneself to others. It became clear that for some, social media is a digital arena for comparison, which impacts identity and mental health. Grace spoke a lot to this point and shared that social media sometimes led to stress and anxiety for her, sharing the example of seeing her peers abroad. As she saw their posts, she began comparing herself to others, and wondering if she would have those same experiences as she began to plan for her time abroad and thinking, “How am I going to make my experience as fun as theirs.” She also shared that when she works in the summer, and while other people say that they are working, she only sees them at the beach, and she questions if she is doing something wrong, which also causes stress. Grace shared that she did not want others to see boring parts of her life. Instagram was a platform where she felt that comparing likes and comments to others and the number of followers was part of her user experience. She shared that social media, “Has the potential to like make you feel bad about yourself for like no reason, just for the sole reason of looking at what other people are doing.” While social media is a tool for connection, it can also enhance feelings of self-doubt and isolation when you are consistently exposed to people having different experiences than you or that you feel not included in some way. In considering the potential negative impacts of social media on identity development and self, comparison and feeling isolated in some way can often be at the root of these concerns. As cisgender women navigate self-authorship in digital spaces, being able to understand personal truth is important, but is challenging when you are consistently exposed to what other people are doing. Grace knew that these connections in her digital spaces had an impact on how she sees herself in comparison to others. The comparison can help strengthen one’s self-authenticity if they will receive the
validation they are search and feel confident in who they are as an individual. However, it can also lead to mental health concerns and have a negative impact when that validation is not received, and comparison to others consistently occurs.

There also appeared at times to be stress in making sure that something to post is worthy enough. Yasmeen shared that, “I have to make sure that it’s, like good enough to post online… I always… compare myself to how people post things…. I know I do these things, but I don’t know, like, exactly why.” Comments like these expose how social media can impact oneself and cause feelings of invalidation when someone compares themselves to others. Feeling pressure to post something that feels relevant not only to oneself and a personal identity, but also relevant to others, creates a new sense of pressure that is not present in in-person exchanges. Not receiving expected responses or reactions can also impact one’s confidence, sense of self, and mental health. The pressure to feel information is post worthy, is indirectly placing a perceived value on the thoughts, experiences, or information shared by someone on social media. The impact on oneself here, is not just posting to share, but having to identify a strategy alignment for the best outcome based on personal expectations which can be exhausting and frustrating if desired results are not received. As participants shared, they have a strategy in place for their platforms, there is a pressure to post and get it right for those target audiences to see participants the way that they want to be seen. Sophia shared that,

There’s more pressure for things to be right. And whatever that right is to you can vary, but like, people will like, I know personally I won’t post a picture of myself that I think is a good picture because its’s just not right. And my boyfriend does not get this.
Sophia brought forward a gendered impact to comparison, when she shared that “I feel like guys have less pressure. Like they, like, they put less pressure on themselves for everything to be just right.”

Most participants were able to identify that if approval was important to them, that there were key stakeholders they turned to. As an example, Whitney shared her close friends and family's approval is always appreciated. Close friend groups were also seen as important. Social media is a medium that has created individual norms and expectations. One of those expectations is receiving or not receiving reactions from others based on content that is shared. These expectations are a part of a formula for what people value. Eliana shared, “I feel like the whole point of posting something, is to, is to give someone something, or is to elicit a reaction or something out of someone.” Sometimes the reactions or lack thereof can have a negative impact as it appears to be tied to the validations that users seek from others. If social media posts are made to elicit a reaction, the response itself validates to the user that what they did was good. If the reaction is not received, then the user ends up worrying that something was not perceived correctly and they either take it down or maybe even readjust their strategy moving forward. The readjustments or validation help the participant or user confirm the path for their digital identity or perhaps make them question whether what they are doing is working.

Participants shared that comparison happens often, Lulu herself thought “a big challenge is people get like comparison hangover” posting “the best version of themselves.” However, people are not just posting content about themselves, when they
do so they are feeding information into algorithms that provide them with information to absorb and then share with others. While students believe they are viewing original content, the content itself is suggesting what participants should see, read, think etc. In turn, social media is taking an invested role in the cultivation of thoughts, opinions, and personal identity which can impact one’s understanding of self and self authorship.

Whitney spoke to algorithms directly sharing, “I think this is like the algorithm Facebook feeds you. Like it can tell I’ve graduated. It keeps saying, I keep getting posts like, stuff you can do as a young adult. And it’s like travel trips and stuff like that.” Through posts or search histories, Whitney is now being fed advertisements or suggestions based on her life experiences. These posts and advertisements are now sending Whitney and other users in similar situations direct but passive messages to what she should be thinking about and consider doing as a recent graduate and young adult. Whitney’s reflection, demonstrates the direct impact social media can play in the identity development of students. Users of social media are being fed and taking in information that used to be done only through in-person networks and physical information sources such as books, newspapers, magazines, etc. Students have a greater capacity to interact with more people online than they do in person, and as such, the way we learn from others has changed. Whitney herself shared that she has friends from the two different school districts she attended at home and has over 1,000 friends which at times can be overwhelming. Eliana also noted that she saw less of the people that she went to school with, and so, “you talk to the people you’re still in contact with and the other people, you would still see them on your timeline and everything, but you wouldn’t necessarily interact with them, like you did back then.” Having this expansive reach to others, can help in feeling validated by
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

seeing similar viewpoints shared by other people, but it also can take away opportunities for growth and stretching understanding of different people’s experiences which is so valuable in in-person environments.

Impact of Online Conflict

Conflict online can be challenging to navigate and often not engaged in due to personal comfort. Rather than talking to people who might be posting content that someone disagrees with, it might just lead to scrolling past the post rather than engaging in conversation. Lulu shared, “I’ve learned that I try like to not get involved too over-involved, in like, for example, conflict. If I don’t think it's worth it, I feel like I’ve been picking my battles in terms of that.” Through listening to the participants, it appeared that people didn’t find value in engaging in conflict online. Hana was asked how she feels when she conflicts with someone online and how she responds. She shared,

I guess lately I just ignore. Or if it's something I don’t know about, I’ll just research it just to know but then most of the time I’d rather ignore because it doesn’t - I feel online it’s a little hard to do a like back and forth because you’re only limited to how many words you can like say at one time, and then for it to not become just lengthy and just like annoying, I’ll just like let it go and just leave it alone.

The difference between conflict online and conflict in person, is it can be harder to not engage or have an authentic response to someone else's positionality on a topic or experience. The conversations that live in conflict are opportunities for growth and an expansion of understanding to assist in creating one’s own authentic self and positionality based on individual values, experiences, and opinions. Not being able to engage in conflict in a healthy and reciprocal way limits identity development, personal growth, and
one’s ability to move towards self-authorship as one identifies their own personality and understanding of truth through lived experiences and interacting with others.

Conflict was one area where participants had different approaches for how they interact both online and in person. Grace shared that when she is in a conflict online, she believes she is more logical because she can reflect, edit, and adjust responses, while in person she described herself as stubborn and has a tough time admitting when she is wrong. Eliana alternatively spoke about conflict, she shared it is “easier to put your thoughts into words that you can type out,” but also reflected that, “there is a lot that can be lost in translation throughout a message, because when you’re reading a message, you only can see it in one tone. You can’t really grasp the emotion behind it.” Participants in these examples, touch upon a level of emotional intelligence and personal awareness in when and how to engage with others and uses relationships as a deciding factor in what personal or digital space they may choose to interact in when conflict is involved. The decision to engage in conversation online may tie into what the individual wants others to see, whether that be their ideology on topic, how they handle a situation, or what they chose to say when sending a message or not replying at all. Often participants talked often about discussing conflict in person with people they felt safe to do so, which does help engaging in civil discourse to support identity development.

Tied into communication, participants noted the ability to have a strategic and intentional response when engaging with others or portraying oneself. One of the benefits that participants shared in communication was their ability to provide thoughtful and intentional messages or posts. Grace called herself a “keyboard warrior,” because she felt
she could be confident in sharing thoughts and messages because she could fact check herself before posting anything. As many participants spoke about preferring to dealing with conflict in person, some identified that it was easier to communicate electronically for this purpose or they could ignore the conflict and just not respond. With the response that is provided intentionally, or the decision not to engage, social media and electronic platforms provide flexibility in how someone wants to respond based on personal preference and style. In this example, Grace wants to be confident that she is approaching any conversation with truth as those are pieces of communication that she values and are a part of how we represent herself.

Social Media Breaking Point

The stress and anxiety in making observations and decisions on social media, for some participants, led to needing to take a break from social media when they felt they were relying on it too much. Whitney shared that she often needed to close her devices and turn them off to just, “Not be in technology.” She shared a story of stepping away from technology for an entire summer and this experience allowed her to reflect on how much better she felt and realized how dependent she had been on technology. She shared, “I felt less stressed, I like, I always had an ache in the back of my neck, like, I still do.” Whitney reflected that when she walks around campus, “No one lives in the moment. They’re all on their phones, texting, scrolling.... you don’t realize how much of your life you’re missing cause you’re always on social media.” Sophia also shared that around graduation time and her friends were posting about the end of the year it was overwhelming. She shared,
People are constantly posting about the jobs they got or grad school entries or how they actually get to graduate at all. And, uh, there’s a lot of engagement, which kind of freaked me out a little bit.... I had to put my phone away a lot cause I was like, this is a lot right now for myself.

She also shared that she has had bouts of social anxiety in the past and she used to have an expectation of how many people would like a post and question what was wrong when that number would not be reached. The reflections that Whitney and Sophia provided illustrate how much of a role personal reflection plays in self authorship and the impact that it can have on oneself. Taking a break from social media does not mean that participants stopped growing and developing as a person, and the acknowledgement and decision to step away when needed, within itself takes self-awareness and understanding of self. When participants make that decision, they are identifying an unhealthy habit or impact on their personal life and wellness. The growth that happens between when they step away for a period and then return, may inform, or alter how they continue to utilize social media in the future, or they could return to the habits that encouraged them to step away. Having these moments of self-actualization and clarity show that identity development is moving in the right direction as individuals can identify an issue and identify a solution or a way to pivot to address the root cause of the challenges they are facing.

**Positive Impact of Social Media on Identity**

In a positive light, some participants shared that social media in some ways can provide feelings of validation and connection. Sophia when asked how she felt when someone interacted with her online, she responded, “It’s a nice way to be validated when
you have social anxiety…. you don’t really have to be like physically present, but you still feel appreciated and heard or acknowledged.” For those who may struggle in large groups or in-person situations, social media can provide a more comfortable way to feel connected to others as we establish or sustain relationships. Engagement like this can be incredibly helpful for people who feel a little safer behind the screen. Being appreciated, acknowledged, or heard through an online platform can build confidence for exchanges in person. Social media can also aid in people feeling more connected with family and friends and feel a greater sense of connection from loved ones afar. Many participants spoke about how they used social media to stay up to date on others, as well as provide updates on themselves when appropriate. These types of exchanges did impact the participants and their sense of connection to others. They also felt moved to reciprocate the validation provided to them through responding to messages or tagging their “friends” when they saw something that reminded them about those individuals or thought they would appreciate. Grace shared, “I usually see things and like will tag people in the comments so that they would see it.” These exchanges impact participants because it only helps them validate what they post, but also validate and strengthen the relationships that they have with others.

Reflections on social media continued to come through personal stories, as participants shared how they felt social media impacted and played a role in their individual lives. Many participants shared that social media was a place where they learned about news and what was going on in the world. Some of the participants used social media to learn more about political issues or movements taking place throughout the study. Lulu shared that she learned more about the Black Lives Matter movement and
has been exposed to more inequalities. As an ally, she wants to fight more for these issues and has been more aware of what is taking place in the world through reading other peoples’ posts. Social media can have an impact on how people learn more about the world around them, and the experiences of others. Even though information is fed by algorithms as previously noted, it can impact users by creating a call to action to be civically engaged contributors both online and in person. In this case, social media helped Lulu identify inequalities in the world, and led her to take action and encouraged her to become more educated and engage in important civic discourse. She was able to identify her own positionality and used social media as a positive influence in her life to engage in action and understand issues and positions outside of her lived experience.

The stories and reflections shared from the participants clearly outline a connection between the expectations participants have from their utilization of social media, and the impact that it can have based on if those expectations are or are not met. As we think about the impact specifically on the identity development of cisgender women, it was interesting to explore the perception of the impact of gender. Grace shared that she believes guys feel that they can post and say what they want, even if it is controversial. However, as a woman, she feels she receives a different reaction and perceives that men argue with her if she says something controversial, which can be intimidating, making her feel more vulnerable. These gendered perceptions impact how cisgender women construct their digital identity for wide audience and how they perceive that they can or should act in a digital space.

**Social Media and the Evolution of Self**
Having used social media for many years often starting in middle school, the participants were able to reflect on and compare how their use of social media has changed over time. For example, Yasmeen shared that when she was twelve, she would post random things, whatever she wanted. Now, in her twenties, she posts what she feels other people are interested in. Having this type of a reaction shows a curated identity and performative behaviors based on the perceived expectations of others, rather than true personal authenticity. She reflected that she posts less but engages with others more on their own platforms which reflects an intentional desire to create a sense of connection with others. Yasmeen shared that she joined Facebook in middle school because her friends were doing the same. She felt a strong need and desire to be online and see what was popular and wanted to express herself. Yasmeen realized that as she grew older, being popular or cool was not as important, and her desire to use Facebook is now driven by the opportunity to see how other people are doing and staying connected as needed.

Carly also talked about the impact that others had on her use of social media and how that changed over time. She shared an example that when she was young, making a blowfish face and posting it was something that everyone did and so she did it too. Today, Carly realizes that she is taking her social media use into her own. She shares what she is doing and does not care as much about the affirmation of others. These stories highlight the growth and development of self among students as they begin to depend less on others and operate with more self-authorship. However, they also identify a shift. While the participants may care less on duplicating what others are doing online to seem relevant or to have a gauge on what is popular like they did in middle school, they are still making strategic decisions on how they want to be perceived by others in constructing their
digital identity. For example, Carly shared, “I don’t really try to change the way that I post based on what people think. It's just like when I post it’s, What will people think?” While not looking for affirmation from others, they are giving thought to how they want to be seen. Grace also shared in an interview that,

The things that I want to share is like you know, the positive things and the, you know, progressive things I like, you know, I’m traveling and seeing the world, and this is why I’m accomplished...accomplishing through doing that, and that’s what I want you to see. Like I don’t want you to see me like being stupid like when I’m at school, I don’t know, going out and stuff like that.

These examples show an evolution in use and thought about how participants want to engage and be seen by others in a more public setting. As they continue to develop so does their digital identity and footprint. The pressure of what to post to feel or be perceived as relevant no longer is impacted by external social pressure to mirror behavior, but rather now, the internal pressure to meet external and personal expectations or representation.

**Posting with the Past and Future Self in Mind**

Throughout the study, when speaking to the participants it was clear that overall, they were very conscious of their social media use. They understood if they were or were not looking for some type of reaction or affirmation from their social media platforms based on what and where they were posting. They also developed maturity in what they decided to share and post. Whitney noted that when she was in high school, she used to post memories that were like, “Going to the mall. Gonna get a smoothie. Text me” and now she questions why she even posted something like that. Participants shared when they first started to use social media that their posts, like Whitney’s, were surface level
and mirrored what others were doing. Today, all participants identified the impact that social media can have both in the short and long term on their lives, as they considered future careers or perceptions of self. Now they think about the implications of who will see their post in the future, they have a wider scope of reach with various target audiences, and have different interests and passions. How the use of social media has evolved for each participant is some ways creates a time capsule to their own growth and digital identity evolution.

Participants shared that the people they are connected to today are not just current connections from their institutions and family members, but peers they knew in middle school when they first created their accounts. Through digital observations I found that participants had anywhere from 280 to 1,404 friends. In total, they had a reach of over 5,000 people. The networks that they cultivated go back to when they first started using social media and include connections they have made along their journey through different life experiences. As the network grows, social media users are cultivating a digital identity that keeps them connected with people that they potentially have not seen or talked to in years, yet are still finding ways to share a part of their life with this extended network through their digital identity. Social media allows users to stay connected to people in a way that likely was not possible before without a great amount of intentionality to stay connected and consistent communication. Today using platforms like Facebook, people can watch their peers grow and observe their accomplishments and life experiences, helping feed a sense of connection. However, this connection can also cause pressure for the user to only share certain parts of their identity that they find would
be relevant to others and represent how they want to be seen by people with whom they have different or distant connections.

Participants shared how the level of strategy they use to navigate the digital world and the construction of their digital identity evolved with maturity over time. Hana also shared that over the years, she continues to share less personal information on social media, due to security concerns and is more conscious on how she shares things knowing how content can be stored without realizing it. Having this type of reaction takes in the mature understanding of the impact of curating a digital identity or footprint and the long-lasting effects that sharing information online can have on oneself. For example, Carly highlighted the fact that she tries to keep her posts more conservative, acknowledging there could be future implications knowing that employers could see her social media profile. She also is very mindful about posting pictures with her hair as she was self-conscious about that for a long time. Carly shared many Black girls were sent home from school or have had a job taken away from them because their hair looked different, or it was expressed a different way from what might be perceived as professional. In Carly’s experience, she not only needs to think about how people would perceive the content of her profile as a woman, but also how she would be perceived as a woman of color. Participants were not only thinking about the impact of how they would be viewed by others in the present, but also in the future as they realize they are cultivating a digital identity, but also a digital footprint that potentially will be around forever. Identifying and acknowledging this impact has implications for how strategies are curated and how individual use of social media evolves over time. While everyone's comfort level in this arena may vary it was clear that participants had an understanding of the evolving use of
social media based on knowing what other people could see or have access to about their personal information, interests, and experiences.

**Shifts in Social Media Use and Understanding**

As participants continued to develop and entered new phases of life similar from middle school throughout college, I saw a shift in use and frequency in their college and post-collegiate experience as well. Participants shared that as they entered the work world or headed home for the summer, priorities and day to day realities shifted, and as a result so did their social media use. Sophia shared that now that she has to go to work regularly, her frequency of use and how she uses social media has changed. Thinking about these transitions can show how social media use logistically can change. Whitney shared that she, “used to post a lot of pictures I feel like, when I was in college. And I, now I’m like, I don’t even have a picture to post cause I’m just working all the time.” As students step away from the college environment, there is a transition or shift from sharing day-to-day activities, to a broader use of social media. It appears through the reflections in this theme that changes in one’s environmental conditions, whether external or personal, impact social media use and the portrayal of a digital identity.

Being able to reflect on relationships and understanding how social media impacts oneself takes a more developed sense of self awareness. The participants also acknowledged that what they view on social media may not be a full representation of a person for the same reasons and strategies they employ in their own use. Participants shared the anxiety of posting photos that make them look good and trying to unpack why they share the things that they do on social media. All of these decisions are strategies to
share pieces of their identity and sense of self with others and help cultivate a picture of how they want to be seen and represented. Carly’s first interview was shortly after New Year's Day and she reflected on how she wanted to make a post because she did not make one for Christmas and while she was thinking about what to write, she saw a note on her timeline about how it had been a challenging year, but she got through it. Carly went back and forth on whether to acknowledge that and write something longer, but at the end of the reflection she decided to just wish everyone a Happy New Year. Carly acknowledged that she spent some time trying to identify if she wanted to acknowledge and share with others the reflection on the past year and then wondered why she would want to put that out there, showing the reflection that goes into what people decide to post what they share with others.

As a theme, evolution of self in the social media space is not only reflective of time, but how social media use has changed alongside the evolution of personal and digital identity development. Social and cultural norms as well as transition in life stages, impact social media use as participants shifted from mirroring what other people were doing in digital spaces, to cultivating content that was personal and tied to their authentic or desired voice. However, while the need to be exactly like everyone else may have diminished, the pressure to still meet varying internal and external expectations was still present. There was also evolution in intention and frequency of social media use based on external factors. Participants can evolve their digital identity alongside their personal identity as social norms, personal interests, and shared experiences shift. However, unlike the representation of our identities in person, it is much easier for friends, acquaintances, or others to see one’s digital identity journey over a longer time. As people felt that they
had less relevant content or less opportunity to engage in social media with their free time, an adjustment in social media use was experienced.

**Social Media, Connectedness, and Representation of Self**

The final theme connects data revealing how participants used social media to portray themselves to help them feel closer to others. Interviews provided the opportunity to hear the narratives of the participants and to learn more about them through their lived experiences and insights. One common narrative across the board was relationships. Participants recounted how they interact with their friends, stay connected with family, or help others feel acknowledged or heard. Social media was also identified as an outlet for quick interjections or comments that could help build or sustain a friendship or connection.

Personal relationships are known to play a key role in identity development. When Sophia was asked how she forms relationships with others, she said, “Shared interests mostly.” Whether in person or online, when people have shared interest in a topic or experience, those shared moments become interwoven into connections. When people put information on their social media platforms whether a picture, thought, political affiliation, or favorite TV show, they are expanding their reach and potentially will identify others or be identified for having those shared interests. Participants in valuing relationships want to post information that identifies with them, while fostering those connections.

**Creating Connectedness**
Social media acted as a bridge to hearing what others were experiencing, sharing personal stories, interests, passions, and values. Even if participants like Sophia did not always respond to every comment or post made by family and friends, she still felt connected and was able to stay up to date on other people in their lives. Sophia shared, “So I think in like the role of family dynamics, it’s kind of, you can keep up without having to intentionally like check in as regularly.” These types of comments were interesting as many participants in the study said that they valued family. She mentioned that her family loves to tag each other in funny posts and wanted pictures to be posted so that everyone can see them. Examples like this show that just through observation, participants felt connected through knowledge of what was happening in the lives of their loved ones, and that feeling was reciprocated. These intersections of approach, use and engagement show that everyone navigates the digital environment in a personal and individual way, in search of connection and representation.

Social media acts as a catalyst to share snapshots of moments with others and provide highlights that would otherwise, not have been widely shared as easily. Whitney received over one hundred comments, mostly from family, when she shared on social media that she accepted her job offer. She understandably was excited to share that information or update with a wide network as she felt proud of that accomplishment. Posting these types of moments or milestones allows for wide distribution of information, which can be easier than having to make personal connections or outreach each time there is important news to share. For family and friends who are both close and far away, it allows for greater connection to one’s day-to-day life and activities in a screened manner. Participants like Yasmeen also have family members across the world and
country, so she appreciates being able to see what they are doing and connecting with them through social media. Social media provides the benefit for global communication and helps reduce financial and access barriers to being connected, while also providing layers of support. Certainly, for families who reside in different countries, social media is a perfect way to feel closer and more tuned in into the lived experiences of loved ones.

The role of family and the authority they hold in the early years of childhood and adulthood are important in the identity development process. Being connected not only in person, but also online can help strengthen that sense of connection, but also make take away the moments of individual exploration that are also a part of the identity development process. Women are relational and the participants in this study noted how they can and have felt support from others both in person and online. Whitney shared, “I love how connected it is and how it makes being closer to my cousins so much easier” identifying the benefits of social media helping her feel connected. However, participants also shared that they strategically did not post certain things in mediums present by family to not stir up conflict or ensure they are presented in a manner that matches the expectations they know family and loved ones have of them. Emily for example shared that, “I think sometimes I do (think about audience when I post) because I consider that I have some adults that follow me in terms of cause they’re family and friends” reflecting that she thinks about would she be embarrassed based on what is or was posted. Being so exposed to others in person and then also online, almost doubles the impact of taking on the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of others, and reduces chance for personal reflection of one’s own positionality and exploration of feelings to space to express oneself authentically.
Many participants talked about how social media helped enforce stronger connections with friends and others whom they interact with online. Most, however, identified that while they might have many friends or followers, it is usually a core group that they interact with on a frequent basis. Eliana attributed this to having stronger in-person relationships with those individuals. Eliana also shared that when she comments on other people’s pages, she likes to keep it simple and not try to dive into a deep conversation with someone like she would in-person. She felt it was more comfortable to get to know someone in person than it would be online. These exchanges strategically and indirectly help reinforce friendships as a way for continued engagement outside of seeing one another in person. While these surface level interactions were more common, participants spoke to a desire to take conversations offline if extended or more meaningful conversation when needed, such as if there was conflict. When asked about conflict, Whitney reflected that it has been a while since she had been in an online conflict but when she would “definitely go back and forth, but also a lot of times I would always do what I do in person and have that one-on-one convo.” There is a level of strategic decision making on when to engage in that dialogue and how they decide to connect further and represent themselves to others both in person and online. Whitney later connected putting comments on walls is “just like putting on a show for the world to see and that’s not who I am.” These reflections show the mindset of participants in the evolution of their use over time as they cultivate and create their digital identity.

It was clear that social media use for all participants also changed over time. A part of being a social platform, it is understandable that the social or engagement portion of social media may have changed as well as a part of that evolution. Sophia for example,
shared that in high school, she made connections with peers online that she knew were in her classes by following them on Instagram, but initially never spoke to them in person. Overtime, through posting and sharing a natural connection through mutual interests, they then began to connect in person. For individuals like Sophia, social media provided a framework to observe personal connections or shared interests with others, which enhanced confidence and provided confirmation that there was enough shared interest to build a connection. While she shared this only happened a few times in her life, having a confirmed sense of common ground in many ways builds starting points for conversation with people and a basic evaluation about the chance for connection before making any outreach. Prior to social media, people had to invest time in getting to know someone before a connection could be established. Today, social media provides an opportunity to begin that process before even connecting in person first. In some ways searching for those shared connections or validations are developmentally tied to seeking support and approval. In her interviews, Sophia addressed that, “approval is nice, but you don’t need everyone’s, and you can’t get everyone’s, you just kinda need your own.” The message shared here was an indicator that Sophia was starting to understand who she was in relation to others as ties to navigating self-authorship were present.

Social media is often used to strengthen relationships through acknowledging others, validation, or sharing thoughts, opinions, or passion areas of interest. However, it can also be used to seek out connection. Whitney shared that she uses social media to try to reinforce recent personal connections such as new colleagues at work as she is, “Trying to find a work friend.” These examples highlight that social media allows individuals to show connections not just through obtaining a certain number of followers.
or friends, but also showcasing or exploring meaning in relationships through quick shares, comments, and touch bases. When one approaches these findings through a sense of awareness of self, a connection can be made that the validation from and exchange with others, can assist in building confidence, connection, and assist in strengthening one’s ability to share pieces of their identity and feel more comfortable engaging these same people in person, as they learn more about each other in a digital space.

**Impact of Social Media Relational Engagement on Self**

Social media, by its name is framed as a social tool and to be social, some level of acknowledgement and exchange seems expected. How this type of communication exchange plays out has an impact on self, if the interactions meet, exceed, or fall below one’s expectations for what they post. Sophia shared that at one point when she posted something she would question why someone did not respond or was almost trying to match a percentage of responses based on previous online posts that she had made. She has done a better job of not approaching posts with that mindset and tries to find the positive spin on any response. Taking the former approach though could have a negative impact on self if expectations were not met. There seems to be a correlation with future online interactions given earlier responses to similar situations. People will post what provides them with the expected outcome that they are looking for. If they see something obtains a positive reaction, they are more likely to post similar content in that one area.

Participants also enjoyed using social media as an opportunity to share stories or experiences with people, whether that was to vent that they experienced a certain hardship or that they were experiencing something exciting. Sophia explained that she
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

loves to share her problems with other people even if she is, “minorly inconvenienced” but also wants to be humble when good things happen as well. She reflected that not only can it provide validation of a problem but allows for venting without going into an intentional conversation with someone. Having a space to air thoughts, experiences, or funny stories with a large audience, has a way of connecting with people on a broader scale in a shorter time. These types of posts tied into her personality as she shared,

I love telling people about my problems ... I like to be bothered, but, if I tweet about something, like I kind of make it funny because I’m like, Oh, I don’t wanna seem like super negative, but I still wanna complain about this thing that happened.”

The comment here shares that while Sophia has a desire to vent and share information with others, she is still concerned about how that message impacts her representation of self in wanting to appear funny and not so much as someone who was negative. She was also likely looking for some form of validation from others, either confirming her feelings of frustration or the sense of humor she brought to the story. These sometimes-small decisions or shared narratives have a significant impact on how people are perceived and help provide direction to others on how people want to be viewed.

Whether it is sharing problems, passions, experiences, thoughts, pictures, or experiences, social media allows participants to share distinct parts of their identity with others. Some participants were foodies and loved sharing recipes, while others liked to travel and shared photos and accounts of their recent adventures. These are the types of posts that others will view and potentially feel a sense of connection to, therefore, potentially having a positive impact on their relationship with the user due to an increased
sense of connection. A greater sense of authenticity seemed to emerge when posts were tied to those areas through my digital observations. As an example, Carly was deeply passionate about looking into the public health care system and implementing ways that it could address disparities and inequalities within marginalized communities. Through digital observations, it was clear that this was an area of passion for Carly as social justice-related posts were one of the top three types of posts she made over the study. In speaking with Carly and observing her social media posts, there was authenticity and alignment between what Carly shared that she valued, and what she posted online. Carly still posted humorous or social posts like videos or selfies of her having fun, in fact many of her posts were light-hearted with positive responses or exchanges with others. I saw her self-authenticity come to life when I saw her share posts tied to her personal passions, because I knew that was a true area of interest based on my conversations and relationship with her offline. Grace is an avid sports fan, specifically the Bruins. She shared that she is outgoing and would initiate a relationship with people on social media who could relate with this passion. She would like people’s posts, share them, and even comment on them to get into a conversation about it, but that that type of behavior was only unique to Facebook. While she is more likely to engage with people this way via Twitter, Facebook has given her the avenue to connect and bond with people who have a similar interest. These types of interactions help her engage in conversation with people she has not met before and make those new connections.

Grace and Carly both shared how their digital identities align with their personal interests and passions. They both noted how they wanted to raise awareness of areas that mattered to them and receive validation in those areas too. Participants wanted to feel a
larger net of support and to engage people in conversations that matter to them. When communicating by text, articles, memes, photos, or other forms of communication, a desire to represent oneself and connect with others was present.

Social media, as I have identified, can help people feel connected to one another and represent themselves. While Facebook as a platform is not anonymous, not all social media platforms are tied to an individual publicly. As I explored the impact of digital identity and the strategy implored by participants when they know there were ramifications both short term and long term in what they posted, I wanted to inquire if participants felt if those same ramifications came forward if they were to use an anonymous platform, and the results were mixed.

In some ways, participants felt restricted in using social media and could not or did not want to be transparent due to social media not being anonymous. Grace felt that if her account were anonymous, she would be even more free with her opinions, conversing with people, and even disagreeing with others. Other participants felt that if social media were anonymous, they would be more reserved as they would not feel connected to it or see themselves represented. Eliana shared that she would be more subtle in her approach and would have less self-representation online if it were anonymous. Lulu shared that she would not put as much content up just because she would feel less removed from it and “wouldn’t be portraying my identity as much.” These varying opinions show various levels of dependency on, and alignment of social media tied to self-authorship and their identity development journey. Users like Lulu and Eliana would not take the time to share personal information or construct a digital identity as carefully because it would not be
tied to the relationships that they have with normally in the digital environment. While they could still be authentic and would not need to make any changes in their use, the purpose of being personally connected is not present. Others however like Grace might be even more authentic because the pressure to meet expectations of others would not be present and might share without hesitation things, thoughts, or experiences, that more accurately represent her different identities, thoughts, and experiences. These different approaches are tied to the importance of feeling connected with others and personal relationships.

**Gendered Nature of Relationships Online**

Gender also provides a layer of complex thinking as digital waters are navigated by the participants. Carly shared that for her identifying as a woman, impacts social media use and noted that how you take pictures or what you share, may be seen as “too explicit.” She went on to share that,

> I feel confident in my body enough to post it on social media so people can see. People don’t see that, but they see sexualizing and all these other things. …. I have large breasts, so I don’t post pictures with like the necks and stuff because don’t want that type of attention... I feel like for guys, they can post whatever they want, and it would be like, this is cool guy.

Whitney also reflected that her, “gender is, does play a bigger part than I would like it to a lot.” She believes that people see gender first when something is posted online, sharing a recent example where she posted a picture of her graduation and an announcement of her new job. She noticed that many people were saying congratulations, but many people were just paying physical compliments such as so pretty or so gorgeous. She noted that when her partner posted about his internship, she read the responses, and everyone noted
how determined and hard working he was, and the one physical comment was from his
grandmother who called him handsome. When women are thinking about their sense of
self and they are sharing important moments in their life that may be milestones,
achievements, or recognition for the work that they do and only receive recognition for
their physical appearance, that sends a strong message about what is valued externally.
For users looking for validation in a digital space, this type of reaction may begin to alter
what they decide to post or think about how they present themselves online, especially if
they are not getting the connection that they are searching for life with others. If
cisgender women continue to share high achieving milestones and are only reacted to
with comments about their looks, or women are too afraid to share pictures of their
physical self because of the ways others may respond, these are strong signals that impact
how someone will represent themselves in a digital space, impacting their identity online
as well as how they likely see themselves behind the screen as well.

These types of interactions and sense for how one will be perceived, certainly
play a role in the reflection taken in what and how to share information with others
through digital platforms and how women share who they are with others. Women and
men develop relationships differently, and social media as we discovered, can build or
detract personal confidence, at times helping be the propeller to personal connections.
How women feel a sense of belonging and connected is gendered and the participants in
this study confirmed that social media helped them feel more connected to others and
helped them feel supported and validated. However, there were strategies and thoughts
put into place regarding how they want to and continue to represent themselves in a
digital space. Social media was found to provide a strategic and intentional environment
to introduce ones’ identities and who they are as individuals in a safe space to help build, support, and sustain different relationships over time.

**COVID-19 Disruption**

This dissertation study’s data collection took place over a year and a half. In March of 2020, COVID-19 impacted the world broadly, and U.S. higher education specifically in an unimaginable way. A little more than half of the participants finished the research study prior to COVID; however, the other half were significantly impacted during the study. It is important to address the impact that COVID had both in my inquiry process as well as in the lived experiences of some participants throughout the study. Not directly addressing COVID would minimize the impact that it had on the lives of participants in this study.

The personal, social, emotional, and mental impact that the pandemic had and continues to have on individuals was reflected in my data. Feelings of isolation certainly played a role in the frequency of social media use and the more desired sense of connection to others that participants felt. Interviews highlighted how students during the pandemic made shifts in their lives both personally and academically. They utilized social media differently and often more frequently to connect with people when the world shut down and in-person socialization decreased. Social media and technology filled a need to stay connected and fight isolation. Eliana shared, “I find myself going to social media to try to get, to try to sort of put myself in the outside world without actually, like, going outside.” Lulu when asked how the COVID-19 experience impacted her use of social media, responded, “I feel like it has increased just because like now I have more
downtime. So if I find I’m not really doing anything, I’ll just kind of look on social media and just see what, you know, what's been posted." Comments like this show how the pandemic changed how people were able to physically engage with the world and people around them, and often felt restrained to the physical environment of their home. As college students would have been normally engaging and expanding their lens of understanding through interactions with others on campus, social media seemed to be one of the only platforms that allowed for this beyond interactions with direct family during the height of COVID-19.

Social media provided a Band-Aid to fill human interaction voids and COVID-19 impacted the frequency of use. Eliana noted,

I’ve noticed that I’m replying more often to posts. So when, I see something I like instead of just resharing it, I also share a comment too.... But now that this is happening, I’m sort of, sort of in a way reaching out to other people. But I'm still, like, keeping, sort of keeping to myself.

Hana also noted that that she was using social media more frequently because there was nothing to do outside, everything is connected to or on the phone. The theme of connectedness was evident from talking about the impacts of COVID-19 on social media use. Participants shared that using social media came from a desire to feel connected to others and provided an escape from feeling bored for filling time that they would have used differently if operating in pre-pandemic days. Reflections like these provided narratives throughout this qualitative work surrounding how the pandemic shifted in the frequency and way students engaged with social media. Prior to COVID-19, strong
themes of connection were already present and as such, while the pandemic amplified the intensity of use, it ultimately did not change or negate the themes.

Given the impact of COVID-19 and social media on cisgendered women, it is important to account for how they formed and sustained relationships, learned, and developed their identity during these formative years in college while in a pandemic. The traditional college experience was flipped upside down as classes moved online, students moved home, and people needed to readjust in how they moved through their day-to-day activities. The impacts of COVID-19, while not as direct as during the height of the pandemic, still play a role in the development and experiences of students of all ages today.

Conclusion

The four centralized themes within the findings, are not mutually exclusive, and share commonalities in how participants utilized social media to portray who they are, how they connect with others, and how social media use can change overtime based on personal development and lived experiences.

In strategies for self-portrayal, participants shared both openly and implicitly that they make strategic decisions in what and where they post based on intended audience. The participants thought about not only what they would post, but the perception that others would have of them by sharing videos, texts, thoughts, photos, etc. They also contemplated how their posts may or may not impact their relationships and even their future careers understanding their digital footprint reaches a wider audience.
All participants could identify both positive and negative ways that social media impacts them as individuals. Some participants shared that at times, social media could be a great outlet to feel validated, heard, and acknowledged. Others shared that it could lead to stress and anxiety, and at times they needed to step away. As aforementioned, that participants strategically decide what to post based on target audience, understanding and acknowledging their gender also plays a role in these decisions, as some shared stories about being perceived as emotional or considering how their posts compare to others prior to posting. These narratives demonstrate that there is a direct and indirect impact of social media use on the participants.

The use of social media evolved over time for the participants as many started using the online tool as early as middle school. They developmentally transitioned from mirroring actions of friends, to creating and sharing more individualized content. Many participants spoke about how social media assisted them in sustaining relationships and evolving those relationships over time, while others highlighted social media’s ability to screen others for potential personal connections.

Finally, I believe that social media serves as a medium to help people feel connected to one another, but also is a strategic tool in representing oneself and communicating with others. Participants shared that social media was a great outlet to connect with others to both build and sustain relationships. While most use the tool to foster current relationships that they have in person, some felt comfortable with connecting with people they did not know but had a shared interest or passion with, such as a sports team or a political or social justice-focused stance. Many participants shared
that social media helped them feel connected to others, with having friends on Facebook that far surpassed what they might identify as their immediate circle. While they overall engaged online in or interacted directly with a select or small group of people, they still valued the chance to know what was taking place in the lives of their other acquaintances or family members. Social media serves as a tool to help people feel connected and share distinct parts of their identity in an intentional way.
This dissertation study focused on answering the questions, how do cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self authorship? How do cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces? The findings from this study were developed using generic qualitative research methods and–more specifically–through interviews, coding, memo writing, and digital observations. Eight participants were included in this study from several institutions within the Northeast and were recruited via email through a shared professional network following IRB approval from each institution. These students not only participated in at least two interviews (with the majority participating in three interviews) but also allowed me to follow them on Facebook for four months during their enrollment in the study. The interviews, as well as observing the participants on Facebook, allowed me to better understand each participant and their personal experience with social media. I was able to observe congruency between their personal and digital identity, as well as strategic decisions to share only certain parts of these identities with others. The findings of this study along with existing student identity development theories, can assist in filling gaps around understanding the current student experience impacted by digital spaces. The study brings to the forefront the necessity to include and understand the impacts of technology and digital platforms on student identity development and learning both inside and outside the higher education environment. The implications for this study have
a direct connection with the work of practitioners and faculty within the college setting, as well as for future research.

As I worked to understand how cisgender women in college employ strategies for social media use and their perceptions of gender to construct their digital identity, I was able to identify four centralized themes (strategies for self-portrayal, social media’s impact on self, evolution of self, and connectedness and representation of self) that comprise the findings of this study. While there was often overlap between these themes, there were distinct ways in that they showed how cisgender women in college employ strategies for social media use, and how their perception of gender aids in the construction of their digital identity. In this chapter, I will provide a brief review of the central themes and findings, which will be followed by a discussion about how the findings themselves extend the current understanding of the literature, respond to the research questions at hand, and impact areas for future research. I will also address limitations and considerations within the context of this study and share the direct implications that these findings have within the higher education sector, specifically the work of student affairs practitioners.

**Overview of the Key Findings**

The findings in this study demonstrate that social media does impact how users, specifically cisgender women, view themselves in relationship to others and that their use over time evolves and shifts based on external and internal motivations and expectations. These transitions and shifts take place parallel to the development of their cognitive, emotional, and social identities. As such, the implications and impact of social media and
digital spaces is an area that should be considered when addressing research and current practice within the higher education environment.

The cisgender women in this study used social media to represent who they are by sharing their interests, relationship statuses, passions, articles, pictures, personal information, and exchanges with others. They identified strategic uses of how to navigate these pieces of their identities in an online space based on the relationships that they had with other users within those platforms—specifically family, friends, and colleagues. Strategies for self-portrayal was a central theme in identifying how cisgender women navigated digital spaces to formulate and maintain their digital identity, as well as how they integrated the gendered nature of their strategies. I found that participants created strategies based on target audience, personal expectations, multiple identities via different platforms, and based on comparisons to other connections on digital platforms. Participants made strategic decisions to make, foster, and strengthen connections with others based on the perception of how and what they shared digitally with a set level of expectations for how and when they would engage with others.

I explored the impact that social media had on the participants, finding that the digital environment impacted the cisgender women in this study in both positive and negative ways. As I listened to participants, I found that there were layers of identities across the digital spaces they had a presence in using. Each platform held a different target audience that implored users to utilize different strategies for how and what information would be shared with followers based on their relationships within those digital spaces. While this employs strategy, it also shows that social media does have an
impact on how a user can seek out or receive validation from others. Seeking out or expecting validation directly from or through comparison with others could bring forward mental health concerns and feelings of anxiety and isolation among participants. Participants spoke often of needing to step away or take a break from social media as they navigated the negative aspects of use with the positive ones, such as staying connected, fostering personal relationships, and learning about the world around them.

Participants also reflected on how their social media use has evolved over time, often in alignment with their own personal development. As they got older, strategies for use no longer centered on duplicating the social norms around them, but rather, posting information that they felt was representative of how they wanted to be viewed and aligned with their interests and passions. Participants changed from seeking approval in mirroring others online, and turned to seeking validation, which is a shift in strategy or expectations for how one would use or engage with social media to represent oneself.

They discussed the connection that social media provided them in feeling like they were better informed in what was happening within their network and were able to share with others widely and instantly what they felt others would be interested in or wanted to share. These elements in the findings identified that the participants used social media to not only share who they were but did so with a desire to connect and engage with others. That desire and strategic decision making in when and where to post was also driven by internal and external expectations based on the relationships that they had with people within their network. Showing this strategic decision making brought forward the finding that students in college are not navigating only their own
development as a person, but now are also navigating the creation and cultivation of
digital identities as well. As students begin to understand who they are in relation to
others, they move towards self-authorship and experience more alignment in both their
personal and digital identities.

Participants in this study also highlighted the gendered lens in which they
navigate social media. They shared that what they post and how they are viewed are
impacted based on their gender. Many shared that they felt there was a disconnect or
inequity in how their successes were acknowledged compared to those of their male
counterparts. Some shared that they are more sensitive on what they post and what people
can see based on physical or social expectations others may have viewing women in a
more physical or objectified manner. Participants also discussed what they posted online
and how others viewed them was based on their gender, such as the negative responses to
posting about going shooting, or about sports—things that are traditionally labeled as a
masculine activity. While the experiences and narratives of each of the participants were
different, the theme of gender and how they view their use of social media impacted by
gender was brought to light.

The research conducted through this dissertation does assist in furthering the
literature and highlights important considerations for additional and future research. The
study was able to address how cisgender women use social media to construct their
digital identities through strategic decision making and a personal understanding of the
impact of what and where they post. These impacts are tied to the internal and external
motivators and expectations revolving around social media and self-presentation. The
study also brought to light how they understand these factors impact others in their relationship to themselves, which impacts their construction of their digital identities. In understanding who they are in relationship to others, they are moving towards self-authorship.

Discussion

Social media within this study followed boyd and Ellison’s (2007) definition as a social networking site that allows users to create a public or selective profile within a system, identify people to which they have a connection and then navigate those relationships and exchanges with others. As I listened to the participants, I began to understand the strategies that they employed in their utilization of social media to represent themselves to others and construct their own digital identity, which is constantly changing and evolving (Stoller, 2013). I realized that while these participants had been utilizing the same tools since middle school, now in college, they adapted their use based on external factors and internal pressures set through their lived experiences and pursuit of capital as they create and sustain relationships (Yang & Brown, 2013). I was also able to identify the gendered nature of their social media. As they vocalized how they adjust what they share knowing that gender is a lens that others will use for comparison or judgment, they also identified the value that social media provides in helping them feel connected to others. These observations support research that has shown that comparison to others can have negative impacts on how one views themselves, such as body image (Fardouly et al, 2017; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Within this discussion, I will share not only how the
findings in this dissertation extend the current research by highlighting the intersection of identity development by ways of meaning making, but also its connection to social media as a way of self-representation and understanding. The discussion will additionally help in strengthening the understanding of social media’s impact on the construction of digital identities and highlight the impact that these findings can have on practitioners and future research.

Identity development is a process that students traverse over time to discover who they are in relationship to others. Students do this in a number of ways through intellectual, social, and emotional interactions with others at different points in their lives as they settle into their own values, positionality, and identity. It is within those interactions that they begin to make meaning and create personal truth and knowledge. The following study not only takes this into account but brings to light the role that social media plays in those intellectual, social, and emotional interactions, often intensifying and multiplying those interactions over time. The findings of this research extend the literature and begin to understand the intersection and impact of life both behind and outside the digital landscape.

As the study took place over an extended period, and during a pandemic, the research approach and data required flexibility and innovation supported by generic qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014). Focused on exploring how Facebook impacts the identity development of cisgender women and their journey towards self-authorship, listening to narratives, observing behavior online, and triangulating information during the process, brought forward themes that address gaps in the literature to date. The
 CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

following sections will bring forward the central discussions that assist in sharing how these findings, responding to the research questions, help move our understanding forward in these areas as well as highlight questions that could be addressed in future research.

Intersection of Social Media Use and Identity Development

In response to the first research question (how do cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self authorship?), as the research study unfolded it appeared that social media use, digital identity construction, and the self authorship process were all intertwined. In addressing this question, there were three main takeaways: (a) the power of relationships, (b) the strategic and curated content that was created by the participations and driven by their relationships and motivations in these online spaces, and (c) the importance of a sense of belonging.

Power of Relationships

The first central finding connecting digital identity to self authorship was confirmation that relationships continue to be crucially important in the identity development process as evident in the strategic decisions participants made to manage expectations and create digital identities that aligned with oneself while also aware of the impact that individual posts would have on others. The relationships were critical elements that drove strategic decisions, motivations, and ultimate use of social media in constructing various digital identities for participants. While digital identities consistently change (Stoller, 2012), researchers have begun to identify the need to explore how these evolving identities online influence in-person relationships (Brown, 2016). Many
participants in this study shared that they curated their content or make strategic decisions on what and when to post based on who their target audience was on each platform, while also identifying the long term implications on their personal and professional self as they navigate creating a digital footprint. As I listened to participants, I found that they were navigating digital spaces and developing multi-layered digital identities intentionally, to meet the expectations of people connected with them in those specific spaces. The motivations and strategic decisions at their core were tied to relationships, and how they saw themselves in relationship to others, which also intersects with self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

Baxter Magolda (1992) introduced self-authorship as a journey from absolute learning to contextual knowledge as students learn about who they are in relation to others. As students begin in absolute knowing, parents and authorities usually have the most power (Baxter Magolda, 1992). It was evident that students’ parents and other influential individuals in their lives can still hold similar power in online spaces, even when users are exposed to other ideas and experiences in college. As an example, many participants in the study shared that they would not post certain content on Facebook or other platforms because of the impact it may have on how they are viewed by their loved ones, including parents, grandparents, and other family members. I found in this study that these familial connections yield great power in the strategic decision making, digital identity creation, and judgements students make in different digital spaces.

As people develop individually, they turn to authorities for information and guidance first and often seek their approval before being exposed to different ideologies,
eventually moving towards self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Thus, developmentally, cisgender women and college students in general should begin to rely less on parental or guardian authorities in their life to understand their individual opinions, feelings, and values as they move towards self-authorship. In this study, most all participants talked about the connection and relationships that they had with family in these online spaces and would make strategic decision on what to post based on those relationships and familial expectations. The data and information that I observed online shared that the digital landscape and connection with family is tied to the student’s path towards self-authorship. While it may not have halted their development, it may have slowed it down as participants navigate and share information differently in each medium based on the expectations and relationships in those spaces. These relationships came forward as central motivators in utilizing social media as a medium to portray oneself in a way that feels authentic, but also meets the external expectations of others in digital spaces.

There is a clear connection between the strategy participants deploy with identifying what type of information will be shared and where, because they value how others perceive them and their relationships. Using self-authorship as the framework, the data demonstrates that most of the participants in this study had made the shift to the independent knowing stage, as they spoke to being open to new ideas and acknowledging that people can believe different things and that it is okay (Baxter Magolda, 1992). In my review, to move towards self-discovery and finding individual voices among others (Baxter Magolda, 1992) is a journey participants continued to be on as they all still discussed the curation of a digital identity tied to the people who would see their posts.
While some were more concerned than others, this process whether directly or indirectly, shows that there is still a hesitation to be fully authentic in all areas of identities and platforms. Most hesitation was tied to family relationships and professional implications, which might lead to future research surrounding the impact social media has on the trajectory of the identity development process. My findings about the impact led me to believe that it can slow down the process, but focusing on this in a longitudinal study would be helpful to confirm or identify new steps or processes in the development process.

It was evident, though, that in digital spaces not only do parents and loved ones hold power, but so do peer networks. The transfer of power extends from the parents to the peer network in self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992). In online spaces within this study, the data showed that parents and authorities still had a tie to participants due to the consistent technological connection, but the expectations of those loved ones likely have not drastically changed based on the family values and expectations of those particular units. The power of relationships online for peer networks, however, I believe evolve as the voice of these peers become more influential throughout the self-authorship process (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Participants also frequently shared how often they used social media to connect and engage with their friends and social networks. Having these connections online and the constant ability to be connected, amplify the importance of these relationships as participants seek connection and validation. Participants discussed their evolution of social media use from simply following social norms as early as middle school and positing similar things as peers, to moving across the developmental spectrum considering how what they post reflected on them personally and the impact those posts
have on their relationships with others beyond the screen. In some ways, social media has even impacted how one can or does understand the definition of friendship (Nie, 2001; Twenge, 2017). For example, friends are not connecting only in school or at social engagements, but they are using digital platforms to constantly connect with others and sustain relationships. Participants in this study shared that they engage with friends and peers daily, they look to these sources for updates or ongoings in the lives or groups of those around them and respond based on motivations and relationships in those spaces which help them feel connected.

I identified through the first interview with the participants in this study that they valued several things, and many were external facing such as family, friends, relationships and how they were perceived. Students today use digital resources to connect and communicate daily (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008), utilizing their cell phone to remain tied to people within their personal network which has been developed overtime (Alquist, 2017). Magolda (1992) defined the receiving pattern as a process of taking information in and interacting with others to process information. This stage translated into online space as participants often discussed in interviews and displayed through online observations how they responded and sometimes pivoted based on the reactions of those they interacted with online. As Magolda (1992) discussed the transition to transitional knowing where peers play a key role, we know these relationships that extend into the digital world are important. As I observed the participants discuss their utilization of social media, their strategy, and their engagement, it became clear that they were not only developing their personal identity but managing the additional complexity of developing their digital identities and connections in each digital space as well.
Participants shared that social media helped reduced the need to connect via phone call, text, or in person to stay up to date in the life happenings of those around them, ultimately allowing them to feel connected without having to do as much work and maximize the information that they could take in simultaneously. As I participated in interviews and digital observations, I was able to listen and observe about the importance and sense of connection between participants and their “friends” or followers, as well as the importance that physical relationships played in their lives. These observations led to central findings in the study around not only the importance or relationships, but the role they play in the strategic decision making in how digital identities are cultivated. I was also able to take these observations and situate the roles and importance or relationships within the self-authorship model to help expand the understanding of social media use impacts this process. I found participants navigating towards independent thinking as they began to use social media to learn information or engage with peers in different topics, realizing that there are no absolute truths, but still valuing the relationships and seeking validation on some level (Baxter Magolda, 1992). A few participants also showed signs of contextual knowing as it was evident that they were more confident in positing opinions and thoughts without as much concern for how others might react (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Brown (2016) also identified the connection between digital spaces, self-authorship, and the impacts on self, such as sense of self-worth and independence.

This study built off the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) and Brown (2016) in identifying self-authorship as a relevant framework to explore the college student experience, but also strengthens my assertion that digital identities and spaces need to be considered when applying foundational student development theories to practice. The findings in this
study were able to extend the literature in focusing specifically on self-authorship and the use of one social media platform and focusing on the experience of cisgender women. Taking this narrow approach to focus on a particular identity allowed me to explore the importance and intersection of social media use, gender, and identity development. Specifically, I was able to articulate that cisgender women employ strategies for self-portrayal in digital spaces and identify how it impacts their sense of self. The findings also pointed to an evolution of social media use alongside identity development and the importance or relationships and balancing self-representation, while seeking a sense of connection among personal networks.

While practitioners and researchers can apply identity development theories to the lived experiences of students today, the findings in this study are able to extend the literature as they consider the connection and power that authorities and relationships can still have in students’ lives even when operating in digital spaces. Self-authorship for a framework was a natural tie to understanding more deeply the impact and importance of relationships online as students developed digital identities. How those relationships are strengthened, and connections are made were tied to the strategy employed by participants.

**Strategic and Curated Content**

Participants in this study showed strategic decision-making processes in what, where, and when they decided to post and share content. These decisions were led by personal and extrinsic values, relationships, and perceived impact on self. For example, strategic decision making is something that I observed evolving with the maturation of relationships tied to sense of self in comparison to others. Many participants appeared to
be moving towards contextual knowing, as they spoke to validating their own thoughts and opinions in relationship to others (Baxter Magolda, 1992). The ability to do this, and post more authentically in social media spaces impacts their strategic decisions in what, where, and when to post tied to the evolution of their online brand. Brown (2016a) specifically shared that:

A student’s ability to engage in reputation management may be influenced by his or her developmental level (p. 63).

Similarly, within the context of this study, participants reflected on a change in their use of social media over an extended period of time and, in my digital observations, showed a shift in mirroring posts of others in middle school to more individually centric posts tied to personal interests, values, or connections with others. While the digital framework has not changed overall in the sense of providing online connection, the way in which users navigate it does based on their developmental progress.

Within the framework of this dissertation, strategic decision making ultimately emerged through personal branding and digital reputation (Brown, 2016a; Junco, 2014; Qualman et al., 2015). I saw this when participants shared that they post things to appear funny because they do not want to seem negative, or they kept posts neutral online and did not want to post anything controversial as they reflected it was tied to approval from others. Comments like these highlighted for me as a researcher, that social media was tied to their identity development process as students expressed who they were strategically, while considering their varying relationships with others. Brown (2016a) shared that digital identities consistently change as they are created with not only self in mind, but with acknowledgement that others are engaging with and perceiving the content of the
identities shown (Brown, 2016b, Martinez Aleman et al., 2009). This level of engagement and concern for others perception is tied to identity development. In describing digital reputation Brown (2016a) found that:

actively engaging in this curation may push developmental boundaries, but digital identity themselves are not development processes. (p. 63).

Digital identity is not a process of development, but it does impact the identity development pathway and is something that is consistently changing (Stoller, 2013). As students self-authored and managed their reputation through digital platforms based on the relationships in this study, participants engaged in the exploration of self authorship and digitized development. Coined by Brown (2016a), digitalized development begins to include the digital landscape as a part of student learning and growth and acknowledges behaviors that exist different from the in-person world and exchanges. My findings strengthen this argument, as I found that how students used social media developed and evolved overtime based on their relationships and personal growth. When interacting in person, there is an authenticity that cannot be replicated or refined. An example of this is when there is interpersonal conflict. In person, participants reflected that there is no opportunity to hide a physical reaction, nor is there the ability to provide a thoughtful, edited response to send when one is ready. However, when it pertains to branding, students often reflected on what they published, including photos, who would see them, and how those posts portrayed them online. Directly or indirectly, my study participants began to unpack or understand who they were as a person and how they were being perceived in broader online spaces. Brown’s (2016a) work extended the literature in affording the impact of digital landscapes on identity development processes in young
adults, like self-authorship. However, the findings in this study continue the work of Brown (2016a), in considering the strategic decisions tied to relationships in the self-authoring process.

My dissertation acknowledges the students have been surrounded by technology at an early age (Brown, 2016a; Pensky, 2001) and highlights that students have multiple digital identities, which they have cultivated over time. They are simultaneously cultivating different profiles and strategies on what and when to post based on the relationships that they have in these digital spaces and wanting to insert influence on how people perceive their image (Ahlquist, 2017; Junco, 2014). However, the strategies in employing this influence can be connected to their identity development journey (Brown, 2016a). These strategies are tied to relationships, but also desired responses or outcomes of information shared. The findings of this study point to the idea that digital identities encapsulate not only their gender, but other identities as well. Participants showcased and employed strategic decision making tied to sharing these identities for each audience online.

Some of these decisions in content shared were directly or indirectly tied to building social capital and networks during their college experience (Gross & Meriwether, 2016). During the interviews with participants, it was shared that people post and made decisions on what to share based on the impact of how others might perceive them. These strategic decisions are tied to their social media use and online spaces to expand their social capital as they extend their networks (Gross & Meriwether, 2016). The findings shared a perception among participants that what and where they post have implications on their lives in numerous ways including the ability to obtain a job or
further a career based off what could be searched or seen in online platforms. Participants also shared that what they post could impact how others perceive them, which impacts their networks on Facebook, and the social capital they are able to obtain through their networks. In the obtainment of social capital, participants are garnering a greater sense of connection to others and through social media are helping create the narrative in how others are perceiving their lived experiences. The desire to be positive and not overly negative was highlighted a few times as an example, which was tied to Alquist’s (2017) work on the internal process users create for themselves regarding decisions on what to post. Social media allows users, to make strategic decisions to control the narrative in how they will be perceived by others, which impacts capital. However, social media also provides the freedom for users to filter content based on platform and target audience, which provides more flexibility in the obtainment of social capital, based on the expectations and impacts of those particular spaces. These decisions can be calculated risks that the participants decide to make and accept the impact it can have on the perception of their digital identities.

**Sense of Self and Belonging**

Participants in this study while having similar themes of social media use, had different lived experiences and were in different stages within the self-authorship framework. In this study, participants shared very specific and personal experiences and perspectives on sense of belonging and connection to others as they reflected on their own social media use. The strategy employed in creating and cultivating multiple
identities online is driven by the central focus in sustaining a sense of belonging. Participants spoke of using Facebook because it was what a social group or organization that they were a part of used to stay connected and provide updates, others shared that social media was a way to feel connected to friends and family who were far away, while others navigated social media to learn information and feel connected to news and happenings locally, globally, and in the lives of others. While social media is an established medium that helps others feel connected and enforces connections through shared mutual interests, these common experiences are what helps bond people together, provides validation of individual experiences, and helps build confidence and support for people as they navigate life outside of the digital screen (Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Droulin et al., 2018). As such, the support provided by social media has a direct connection to the relationships participants and users have both on and offline.

The study helps extend the literature, by considering not only how participants felt connected to others online but also their concerns about how they would be perceived based on the content they shared and the impact of relationships in online spaces. Relationships and their importance in establishing a sense of belonging and sense of self are a central finding in this study. These relationships on Facebook impacted not only how participants felt connected to those around them, but also how they navigated their strategic decisions on what content to share, based out of concern tied to how they would be perceived by others. Baxter Magolda (1992) spoke to the importance of life outside of the classroom, with relationships having both positive and negative impacts. During the participant interviews, it became clear that the success of their relationships was tied to how students saw themselves in relationship to others, which is a direct tie to the self-
authorship process (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Whether intentional or not, the decisions placed into creating profiles and what to share online play a role in looking for approval or acknowledgement from others through an intentional and strategic lens. These decisions were revealed not only in how participants view themselves, but how they want others to view them. Park and Lee (2014) found that use of Facebook was tied to motivations around entertainment, relationships, and communicating thoughts and experiences, which assists in managing the perception of others. The process of seeking approval has a direct impact on self, how individuals see themselves individually and through the eyes of others, and their sense of belonging.

Social media not only provides a place to share thoughts, feelings, or experiences, but also a structure and place to be recognized for them (Whittaker & Gillespie, 2013). The recognition of one’s thoughts and the ability to share pieces of oneself is what helps cultivate a sense of belonging and connection. The relationships between recognition and sense of self as a part of this study’s findings, highlighted both positive impacts on self-esteem, as well as areas of concern that negatively impacted participants. One of these areas of concern is that of comparison, which can have negative impacts on different areas in ones’ life like body image (Fardouly et al, 2017; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) or self-esteem (Cingel et al., 2022).

Today, with the constant connection of digital technology at the swipe of the button, my data demonstrates consistent comparison online is connected to the cultivation of true sense of self. While the desire for acknowledgement or validation is present, the type of validation or connection participants looked for in this study, was tied to their
individual identities and external expectations. Brown (2016) found in their work that validation, self-worth, and independence were tied to users’ self-authorship and use of digital spaces. I observed, that the biggest expectation appeared to be fostering relationships that meant the most to them, including family and close friends, which they did through strategic decision making, curating their content, and engaging within online spaces. Meeting the expectations of family and friends, provided a greater sense of confidence or sense of self, even if the decisions in doing so were calculated to expose or suppress different parts of their identities to feel more connected to others. Meeting those expectations, often tied to receiving the validation they were seeking from others, reflected as comments, likes, or any type of engagement or support on Facebook. I situated participants closer to contextual knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992) when I began to see or hear them worry less about receiving validation from others. Additionally, I saw similar results as Brown (2016), in that that they expressed more confidence with their digital identities.

As participants consistently engaged in social media use and searched for connection and a sense of belonging, their digital identities and sense of self continued to shift as well. As they grew up using social media at an early age, like many others in their generation (Brown, 2016), their use has evolved, curating varying identities in different platforms, which all represent a part of who they are offline as well. Navigating these different spaces takes intentionality and strategy in identifying what their desired outcome in sharing information about themselves may be.
Jäkälä et al. (2013) shared that how one is perceived, and the identities that are shared, begin with the creation of a profile. The profile is an outward-facing representation of oneself that is seeking to share personal information and content with others (Caers et al., 2013). While participants in this study may have struggled in identifying their values, what participants shared in interviews and digital observations showed what personally resonated with them was tied to what they posted on the screen and how they engaged with others. Many chose to not place original content online, but reposted content like stories, videos, or pictures, to help reiterate what they thought to be funny, relevant, or important to others in searching for a sense of belonging. Through their posts they shared a window into their own identity development journey. The dissertation findings demonstrated the deep sense of connection that was desired by participants.

The research in this dissertation brings light to the role that social media plays in the identity development process for cisgender women, responding to the gap found from foundational research in identity development (Cabellon & Junco, 2015), especially self-authorship for the context of this study. It is the sense of connection that can strengthen the bond between people, which was evident as I identified the importance of relationships in the development of digital identity and self-authorship process, extending the work of Baxter Magolda (1992). The study findings also expose how participants constructed authentic digital identities in a way that shared parts of themselves, but also took strategic action to seek out a sense of belonging. In doing so, participants met their desire to feel connected with others, but also a sense of validation through those online relationships Participants used strategic planning centered on how they created content.
across various digital platforms, taking into account the expectations they felt in these spaces from their networks online.

**Cisgender Lens: Identity in Digital Spaces**

The research in this study was additionally focused on responding to the question, how do cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces? Using self authorship as a centralized framework within this study reinforced that there were differences in gender patterns tied to relationships, as cisgender women navigated their way towards self-authorship. Women in Baxter Magolda’s (1992) research leaned towards understanding and processing information through their relationships and experiences with others, which I argue also applies to online spaces.

The following section responds to this research question directly, while also connecting findings back to the literature to share where this research helps extend current knowledge.

Cisgender women perceived and navigated digital spaces with a gendered lens in two central ways, focusing on their self-perception, as well as sense of self in relationship with others. Participants identified that they had personal intrinsic and external expectations tied to their use of social media, which in turn connected to their perception of self and helped them feel seen. However, these expectations also had an impact on their sense of self, and sometimes led to stress, needing to step away from social media for periods of time. The participants invested time and provided intentional thought into what they posted and how that information would be received by others as they sought out some sort of specific response such as validation or support. Drouin et al. (2018) as
an example, focused on if social media could be a source of social support, and while the study had both men and women participate, women and those with high depression and anxiety levels were more likely to associate social media to stress. The external expectations from the participants in this study were based on the strong relationships in their lives, such as family and friends, and the known or perceived responses from those individuals.

The observations in this study identified the internal expectations that participants had tied to their social media postings whether that be the number of likes or comments they would receive, or how they wanted to be perceived by others in digital spaces. As participants strategize the curation of their digital identities, they are making decisions based on previous exchanges, rather than on authentic happenings in their lives. For example, some participants reflected that they felt different pressures than their counterparts that are men, and that they as women place more pressure on themselves for everything to be just right. The ability to align personal intrinsic and external expectations had a direct connection to the participants’ sense of self. These findings were similar to other research in this space. Chen et al. (2023), as an example, found a strong connection between self-objectification and strategic self-presentation utilizing Tinder and Facebook among women. Participants in this study who reported that their digital identity aligned with their values and represented themselves in an authentic way, there was a clear observation tied to a positive perception of self in the way they confidently spoke about who they are, and what and where they post on social media. For those who are not as congruent, there is a real pressure surrounding self-presentation for women (Chen et al., 2023)
Expectations played a large role in how participants in this study navigated digital spaces and curated their online content through a gendered lens. Through observations and interviews, I identified the participants’ understanding of self and gender connected to their social media use and how they experienced the positive and negative impacts of social media use. Participants decided to share information tied to controversial topics connected to gender such as abortion, and leaned into exchanges with people they knew as well as strangers, clearly articulating that they do not limit themselves to conversations on social media just because they identify as a woman. These experiences, and motivations for social media, showcase participants navigating towards self-authorship as they identify their own positionality in the world with a gendered lens. Other participants reflected on the negative responses and consequences of posting when they expressed their love or understanding of sports or interest in stereotypically labeled men’s interests. Participants overall, considered the gendered expectations people had on them as they were navigating digital spaces as cisgender women; however participants reflected on how they approach or attempt to balance those expectations with their own to feel authentic in their own personal and strategic way. The decisions to post online or to hold back content, has an impact on a student’s self-esteem, or the subjective value of how they see themselves (Cingel et al., 2022) in relationship to others. Social media itself provides cisgender women among other users the opportunity to project a strategic self image which is either authentic or misrepresented (Chen et al., 2023; Toma et al., 2008). How participants approach their response to external expectations is tied to identity development, and the gendered lens in which they navigate online spaces is also important for achieving self-authorship.
Josselson (1987) focused on the identity development of women and sought to understand how women see themselves uniquely to others. In Josselson’s (1987) theory, when women were in the second phase, identity achievement, women took small challenges to explore parts of their identity. Translated to social media spaces, cisgender women in this study make strategic decisions on what to post based on their relationships with others and took note when the reactions to those posts met their expectations or not, which shifted what they continued to post in the future at times. Meeting or not meeting those expectations are tied to self-esteem. Many participants appeared to be between identity achievement and the third phase, moratorium, as they took risks in sharing their experiences authentically, and pulling away from expectations from others, including being seen as a “good girl” (Josselson, 1987). Josselson’s (1987) work ties into the observations related to gender, as some participants in this study took risks to explore their thoughts, reflections, and interests with others in a social space, and the result was a feeling of greater understanding of self in relationship to others. As participants reflected on their use of social media, or the strategies that are employed, it became clear to identify that their gendered lens evolved alongside their self-authorship journey.

Another central way in which cisgender women perceived and navigated the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces was through their relationships as they moved towards self authorship. Creating and sustaining relationships is an important element in self authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992) and digital identity development. Research demonstrates that women form and build their identity through their relationships with others and are closer to their families than men are (Josselson, 1987). However, being connected on social media centers on more than just strengthening
relationships or forging new ones through direct messages between friends. Through creating and sustaining a digital identity, users also can cultivate content that represents themselves in a way that will passively reinforce how they want to be seen in a public forum. I identified that social media does impact how cisgender women foster connections with others, while establishing a sense of self simultaneously. For example, being connected with family provided an additional layer of support, but it also impacted the participants’ desire or strategy to share information online that they believed might impact how they are perceived by their loved ones as well as their peers or social network. The participants in this study spoke about needing to consider multiple lenses when they posted something on social media, including if there were gendered components. They considered whether they would receive negative feedback for not following stereotypical feminine behavior, or be perceived as someone who was promiscuous or a partier. Another consideration was whether photos were too staged or not staged enough. Participants even reflected on the perception others would have of them on social media because they were not posting a lot of photos with other people in them. Posting on social media seems like an easy enough task, but the actions behind it are strategic, intentionally, and are led by a desire to connect with others and feel a sense of belonging. As cisgender women navigate the process of self-authorship, they are creating and evolving their digital identities. Similarly, Michikyan (2020) shared that women who had a greater clarity of self were more aligned with their online presence. The clarity and journey towards self-authorship is directly tied to the strategic decisions, reflections, and action taken by users in digital spaces as they navigate gender and relationships with others.
Belenky et al., (1986) identified the uniqueness of the woman experience and voice and took time to begin to understand how the experiences of women impacted their development. They identified five epistemological categories (Belenky et al., 1986), which today still had connections to the finding in my dissertation study. For example, silence was the first category that was described as women depending on others to make decisions (Belenky et al., 1986), similar to absolute knowing (Magolda, 1992) and even foreclosures as described by Josselson (1987). The central idea that at the beginning of development, users or young adults rely on those of authority or knowledge to help them in making or guiding their decisions. These themes came forward as participants described their use of social media early on in their lives. They would mimic the posts of others, follow trends, and those decisions, trends, and posts evolved overtime. They also would limit or make strategic decisions on what to post in spaces like Facebook based on the relationships they had with people in those spaces who were often seen as people with power or authority. Participants created other profiles and digital spaces that might feel more authentic where they engaged with more peers or strangers, which allowed them to explore different parts of their identity or showcase those parts more comfortably.

Given research that identifies differences in how identity is formed between men and women, I argue that there is a gendered component to identity development in online spaces. Josselson (1987) shared:

The most important developmental task facing women today is the formation of identity, for it is in the realm of identity that a woman bases her sense of herself as well as her vision of the structure of her life (p. 3).
While Josselson shared this reflection over three decades ago, the central idea focused on the importance of creating a sense of self still remains; however, the space in which cisgender women navigate the world has changed. Forming an identity for women is vitally important, because it sets the course for their lives. Identity focuses on the decisions a woman will make throughout her life based off the values and priorities that she creates (Josselson, 1987).

The findings in this study directly addressed that cisgender women perceived and navigated the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces. I have added to the literature by bringing forward examples and discussing how external pressures in online spaces are directly tied to identity development. I have also shared observations about how users navigate sharing their digital identities through considering who they are, how they will be perceived, and how those reactions will be expressed.

**Bridging the Gap**

The findings in this research, as shared, have impacted how we understand the impact of social media on meaning making or the identity development of students within a higher education context. As such, practitioners need to have tools to help understand how and where social media situates itself in the identity development process. As practitioners have conversations with students and identify programming needs as noted later in the implications section, tools and a process of questioning will be important to help identify where students might be situated in the self-authorship process. The following tool or process map is a visual guide based on the findings of this study, that
can help practitioners acknowledge theory, but also infuse practice and current student lived experiences in the conversations they have with students.

**Table 1.0**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Decision</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Power/Authority</th>
<th>Self-authenticity</th>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In self authorship, the question of “who am I in relationship to others?” is a central key framework of the theory (Baxter Magolda, 1992). The findings in this research highlight the need to understand the impact of social media as a tool of self-representation in cultivating meaning making and identity development. Identity development itself is a process of learning about oneself over time and through interactions with others, however today exchanges are not just dependent on in person experiences, but digital ones as well. As practitioners engage in conversations with students, they need to identify the central key components that impact these strategic decisions. The above table helps demonstrate
how this dissertation not only extends current literature, but helps practitioners situate students within the self authorship framework that better represents the student experience today. Specifically, the findings share that acknowledging identities such as gender, relationships, and the power those yield in one's life as well as self-authenticity are central factors in self-representation online and as such, impact identity development. These factors lead to questions similar to self authorship, but specifically ask “who am I?” “What is important to me?” “What will the impact be in person and online?” And “how do I want to be seen by others?” These are the questions that students engage in as they decide how to construct digital identities.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

My research process has limitations that can be tied to areas or implications for future research. A common limitation in this work is that student development theories or processes often take years to see major shifts in developmental growth. I attempted to reduce this limitation as I relied on long-term and recent reflections from the participants during interviews to provide insight into how their use or engagement with social media might have shifted along with their identity development process. Additionally, through my digital observations, I was able to scroll back to observe informally the posts and evolution of social media for each participant to the degree I had access to do so. Given the limitation of timeframe of data collection for this dissertation study being only four months, the findings can assist in informing longer longitudinal studies in this area.

Tied to this implication of time is also space. Within this study, I focused on how cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self
authorship as well as how my participants navigated the gendered nature of their identity in digital spaces. While I focused on gathering data through digital observations and interviews, my focus was mostly on observing activity in online or digital spaces. While I could interpret where participants were in their own journey towards self authorship based on what they shared and my analysis, future research should consider identity development in both the physical and digital spaces and extend beyond the college experience to see how social media continues to impact identity development following graduation. It is after college that Baxter Magolda (1992) identified that moving into contextual knowing was more evident. I anticipate an evolution of self and use regarding social media would continue over time of which self authorship would remain a relevant framework for this type of exploration. Moving forward, the impact of social media should be considered in how all students develop and create their identities from childhood into adulthood. While participants in this study started being exposed to social media in middle school, today, that introduction to technology and social media can begin even earlier. Understanding the impact that these social applications have on people, could impact educational delivery starting prior to college.

Another limitation from the research approach was the inability to triangulate the data from various social media platforms. Facebook was the only platform where I could create privacy settings that would protect the participants, particularly so no one would be able to identify who was participant in the study. The only other option was creating a different account as the researcher for each participant in other social media platforms, which did not appear to be a realistic approach to this study. I believe in future research a
different approach would be needed to observe and retrieve data to triangulate more
digital content given that students regularly use multiple social media platforms.

Another related implication is the impact of social media, and the changes and
trends of those who use these platforms. Attention should be paid to what social media
platforms are popular and to their target audiences. The 2021 Pew Research Center study
showed that users who had a college degree or higher had a higher percentage of usage
across nine out of eleven platforms. The only two platforms where that was not the case
were Snapchat and Tik Tok (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This statistic helps strengthen
the argument for understanding the impact that social media has on students in college.
Future research will need to consider the varying, changing, and expanding forms of
social media that are available to users at the time of inquiry. Facebook as an example is a
platform that is not as popular, or as highly utilized by traditional-aged college students
anymore compared to other platforms, and those shifts and changes will continue to
happen as technology advances (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Future research will need to
account for social media as an overall tool rather than specific applications to remain
relevant and inclusive of all online experiences.

Tied to the participants, another limitation was connected to sampling,
specifically the geography and composition of involved student leaders who participated
in this study. The majority of participants were from institutions within Massachusetts,
with two attending college in Connecticut. The ways individuals communicate within a
university may impact the social norms that are created or sustained specific to one or
two states in the Northeast. Future research will need to expand beyond the geographic

169
boundaries of Massachusetts and Connecticut to see how students’ experiences might differ. The second piece tied to sampling was that the students themselves had a high potential to be involved students on campus as they would be contacted by their campus’s Student Activities professionals. Students who are engaged on campus tend to have better time management skills, feel connected to the college or university, and have engaged with students socially outside of the classroom (Astin, 1999). These types of students as participants might be highly connected on their individual campuses and might have different experiences than students who are not as involved. Future research should take into account the level of student involvement through the recruitment process and in examining its sample requirements. Finally, my research findings opened a door for further consideration and exploration of social media in relation to students’ other identities and key characteristics such as sexual orientation, domestic or international status, race, adult learner or “traditional age” student, as well as an intersection of multiple identities. Layering the impact of and connection between social media and students’ multiple identities is certainly an area for further research.

Further research also needs to explore the process for digital identity development and its alignment, connection, or separation from traditional identity development processes. Within the findings of this study, each social media platform that participants used consisted of a digital brand or representation of the participant that they wanted to share with others in those specific networks. The decision making and strategy behind what and where to post leaves a question as to how digital identity development connected to student development as a whole. As I reflect on the findings and this implication for future research, I found that that digital identity development comes from
maturation of relationships, understanding of self, and lived experiences over time. It was also a more strategic approach to constructing how one understands themselves in relation to others. Future research should explore the connection and disconnect between online digital identity development and personal identity development theories.

The findings in this study highlight a connection and interplay between digital identity and in-person identity; however, future research can also explore the impact that this has on the college student experience both in person and online. One way for participants to stay connected to what their peer groups and organizations were doing was through social media, sharing that social media assists in cultivating a sense of connection and belonging with others, as well as establishing and maintaining capital (Yang & Brown, 2013). While this study focused mainly on the digital spaces, expanding to a macro view to help understand the connection between digital identities and the college environment could have even larger implications for research, administrators, and practitioners.

One of the considerations that must be made is that of social media itself as a social and economic driver and business. Algorithms were addressed in this study’s findings, but future research should investigate how the algorithms that are employed for each user impacts their experience and digital identity. Algorithms play a huge role in what people see on social media through their feed, advertisements, etc. Participants recognized that as they had conversations and gone through life milestones such as graduation, they instantly saw posts about becoming a young adult, traveling, etc. These ads or posts tie into interests, hobbies, etc. If participants and people in general are impacted developmentally by social media, then there is a direct connection with what is
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

put in front of them by a third party. Social media not only feeds information through algorithms based on likes or life milestones, but also various content that often can impact how one forms opinions of news, issues surrounding politics and social justice, and much more. Participants often spoke about how they turned to social media for news or to learn what is happening in the world, but the reality is that unless they look at other mediums for different perspectives on the same topic, or look at additional sources, their knowledge and perspective will be limited to what the platform shows them through an algorithm. In considering self authorship as a central framework and knowing that social media users are not just influenced by posts made by people they have a direct connection with, the impact of algorithms and third-party content needs to be considered. How users connect with others, intake and process information within the context of algorithms, as well as the ways connections and algorithms impact users decision making and behavior are important areas of inquiry. All of these elements may affect digital identity development as well as personal development and growth.

The data collected and the experiences of some of the participants were also impacted by COVID-19. The impacts of living during a pandemic impacted everyone, including some of the participants in this study and myself as a researcher. Following the study, continuing to live through a pandemic and into post-pandemic life will continue to have impacts on how people interact with each other, gather, and care for themselves. Many institutions were negatively impacted and had to send students home to take classes or complete coursework virtually. Many businesses and schools began to alter their operations beginning in March of 2020. Three of the participants were participating in the study at this time and, as such, their use, perception, and relationship with social
media was also changed (see Chapter 4). COVID-19 changed how people communicated and socialized, and how frequently they used social media in both intentional and unintentional ways. While this may or may not be a true limitation, it had a large enough societal impact that noting this information is important. I attempted to address this issue through interviews by asking participants about how COVID-19 was impacting their use of social media and that there was overall agreement in their increase usage of social media. These findings pointed to COVID-19 having an increased impact or role in students’ day-to-day lives, often increasing their use of having a more visible presence on social media. More research and future considerations should be pointed to connecting digital identity, higher education, and impacts of COVID-19 as a relevant area of future research.

**Implications for Practice**

Understanding the impact of social media on cis-gendered women is important to the work of practitioners in higher education. In being able to identify how social media intersects with the development of college students, administrators and staff can alter the way an institution provides resources, interacts, and supports student development during the transformative time between high school and entering the workforce or graduate school. Through this research, and as a practitioner, I have identified multiple implications for practice and considerations for action to support student success.

The first implication or call to action, is for practitioners to create programming to support students in navigating social media. Having an open and safe space to talk about pressures felt online, the role comparison and isolation plays in the digital environment,
and the individual impacts on self can help not only normalize feelings but also provide support systems to address any needs tied to student mental health. As a practitioner in higher education, I can see the need to create intentional and optional avenues to have these conversations and bring college students together to address what they are experiencing in person and behind the digital screen. In doing so, institutions will be better equipped to help and understand students’ lived experiences and resource needs. Supporting students in identifying when actionable steps are needed to support their mental health, help reflect on the authenticity of their digital identity, and talk about the short- and long-term impacts of their digital identity would be helpful to college students.

While the findings in this study intersected with gender, the needs and support tied to programming relate to all students. However, specific support tied to cisgender women is also recommended within intentional programs and resources in women-centered spaces, where gender expectations and stereotypes can be specifically addressed and discussed to support this group of college students.

The second implication for practice is the need to understand not only the important role that strategic decision making has in creating a sense of belonging online, but also presenting students with tools to understand the positive power their digital identity can have in their current and future experiences. Today, students often only hear what they should not place on social media, but Ahlquist (2017) reframed what student leadership could look like and called practitioners to understand student technology use including social media in identifying ways to support student leader growth. Thinking about social media as a deficit rather than a tool can potentially limit the ability of
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

practitioners to be effective in supporting student success and create a barrier to research surrounding the current student experience and how to proactively support student development. Understanding these implications tie into exploring the role that social media plays in the development and growth of cisgender women in college. As students grow and navigate towards self-authorship, they begin to rely less on the validation of others and build more confident and authentic digital identities (Brown, 2016). Aiding students in being able to utilize social media to increase their confidence and support the representation of their authentic self needs to be a part of the conversations, programs, and resources that practitioners use in their daily work with students. These support programs and services could be utilized in a number of functional areas across the institution, including how to navigate the impact of digital spaces on one’s career through the Career Development Center and of engaging in group discussions around the social and emotional impacts of social media with members from the counseling centers. Acknowledging the use and highlighting the benefits of social media will help engage students in a conversation that meets them where they are—digitally and developmentally.

A third implication for practice is understanding and meeting students where they are developmentally, physically, and digitally. The work of Student Affairs practitioners is incredibly student facing, often seen as the front line engaging with students around all aspects of their college experience outside of the classroom. The work is traditionally done in a space and environment that is created for in-person exchanges but has not evolved with time and technology to include digital spaces. While offices and departments might engage in social media activities and use platforms, my observation is
it is often a one-way conversation to push information out to students, rather than mirroring their own practices or uses of the digital resource. COVID-19 in many ways, showed practitioners that work can be done in online spaces to support students, but as the world transitions back to more in-person interactions, practitioners cannot lose steam in exploring how to engage and support students in different digital spaces and talking to them about how their online experience can enhance or hinder their in-person experience within the higher education environment.

A fourth implication for practice tied to understanding the impact of social media for practitioners, is also the importance for faculty to understand how students use social media to create a positive learning environment. Within this study, the level of engagement on social platforms with teachers or in the classroom was not explored and as such, that leads to an opportunity for exploration. Focusing on the impact of social media on learning environments could lead to better integration inside the classroom curriculum, class discussions, and faculty understanding of the lived experiences of their students. Understanding the impact of the intersection of technology and learning may also help how faculty engage with students and establish relationships inside the classroom.

A fifth implication for practice involves actively engaging theory-to-practice and practice-to-theory via practitioners’ using their professional experiences to identify gaps and utility in how foundational student identity development theories reflect the current lived experiences of students. As I reflect on my own practice, the findings in this study allowed me to identify gaps in foundation scholarship, and question on some level, how
the current student experience including digital technologies influence those foundational processes and practice. Student Affairs practitioners need to be able to find theories and adapt them to consider the current student experience. If that cannot be done, that highlights an opportunity for future research or acknowledging that a theory might not necessarily be relevant today. As such, practitioners need to remain engaged in current research to assist as frontline eyes and ears to the student experience. Practitioners not only learn foundational texts in their graduate programs of study, but they also can identify new experiences that are not reflective in the literature and new reflections on what areas of inquiry to consider as the higher education environment continues to evolve.

Conclusion

This dissertation study was focused on answering the questions, how do cisgender women in college use social media to construct their digital identity and self authorship? How do cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in these digital spaces? In taking a generic qualitative approach, I was able to respond to these questions by listening to the narratives, reflections, and experiences shared by the participants through interviews, and comparing that data to what I digitally observed from the eight participants in this study.

I analyzed these stories and data with existing student development theories to explore the connections between digital identity, social media, and identity development of cisgender women and address gaps around understanding the current student experience impacted by digital spaces. Generic qualitative theory provided flexibility in comparing the experiences of students, while allowing for their journey of self-authorship
to be examined individually as well. While shared themes emerged across all eight participants, each participant had an individual experience with social media and lived experiences that impacted when and how they use social media and were influenced by their environment.

This study highlighted three main takeaways. The first is the power of relationships, specifically as the relationships participants had with others influenced the creation of their digital identities in different spaces based off perceived expectations and intrinsic motivations. The motivations and strategic decisions tied to relationships reflected how participants saw themselves in relationship to others, reflecting on the self authorship process (Baxter Magolda, 1992). As participants reflected, they shared indirectly the power or voice that their friends and loved ones had in influencing their use of social media, and how they navigated those digital spaces to create a sense of connect in a strategic and intentional way.

Participants showed that strategy was a regularly implemented tool, as they navigate decisions around what to post as it relates to their values, relationships, and motivations for social media use. Participants reflected on how their strategy and decisions regarding shared content evolved from middle school through the college years, which allowed for insight and application of the self authorship model to be applied as many participants appeared to be moving towards contextual knowledge as they grew closer to graduation or had recently graduated (Baxter Magolda, 1992). The findings also demonstrated how students managed their reputation or image on social media, which supports other research in digital spaces (Brown, 2016a, Junco, 2014; Qualman et al., 2015) and addressed the connection between social media use and desire for social
capital (Gross & Meriweather, 2016). Participants perceived that there were implications for their social media use whether that be tied to future professional impacts, relationships, or how they were perceived in online spaces.

It is also clear that social media use has implications in how students create and sustain relationships and is tied to a sense of belonging. Social media use within the context of this study had both positive and negative impacts on cisgender women. The study extends the current literature by demonstrating how social media assisted participants in feeling connected, but also highlighted their concerns about how they would be perceived based on what they shared. For example, there were concerns about how they would be judged based on the digital identity that they created for themselves. This concern stemmed from the search for validation from others and highlighted the constant comparison of self to others that digital platform environments create. Students are concurrently developing as individuals, navigating online spaces and crafting multiple identities as they engage in life on and off screen. The relationships tied to each of these spaces play a role in how college students explore who they are in relationship to others. While social media seems to compound this process, it does provide opportunities for a consistent feeling of connection.

The chapter also described two ways in which cisgender women perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces, specifically focusing on their self-perception as well as their relationship with others. The findings in this study identified that participants did feel a set of different perceived pressures than men related to their gender and social media use. Thus, they felt that they had to make decisions on how they would be perceived or what the response might be if they played into or against
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

gendered stereotypes, as an example. These expectations played a role in how participants navigated digital spaces and where they were on their journey to self-authorship as some were more impacted by the anticipated reception of their posts than others.

Participants overall considered the gendered expectations that people had on them as they navigated digital spaces, but they also considered their relationships. I connected the findings of the study to the work of Josselson (1987) and Belenky et al. (1986) as participants share the role and impact that their loved ones and friends had in their lives both on and behind the screen (Turkle, 2004). Gender impacted how participants cultivated their strategies for self-portrayal and the challenges tied to internal and external expectations.

Understanding the impact of digital identities on identity development is a large implication for practice and future research. Practitioners will need to respond to these findings and future research to create programming and resources that create safe spaces for students to speak to the role comparison and isolation plays in the digital environment, as well as how students can use social media to their benefit, especially as student leaders. Education and resources are key to supporting students and engaging them in conversation, but understanding the impact and role of social media is a crucial first step to providing adequate support. Practitioners will need to meet students where they are at and that might mean engaging with them more consistently and deeply in online spaces.

Technology is going to continue to grow and evolve in not only what it can do, but how it is accessed and utilized. The concepts and findings of this study were vital in
exploring the connections between social media, digital identity, and identity development of cisgender women in college, and how they perceive and navigate the gendered nature of identity in digital spaces. These findings are important and applicable in future research and across other intersecting identities.
APPENDIX A: CALL FOR INTEREST

Dear ____________,

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my research. As I mentioned before, my research is focused on one of my passions, the intersection of social media and our daily lives. Specifically, I am looking to explore and understand how social media engagement impacts women’s identity development in college. My hope is that the study will last four months (September – December), or a traditional semester in school.

As I shared, to participate in the study, I’m looking for participants who identify as cisgender female, and are a sophomore, junior or senior class standing at their institution. It is also important that the participants in the study have a general understanding and frequent use of social media. I am asking that all participants have had at least a Facebook account for the past four years and have utilize this social media tool at least five days a week over the past year.

If you meet these requirements and choose to participate, there would be two ways that I connect with you. First, I would ask that we connect for an online interview that lasts approximately 60 minutes at the start of the study and at the conclusion. A third check in interview in the middle will also be provided to you.

The second way that I would gather information would not require anything from you except asking you accept my friend request on Facebook and allowing me to follow you on any Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts that you may have. In this online space, I will not engage with you directly, but will notice how you are connected to other people, what you have posted and do post, and see how these items connect to what we discuss in the interviews.

If you decide to move forward and participate in the study, all participants will be provided a $10 digital Amazon gift card after each interview is completed ($20 total). At the conclusion of the study, if you complete both interviews, you will also be put into a drawing for an additional $50 digital gift card for Amazon.

Attached to this email is the consent form. If you are interested in participating in this study please read and sign the consent form, returning a copy to me directly at cgiouard@umass.edu. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to reach out and I would be happy to connect.

Best,

Christine Sharry
Doctoral Candidate
University of Massachusetts Amherst
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1 Questions

1. Tell me about yourself?
   a. How would you define who you are and your values?
   b. What are the top three things that matter to you in your life?
   c. What do you want to do after you graduate? What is your career trajectory?

2. What social media platforms do you use?

3. How long have you been using social media?

4. How often do you use social media in your day to day life?
   a. What do you think you post more of, text? Pictures? Quotes? Thoughts?

5. What are the great things about social media?

6. What are the challenges with social media?

7. When you decide to post something, what are some things that go through your mind? Could you provide a specific example?

8. When you look at the posts of others, what are some things that you think about? Could you provide a specific example?

9. Why do you use social media? What do you gain from using it?

10. How has your use or application of social media changed since you first began to use it?

11. How do you think your online identity aligns with your personal identity? Why?

12. What role does social media play in helping express who you are?

13. What identities play a role in your life? How do these impact your use of social media? Do they?

14. As a female, how do you think your gender impacts the ways you engage with others?

15. How does identifying as female, impact your use of social media differently than others?

16. When you think of how you learn in general, how do you know what you know? In other words – how do you learn?
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

a. Does social media play a role in how you learn information and if so how?

17. In thinking about how you learn, how does that impact who you are or how you identify?

18. In looking at social media I have noticed….. Do you feel that is an accurate summary of what you are experiencing?

19. How does your environment or culture impact who you are or how you see yourself?

20. Does this change or alter how you see yourself depending on the environment or culture you are in? if so, how?

21. Are there any questions that you thought I would but didn’t? If so what are they?

Interview 2 Questions

1. How have you been since we last met?

2. How has your use of social media changed over time? Do you use it differently? If so, how?

3. How often do you feel you post on social media?

4. How do you use social media to connect with others?

5. How do you form relationships with others?
   a. Do you use social media to do this in any way? If so, how?
   b. How frequently do you use social media in this way?

6. Are there times where it is easier to put something online than say in person?

7. When you post something online do you think about who will see it? Does it impact what and when you post?

8. If you were to use social media platform where your identity was anonymous, how would that change your utilization of those platforms?

9. How did you use social media to make connections to the institution prior to orientation or classes starting? Did you utilize it to make a connection with a roommate or peer?

3. What do you think you post more of, text? Pictures? Quotes? Thoughts?
CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK

7. What role does approval from others play into your life? How about information gathering?
   a. How does social media impact that

8. What role do others play in how you learn information about things in general and about yourself?

10. How do you like to receive recognition in your life? How does that impact your decisions?

11. What type of recognition do you look for through social media? How important is that recognition to you?

11. When you feel that you are in conflict with someone how do you respond?

12. When you are in conflict with someone or something online how do you respond?

13. In looking at social media I have noticed… Do you feel that this is an accurate summary of what you are experiencing? Is there anything you would add?

14. Are there any questions that I didn’t ask that you thought I would? If so what are they?

Interview 3 Questions

1. How has this process been for you so far? Has it impacted how you use social media at all?

2. How do you feel when someone interacts with you online? Does it matter what time of day it is or how you might be feeling?

3. How are you open to other people’s views? If you see something online that you disagree with how do you react?

4. Does it matter who it is that posted something that will determine if you respond or react?

5. How do you learn from using Facebook? If so what?

6. What role does Facebook have in your life?

7. In looking at social media I have noticed… Do you feel that this is an accurate summary of what you are experiencing? Is there anything you would add?

8. Do you have any questions for me? Are there any questions that I didn’t ask that you thought I would? If so, what are they?
APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION SHEETS

Facebook Social Media Observation Sheet

Participant Name (Pseudonym): ________________________________

Date: ________________

Facebook Posts:

# of posts made to participant wall (by others): __________

# of posts made by participant to wall: ___________

# of posts made in total: __________

Facebook Photos:

# of photos where participant is tagged: __________

# of photos participant shows: __________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post Date</th>
<th>Picture/Text</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Descriptive Category</th>
<th># of Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researcher Reflections:
APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher(s): Christine Sharry
Chrystal George Mwangi (faculty sponsor)

Study Title: Connecting and Developing Through Facebook: An Exploration of Impact on College Women

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. I (the primary investigator) encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
Participants must be individuals who were born as and identify as female, are between the ages of 18 and 22 years old, have sophomore, junior or senior class standing in college and have utilize social media platforms such as Facebook for at least four years. Participants must acknowledge that they actively use social media platforms currently by logging onto Facebook at least once a day, five days a week either directly or as an observer.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this research study is to explore how women use social media in college to construct their identity both on and offline.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?
The research study will last approximately four months (September 2018-December 2018). Each participant will be asked to participate in two video-recorded online interviews (at the beginning and end of the project) that will last approximately sixty
minutes via Zoom or a similar online tool. Additionally during this time, observations of the participants Facebook accounts (along with Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter if applicable) will occur online weekly. An optional 60 minute interview to check in will also be available to each participant if desired.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?
If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in two video-recorded online interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes. Questions will revolve around you as an individual as well as your values, thoughts and experiences surrounding social media. In addition, you will be asked to reflect on how you have and currently use social media and how it impacts your identity as an individual and how you build and maintain relationships with others.

Specifically the first interview will provide you an opportunity to share things about who you are as an individual, your experiences and perceptions about using social media, as well as reflect on how your utilization of social media has evolved over time and impacts how you build or sustain relationships. Additionally, some questions will ask you to think about the role environment and culture plays in how you utilize social media. The optional check-in interview will also be video-recorded and will be a chance to review the observations that have been made to date about your social media use, and ask any observation based questions the researcher may have and answer any questions that you might have as a participant. Finally the second interview will include questions around how you feel when you use social media, how you compare thoughts or experiences with other people, and provide the opportunity to ask clarifying questions pertaining to the information reviewed on your profile. Questions from participants are always welcome and you may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering.

Additionally, the researcher will need to gain access to the participants’ Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter accounts. Access to your Facebook account will not be requested until the conclusion of the first interview to ensure you are comfortable proceeding. Access to Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter will also be requested if used. Access does not mean log in and password information, but only friending or allowing the researcher to follow you on the mentioned platforms.

6. What are my benefits of being in this study?
You may not directly benefit from this research; however, as the primary investigator, I hope that your participation in the study may provide some insight to how social media plays a role in how participants develop as individuals, specifically their ability to understand and identify individual values and opinions in contrast to others.
As compensation for participating in this study, each participant will receive twenty dollars in Amazon gift cards. A $10 digital gift card will be provided at the conclusion of each interview to thank each participant for their time. If the participation decides to participate in the third check in interview, an additional $10 digital gift card will be provided. Additionally, at the conclusion of the study, all participants who complete the two required interviews will be entered into a drawing for an additional $50 Amazon digital gift card.

There is hope that participation in this study will also provide participants the opportunity to reflect on personal use of social media and its impacts. I am also willing following the study to sit down with each participant and discuss social media in general and my own thoughts in viewing individual profiles if requested.

7. What are my risks of being in this study?
Risks associated with the study may be a risk of data breach. However, the researcher had made every effort to maintain confidentiality of the data. Additionally, there are no known physical, social or psychological risks associated with this research study, but resources will be made available to each participant if needed.

8. How will my personal information be protected?
The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records which include transcripts, interview videos, digital artifact observations, and personal contact information. The primary investigator will keep all study records, including any codes to your data, in a secure location on a computer that are password protected as well as cloud based storage that is sign in protected. Research records will be labeled with a code owned by only the primary investigator. The master list of codes and consent forms will be stored separately from the other collected data as well. At the conclusion of this study, the primary investigator may publish findings which may include direct quotes from your interviews. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

If the researcher finds that you or a friend are in imminent harm however, or there is a threat to yourself or others, confidentiality will be broken and the researcher will contact your institution to ensure a welfare check is made or appropriate steps are taken.

9. What if I have questions?
Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher(s), Christine Sharry (401-829-7276, cgirouard@umass.edu) or Dr. Chrystal George Mwangi (413-545-0747, chrystal@umass.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research
subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428.

10. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

11. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

______ I agree that segments of the recordings made of my participation in this research may be used for conference presentations, as well as education and training of future researchers/practitioners.

______ I agree to have my recordings archived for future research in the field of higher education and technology/social media research.

______ I do not agree to allow segments of recordings of my participation in this research to be used for conference presentations or education and training purposes.

________________________ ____________________
Participant Signature: Print Name: Date:
By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person       Print Name:       Date:
Obtaining Consent
BIBLIOGRAPHY


195


Galman, S. C. (2013). The good, the bad, and the data: Shane the long ethnographer’s basic guide to qualitative data analysis. Left Coast Press.


CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK


CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING THROUGH FACEBOOK


Muzari, T., Shava, G. N., & Shonhiwa, S. (2022). Qualitative research paradigm, a key research design for educational researchers, processes and procedures: A theoretical overview. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 3*(1), 14-20.


