

WAITING TO CONNECT: IN PURSUIT OF BELONGINGNESS AND CONNECTEDNESS  
NEEDS FOR GIRLS THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

BY

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WAITING TO CONNECT: IN PURSUIT OF BELONGINGNESS AND CONNECTEDNESS  
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Abstract: This qualitative study explored how young women pursue belongingness and connectedness needs through their use of social network sites and the other meanings they give to their activities. The study involved multiple individual interviews with 35 diverse participants ages 13 through 18. Unlike most research on girls that focuses on White girls, 40% of the participants were girls of color. This research examines girls' experiences using social media in their own words. Using inductive analysis and feminist critical theory, I first analyzed the data individually and then across cases. I sought meaning in the girls' own words and understandings that "give voice" to people "outside mainstream research," like girls (Patton, 2002, p. 98). The findings were grouped into 3 categories: how social media fosters connection and belonging needs; the other personal meanings involved in girls' social media activities; and the ways social media interfered with belongingness and connection. First, I found that girls exercised their agency in connecting with their friends throughout the day; *Instagram* and *Snapchat* were particular favorites. Second, older girls used social media to explore social and political issues, experience freedom and all girls processed concerns about appearance and body image. Some girls believed that social media affected their mood and often had a positive effect on their lives, but they believed they should spend less time on social media. Third, social media at times disrupted girls' social connections through online drama, bullying, and sexual images, or by avoiding face-to-face interaction. The research suggests the importance of better understanding girls' online activities from their perspectives for parents and educators.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*How can she say what she wants to say her way? How do girls and their allies open up supportive and equitable spaces?*

Laura Boutwell and Faduma Guhad, *Difficult Dialogues about 21<sup>st</sup> Century Girls*

The words of Faduma Guhad (2015, p 83) begin this qualitative study focused on exploring how girls and young women (ages 13-18) experience social network sites (hereafter SNS) to pursue their belongingness and connectedness needs. Contemporary SNS are unique in their multimodality and widespread availability. Teen use of digital technology for enjoyment, engagement, or deeper psychological activity is here to stay (Freitas, 2017). As an educator of 29 years, I sought understanding of girls' online SNS pursuits for belongingness and connectedness. I wanted to know how a girl could say what she wants to say her way and how I, as a researcher, could understand girls' expressions of their online experiences. The girls studied by the research community are overwhelmingly White; this study offers a diverse population, including African American, Latina, and Native American girls.

Social network sites have the “potential to exclude people for their gender, ethnicity, social class and other structural inequalities” (Turley & Fisher, 2018, p. 2). Girls of color are under-represented in research (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016); historically work has been focused on White, middle class girls, such as Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994). This study aims to broaden the research conducted on girls.

Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and professor at MIT who studies the implications of technology for social relations, states that today's teens “live in a state of waiting for

connection” (2011, p. 171). A common theme in adult conversations is decrying teens’ dependence on digital technology and its negative effects (Clark, 2013; Damour, 2016; Homayoun, 2017; Turkle 2011; 2015). Yet, SNS use is a layered social phenomenon; neither positive nor negative inherently, it can serve as one vehicle youth use for meeting belongingness and connectedness needs. Given these contemporary realities, how can adults understand girls’ use of SNS to meet and affirm their needs? Informed by theories that examine the human need for belonging, including the work of Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995), Wendi Gardner, Cynthia Pickett, and Marilynn Brewer (2000), Abraham Maslow (1943), as well as theories of female connection from Carol Gilligan (1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992), this study focused on increasing understanding for educators, families, and scholars of girls’ experiences with the online activities in which they were immersed daily.

In this document I provide background for the study, a literature review, a detailed plan for conducting the study, analysis of the data, and findings from the study. I begin Chapter One with information on what we know from scholarship about teens’ online interactions and discuss belongingness and connectedness constructs. Next, I detail the problem statement, offer the purpose for the study, and state my research questions. I explain the need for the study, outline my positionality, and examine theories that provide the research background for the study. Finally, in Chapter One I present my epistemology and theoretical perspective, along with my theoretical framework.

### **Terminology**

According to Goldberger (1999), “Using accurate terminology is important because the conceptual language we use can significantly influence the way we think, and thereby can influence the way we listen” (p. 462). The term “girl” is disputed in some feminist circles because of its disrespectful connotations (Fox, 1977). Some writers prefer the terms teenager and adolescent. However, a vast number of feminist writers and theorists continue to use the term girl

(Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan 1982; 1995; 2011; Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2011; Tokunaga, 2018). The terms teens, girls, and adolescents will be used interchangeably in this study to refer to female youth ages 13 to 18. Teens who chose to take part in this study will be referred to as girls rather than participants. The emic term social media will be used along with SNS.

## **Background to the Problem**

### **Teens' online interactions**

The development of SNS barely predate the advent of the twenty-first century as *SixDegrees.com*, which is considered the first SNS, launched in 1997 (boyd<sup>1</sup> & Ellison, 2008). In 2003 *MySpace* began, 2004 saw the creation of *The Facebook*, predecessor to *Facebook*, and *Twitter* entered the stage in 2007 (The History of Social Media, 2015). Today teens flock to the internet, and Anderson and Jiang (2018b) indicate that 97% of teens go online daily (p. 1). The top five ways that adolescents are using media are for watching movies and television, listening to music, playing online video games, and social media (The Common Sense Census, 2015). Seventy percent of teens use social media more than once a day and 16% expressed to Rideout and Robb (2018) that they use social media “almost constantly” (p. 8). In one national study a full 45% of teens reported to Pew Research Center’s Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang (2018b) that they are on social media “almost constantly” (p. 4). Girls put the *social* in social media, using digital technology for social interaction, while boys are more likely using the internet for gaming (Lenhart, 2015; Lenhart, Kantor, Malato, Benz, Thompson, Zeng, & Swanson, 2017). Like other leading innovations that created social changes (e.g. the automobile, the telephone, television, controversial music styles), many online communications were accepted first by youth. Teens embrace the online realm enthusiastically to make it their space (Livingstone, 2008) and make themselves visible to a wide audience (Herring & Kapidzic,

<sup>1</sup>danah boyd elects to spell her name in lower case letters

2015). Consequently, the freedom SNS offers can feel liberating to the teen (Lenhart, 2015; Ogdens, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), but adults may consider the freedom risky. Online interaction may strengthen relationships, with 60% of teens spending time with their closest friend online (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b).

Research finds that girls are using SNS for activist goals; activist girls are fighting media sexualization of girls and becoming politically involved through SNS. Some girl bloggers are “taking back sexy” via participation in Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge (SPARK) (Brown, 2011, p. 47). SPARK is a national effort to give girls and young women tools for activism and pushing back against media sexualization of girls. Recognizing that girls are the target of media and marketers while growing up in a culture saturated with the message, “be sexy,” SPARK promotes sexual rights for girls through blogging (p. 48). Yet minimal information is available concerning what girls gains from their time spent online (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015).

An increasingly mobile population creates geographic dislocation which can challenge connectedness between friends. Tierney (2013) confirms the use of SNS for youth connection when proximity is not possible. In a study of 107 people focused on their online practices, 53% of respondents indicate that they use SNS for connection when friends are separated and “view their friends’ activities from afar” (p. 85). Most girls will move from their hometown to attend college and likely move again after graduation (Tierney, 2013). Teens may meet proximal needs through SNS use, maintaining contact when a best friend moves or their friends matriculate to different colleges.

Some researchers (Clark, 2013; Coulthard & Ogden, 2018; Turkle, 2011; 2015) consider teen SNS interactions unhealthy and, according to Andreassen (2015), even addicting. Extensive research today focuses on the negative aspects of technology use. In *Alone Together* (2011), Turkle explores the “illusion of companionship” that digital connections offer without the

demands of an in-person friendship (p. 1). Turkle (2011) describes illusory companionship in teens who do not have time for their friends except when they communicate online. One girl calls digital communication “a place to hide,” shielded from the online viewer as the user composes her thoughts and prepares her next post (p. 187). Teens with lowered heads paying rapt attention to their digital devices is the new normal, but new enough that adults, remembering the chatter of recent years, regret the loss of face-to-face interaction with their children (Turkle, 2011, 2015). Teens text each other rather than speak face-to-face when in the same room and estranged parents connect only through texting their child (Turkle, 2011).

In a typically gendered fashion, research and cultural discourse portray girls as at-risk for sexual exploitation through online activities (Damour, 2016; Shade, 2011). Research shows that sexting can become a negative online experience, given that some girls feel pressured to send sexts (Damour, 2016), and girls are more likely than boys to receive unwanted explicit images (Anderson, 2018). Thirty-five percent of girls ages 15 to 17, compared to 20% of boys, received graphic images they did not want (p. 4). Ninety percent of American teens believe that “online harassment is a problem that affects people their age” (p. 5). These studies are a few among many emphasizing the costs of SNS activity. However, neither portraying SNS in fatalistic ways nor as online utopias offers a useful lens for examining girls’ diverse SNS experiences. More knowledge is needed about the girls’ positive experiences on SNS. Considering the widespread use of SNS, educators, families, and scholars need to understand more deeply what girls experience in online interactions.

### **Girls Studies**

The introduction of women’s studies during the second wave feminist movement took academia by storm in the 1970s (Gilligan, 2011); however, the new field of women’s studies shed scant light on the unique experiences of girls. Women’s studies produced some research on girls during the 1980s, but primarily focused on understanding women (p. 4). Until the 1990s,

academics did not study teen girls in any detail (Pipher, 1994). In the 1990s a new area for study entered academia: Girls studies (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015). Many researchers in the field of girls' studies consider themselves third wave feminists (Kearney, 2011). A landmark event for girls' studies occurred with the third wave feminist publication of *Riot Grrrl* magazine in 1993 (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015). The 1990s "girls' zine" movement gave voice to girls and fostered new spaces for agency (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015, p. 5). The movement took off, with an accompanying increase in the publication of girl-specific scholarship and a journal devoted to girls' studies, *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (Kearney, 2009), among many other publications. By 2009, Kearney describes the coalition of girlhood studies as "a unique and significant area of critical inquiry" (p. 2).

The distinct separation from women's studies benefits girls' studies, yet the study of girls' "social, cultural and political realities" continues to lag (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015, p. 3). As Pipher (1994) cautions us, "Psychology has a long history of ignoring girls this age" (p. 21). Typically, adolescent research lumps girls and boys together and focuses on white adolescents (A pocket guide to social media, 2009; Nielsen Social Media Report, 2016; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Rideout & Robb, 2018; The Common Sense Census, 2015); in this research I present specific information on diverse girls' use of SNS when available. For instance, differences are significant in the use of SNS among girls and boys, as 78% of girls make new friends on social media compared to 52% of boys (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015). While girls are making friends on SNS, boys are more likely to make new friends when playing video games online (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Lenhart, 2015; Lenhart et al., 2017).

Differences between the behaviors of girls and boys in SNS are noted by the researchers named above, but distinctions regarding racial differences are scarce. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) refer to Black girls as "invisible" in research literature (p. 299). Racial discrimination is a common stressor for American adolescents of color and cyberbullying researchers posit that



teens of color are bullied at a greater rate than White teens (Tynes, 2015). Black teens report racial epithets, stereotyping and racist comments, images of the Confederate flag, and threats of physical harm accompanied by images of dead black bodies in online sites (Tynes, 2015, p. 3), yet Black youth engage in SNS at a greater rate than White youth (Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011). Teens continue to follow a pattern of moving to newer platforms and Black teens flock more quickly to newer online spaces. They have shifted away from sites such as *FB* toward *Instagram* and *Snapchat* (Lenhart, Kantor, Malato, Benz, Thompson, Zeng, & Swanson, 2017).

According to Johnson and Ginsberg (2015), girls are objectified in the media, and their voices have been trivialized and self-censored. Research focused on girls frequently portrays them as victims (Damour, 2016; Scully, 2009). At the opposite end of the victimhood continuum (Strzepek, 2015) is a stereotypical, idealized conception of girlhood, and the search for a “universal girl” which prevents researchers from connecting to the reality of girls’ lives and their racial, class, and gender differences (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015, p. 5). We need to know more from diverse girls themselves about their use of SNS.

Feminist research focusing on the experience of girls is valuable for understanding the needs of girls. *Meeting at the Crossroads* (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994), *Ophelia Speaks* (Shandler, 1999), *Queen Bees & Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2002), and the “unfit subjects” (p. 1) of Wanda Pillow’s (2004) research on pregnant and mothering girls all contribute to my understanding of girls’ agency. In those works, the authors hold a stance that regards girls as powerful and agentic. They position their work against patriarchal, masculinist norms. The feminist research process is not neutral (Crotty, 2003). Feminist critical theory research allows researchers to highlight the ways in which women and girls are different from the assumed male norm (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

## Belongingness and Connectedness Constructs

Literature that informs the subject of belongingness and connectedness varies widely, from Coon's (1946) study of universal innateness of forming groups in a sociological context, to Maslow's (1943) theory of the fundamental need for belongingness for people to reach higher psychological needs. The constructs of belongingness and connectedness have unique yet overlapping meanings. Belonging is not an *emic* term, not part of the teen vernacular; girls say they "talk," "hang with," or "hang out." Belongingness is a broad, widely researched construct (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gardner, Pickett & Brewer, 2000; Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005a; Maslow, 1943; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Baumeister and Leary (1995) state that "much of what human beings do is in the service of belongingness" (p. 498). Young people satisfy belongingness and connectedness needs through "identification and participation within the social world" (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 338), and today the *social world* means *social media*.

In the field of *self psychology*, Richard Lee and Steven Robbins (1998) call connectedness a "ubiquitous social lens" for interacting with the world requiring "active involvement with another object, group or environment" (p. 343). Lee and Robbins (1998) study belongingness and social connectedness and refer to social connectedness as an internal sense of belonging. Describing social connectedness as "an aspect of the self that reflects subjective awareness of interpersonal closeness with the social world," such closeness is critical to a sense of belonging (Lee & Robbins, 2000, p. 484). Gradually, individuals organize their social experiences into an internal sense of belongingness *and* connectedness, which Lee and Robbins (2000) label social connectedness.

Townsend and McWhirter (2005) draw the concepts of belongingness and connectedness together when they state that the consequences of disconnection from others may include "social isolation, deficits in belongingness and connectedness, and a lack of meaning or purpose in life"

(p. 191). Connectedness relates to better self-management of needs and emotions (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) proclaim belongingness as the “fundamental human motivation,” but that phrase could describe the need for belongingness *or* connectedness (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Articles regarding the merits of SNS range broadly from the historical research of Boyd and Ellison (2008) and the statistical work of Lenhart (2015), Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan (2016), and Anderson and Jiang (2018b), to the theories of Herring and Kapidzic (2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Girls’ use of SNS is a subject often discussed despairingly among adults (Clark, 2013; Damour, 2016; Homaoun, 2017; Turkle, 2011; 2015). Parents express widespread concern about the unhealthy online practices of their teens, and some studies indicate teen behaviors warrant concern (Allen, 2012; Baker, 2011; Damour, 2016). Teen use of SNS confounds many adults who view teen interest in their digital device as addiction or obsession (Andreassen, 2015). A predominance of research predicts negative outcomes for millennials and young millennials addicted to their phones (Andreassen, 2015; Clark, 2013; Damour, 2016) and unable to hold a coherent face-to-face conversation (Turtle, 2015). Damour (2016) laments girls as hapless sexting victims, non-agentic rag dolls. Davis (2013) explores girls’ developmental tasks of identity expression and social interaction online. Turtle (2011, 2015) emphasizes the costs of teen technology use for face-to-face communication. Clark (2013) describes the dilemmas families experience with teen digital media use. Literature by and large does not reflect positive outcomes or experiences for teens online

However, Lynn Clark, author of *The Parent App: Understanding Families in the Digital Age* (2013), states, “many parents are pre-occupied with potential risks and less interested than they might be in the value of their teens’ online experiences” (Jenkins, 2013, p 3). Teen use of SNS confounds many adults who view teen interest in their digital device as addiction or

obsession (Andreassen, 2015). Minimal scholarly research exists to explain girls' positive encounters through SNS, particularly as resources for pursuing belongingness and connectedness; even less research describes girls' differing experiences by race. Insufficient qualitative research is available detailing what girls may gain from SNS, how their belongingness and connectedness needs are fostered, and how girls themselves describe and experience their use of SNS. Despite the body of research that examines negative aspects of SNS, stop for a minute and listen to the words of danah boyd (2014), "teens aren't addicted to their phones, they are addicted to each other" (p. 18). To understand girls' SNS activity, researchers need to study girls' experiences *in their own words* to recognize how and why they use online sites, including in pursuit of fulfilling belongingness and connectedness needs.

### **Purpose for the Study**

The purpose of this research was to examine how girls use SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs, for communicating with friends and family, and the personal meaning they find in their SNS activities. This research of girls' SNS use examined their use of online platforms such as *Facebook* (hereafter *FB*), *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Snapchat*. Viewing the use of SNS as more than an addiction, and more than entertainment, this feminist study conceptualized girls as agents in their meaning-making through SNS. This study increases understanding for educators, families, and scholars to facilitate productive responses to diverse youth's desire for online communication.

Research questions:

RESEARCH QUESTION 1 – How do girls use SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs through their SNS activities?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2 – How do girls describe other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities?

## **My Positionality**

I have been interested in girls' experiences for many years. As a former high school teacher, I spent years watching girls progress from 14-year-old freshmen to 18-year-old seniors. Observing them walking the high school halls and talking with animation, I saw note-passing in class, important missives that could not wait until lunch period. Connecting to girlfriends, boyfriends, best friends, or parents was a premier concern for them, while disconnecting could be devastating. They enthusiastically sought a sense of belonging, to their friendship group, clubs, or sport teams (Johnson, 2009). The energy in a high school was dynamic with connections between teens palpably humming with electricity. I could observe girls' focus on analog relationships, and the connections those relationships provide.

## **A Pilot Study**

Doctoral coursework provided the first opportunity for me to undertake educational research on girls and SNS from my perspective of girls as agents, which was beneficial for my understanding of qualitative research as a productive set of methodologies for exploring girls' agency. In 2014, I interviewed eight girls between the ages of 13 and 18 about their use of social media and later held a focus group discussion with four of them. The girls volunteered their thoughts about their use of *FB*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Pinterest*, the social media sites of interest to them. None of the participants were *Twitter* users. Girls expressed their approval of social media use and their enjoyment in following friends on *FB* and creating *boards* on *Pinterest*. They used phones (sometimes shared, in the case of two sisters) to text prolifically; the girls were in frequent contact with friends, and sometimes parents.

Other results in the pilot study revealed that one participant found social media constraining in its demands, but the other subjects were uniformly positive about their use of social media, finding it relaxing and entertaining. The girls' clear engagement with and enjoyment of SNS drew my attention toward the under-researched benefits of SNS use for girls.

Scaffolding my initial research with girls and their use of social media, I continued my study with a focus on understanding in more depth teens' positive experiences with SNS.

### **Background Theories**

Belongingness and connectedness have a rich history of research. To initiate my study, I provide a brief review of psychological theories relevant for grounding this study's key constructs of girls' need for belongingness and connectedness. I apply research on belongingness by Maslow (1943), Baumeister and Leary (1995), and Gardner, Pickett, and Knowles (2005b), and connectedness studies by Gilligan (1982), Brown and Gilligan (1992), and Townsend and McWhirter (2005) as the anchoring research for the central concepts I used to explore girls' use of SNS (see also, Chapter Two).

### **Hierarchy of Needs**

Maslow (1943) describes the hierarchy of needs as a “framework for future research and [it] must stand or fall” (p. 371); 76 years later Maslow's theory endures, providing the theoretical foundation for central concepts in this research. The critical role of belonging for psychological health is explained in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). He describes needs in layers. The first set of needs are “the ‘physiological needs’, physical drives for gratifying hunger” (p. 373). When physiological needs are well met, a new set of needs emerges: The second level need for safety. Successfully met safety needs allow a person to seek the needs of the third level: The higher, psychological love needs, which Maslow (1943) describes as “love and affection and belongingness needs” (p. 381), and a new center of focus develops. The fourth level of esteem needs appear as a desire for a “high evaluation of themselves” (p. 381). The last level is the need for self-actualization. Self-actualization is the desire to “become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (p. 382). In other words, what a person *can* be, she *must* be. Higher needs are less necessary for survival, but their satisfaction can produce profound happiness (Maslow, 1970). Individuals must satisfy belonging needs to move on to the

higher motive of self-esteem, and by whatever means the girls meet these needs, they remain essential to psychological health (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Today's girl pursues her belongingness and connection needs through SNS (boyd, 2014). *Snaps* and *tweets* supplant face-to-face conversation in today's teens' world. The SNS medium, only two decades old, substitutes for the in-person communication that has sustained youth connection for millennia.

### **Difference Research**

Noted feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982; 1995; 2011) explains women's experiences in terms of gender and outside the "patriarchal norm" (p. 56). Gilligan (2011) worked with Erik Erikson (1963) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1973) at Harvard University and their androcentric development theories inspired her research, known as *difference research*. She launched this research trajectory with her book, *In a Different Voice* in 1982 (Hesse-Biber, 2014). According to Gilligan (2011), the culture of psychology has a view of men as the "measure of humanity" (p. 1), with significant figures in psychology, Freud (1923), Erikson (1963), and Kohlberg (1973), deeming women deficient in development (Gilligan, 2011). Gilligan (2011) discusses the "tell-tale clue" (p. 1) to the problem's origin as *gender*. Challenging the prevailing wisdom that male development is the norm, Gilligan argues that women's development is simply different (Tong, 2014).

### **Methodology**

This study employed a constructionist epistemology to approach girls' use of SNS for belongingness and connectedness. An epistemology is a "way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 2003, p. 3). In constructionist epistemology, the researcher proceeds from an understanding that truth and meaning come into existence as individuals interact with the world, constructing meaning as they engage (Crotty, 2003). In this sense, I drew from an understanding that girls are legitimate sources of knowledge about their social worlds and they

construct meaning as they engage with objects, such as digital devices, and systems such as SNS, as well as people in their networks. The theoretical perspective is defined as “an approach to understanding,” and for this research the theoretical perspective is feminist critical theory (p. 3). Hesse-Biber (2014) describes feminist critical theory as a feminist trajectory that enables new paradigms for the exploration of women’s lives. Feminist critical theory characterizes the world as patriarchal and culture as masculinist, and research is intended to unsettle taken for granted norms, empower and liberate (Crotty, 2003). In this view, the research process is not neutral, but laden with power relations.

This qualitative study proceeded with a feminist critical theory perspective and feminist methodology. Upon Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, I contacted superintendents and principals in two area schools. With the administrators’ permission, I discussed the study with teachers who were willing to allow me access to their students. Volunteers were recruited from the teachers’ classes and I sought both consent (parents) and assent (teens) forms. In addition, I reached out by word of mouth to friends and colleagues who had students or relatives interested in participating. Thirty-six girls volunteered and each girl would take part in two interviews. The study was projected to begin in January of 2018. Acquiring IRB permission commenced shortly after the proposal was approved and I believed that data collection could take place February through May of 2018. IRB permission took longer than anticipated and data collection began in September of 2018 and I completed it in December of 2018.

I contributed to this body of literature by conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews with 36 girls between the ages of 13 and 18 during 2018 in several locations in a Midwest state. The narrators included three African American girls, eight Native American girls, three Latina girls, and twenty-one White girls. To investigate girls’ use of SNS for belongingness and connectedness, I examined *FB*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Snapchat* sites.



Adolescent girls are a complex demographic. Girls can be reluctant when pressed for more information than they choose to offer, but they open up when ready to connect on their terms. Dana Edell (2015), for example, reminds us that there is often a layer of “wary suspicion” when teenagers talk to adults (p. 56). I was mindful throughout the study that I wanted to learn from the girls, believing they had much to teach me about their worldviews. Girlhood is a relevant social category, one that is important to “global capital and global citizenship,” and to our understanding of political resistance and social movements (p. 16). This research was well-served by a feminist view of gendered social lives, roles, and relationships with technology. Hesse-Biber (2014) states that “feminist research positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process” (p. 3). Girls were the center of this study; the focus was on their SNS experiences in their voices. I recognize the androcentric nature of attitudes toward girls, either as helpless victim of the stronger male or the cheerleader with a gleaming smile, and I reject both stereotypes. Girls have agency in their lives and engage in meaning-making in their activities.

As a feminist researcher, I was aware of power and authority issues that can occur between the researcher and the participant in any research study. Sociologist and women’s studies author Barrie Thorne (1993) describes her closeness to girls resulting from her memories of her own girlhood relationships, and I acknowledged a similar pull toward girls and feminine interaction. According to Brown and Gilligan (1992), interviewing girls allows us to “remember the forgetting of our girlhood” (p. 17). Despite my familiarity with and fondness for my target age group, I understood that I must avoid “studying down.” I knew that I had much to discover from girls, and I recognized that teens are complete versions of themselves (Thorne, 1993, p. 12).

Researchers who use feminist methodology may collect data through any number of methods. In this study, I planned to use interactive voice diaries, semi-structured interviews, and online data sharing. I anticipated employing Edell’s (2015) interactive voice diary method. This method involves providing participants with a recording device, such as an MP3 player and

recording open-ended questions for the subject to answer at her leisure. In my original study plan I invited girls to listen to and consider my interview questions, answering in their own words, in their own time. Yet, my initial attempts with the interactive voice diaries did not produce robust data (see Chapter 3). I shifted to conducting my research with traditional face-to-face interviews in locations as comfortable as possible for the girls, such as school offices or the participant's home. Hesse-Biber (2014) notes that the interview "seeks to understand the lived experiences of the individual" (p. 189). The interview is used for "getting at the 'subjective' understanding an individual brings" to a situation (p. 189). The qualitative method of interviews was appropriate for this study because participants had the freedom to respond to questions in ways they found meaningful. Resulting data reveals the information the participant finds important without the researcher's preconceived notions of the girls' lives (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

In addition, key to this study was the method of online data sharing which provided researcher and participant the opportunity to sit side-by-side, perusing SNS that the girls used, and sharing interests and information. Participating girls had several online accounts and sitting together with a digital device provided an opportunity to examine individual sites, pages, and view real-time interaction (Gleason, 2016). Select examples served as prompts for discussion, sites for understanding, and potential documents to scaffold data. Data analysis was ongoing, and inductive, and based on the ideas and themes that emerged.

### **Summary and Chapter Descriptions**

In this chapter I introduced my study, an examination of girls' use of SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs. I began this chapter with the information on the background to the study, drawing from what we know about the use of SNS, and the information we still need to know. Then, I discussed constructs of belongingness and connectedness that emerged from classic theories in the field of psychology. Next, I presented my problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. I examined my positionality, discussed

girls' studies, and girls as subjects. I provided background information for theories crucial to understanding girls' need for belongingness and connectedness. Chapter One concluded with the methodology for the study, including the epistemology and theoretical perspective, and a brief introduction to the feminist framework of the research. I discuss the methods in detail in Chapter Three.

In Chapter Two, I review literature relevant to the study. Sections include the history of SNS and current SNS that girls in this study use most frequently. I examine theories of belonging ranging from the work of psychologists Abraham Maslow (1943) to Wendi Gardner and colleagues (2000; 2005a; 2005b) and explain the connection research of feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982) to better understand the foundational theories that inform the concepts of belongingness central to the study. I discuss teen access to the internet, economics of the internet, and interaction styles. Examination of girls' connection through relationships concludes the literature review.

In Chapter Three I describe the feminist commitments of this study and research design and framework that I used to examine the importance of SNS for belonging and connection needs from girls' perspectives. Beginning with a statement of purpose, I next detail my rationale for choosing qualitative research methods. I explain the various reasons for the choice of Livingstone's (2008) online data sharing method along with traditional interviews, and the ways I apply these methods to this study. I describe the interviews and changes I made in my methods based on pilot interviews and discuss the girls' attitudes toward sharing the content of their social media accounts. Sample questions asked of the girls are included, as well as analysis techniques, the analysis process, and reasons for the process. Transcriptions are discussed as well as quality trustworthiness criteria. Strengths of the methodology, limitations of the methodology, and limitations of the study are detailed, along with the terminology used.

Chapter Four emphasizes description of contextual information and presents themes that emerged from inductive analysis. In Chapter Five I present the study's findings, implications, recommendations, and final researcher reflections.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand girls' use of SNS for experiencing belongingness and connectedness and other personal meanings. Current research indicated a scarcity of qualitative studies on the significance of belongingness and connectedness for girls, especially girls of color, via SNS. Research for girls' use of SNS as it relates to belongingness and connectedness was minimal (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a; Damour, 2016; Lee & Chiou, 2013; Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013). Literature focusing on belongingness and connectedness for other groups was abundant (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gardner, Pickett & Brewer, 2000; Gardner, Pickett & Knowles, 2005b; Gilligan, 1982; Maslow, 1943). As a researcher, my interest was directed toward how girls understood their use of SNS, what they gained, and how they felt about their SNS use in their own words. This chapter provides a foundation for the topic by examining SNS history and current platforms (e.g. *FB, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter*), exploring feminist theories of technology, reviewing relevant literature regarding belongingness and connectedness theories, studying girls' use of SNS for communication and relationship building, and considering information about girls' use of SNS for relationship affirmation.

#### **Literature Sources**

To identify research for this literature review, I employed academic databases including PsycINFO, Psych articles, Google Scholar, suggestions from advisors, and searching terms and combinations including *social network systems, social media, teens, adolescents, youth, belongingness, connectedness, connection, girls, females, FB, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat*.

The scholarly articles and books I identified and reported for this literature review met the criteria for: 1.) Peer-reviewed, 2.) Published within the last fifteen years if specific to SNS, 3.) Empirical research (qualitative or quantitative), and 4.) Studied ages 13 – 18. I also examined non-scholarly articles from *Social Media Today*, *History of Social Media*, *MTV*, *The New York Times*, and *The Huffington Post*, as well as *about us* pages on prominent SNS such as *FB*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *Snapchat*. Articles from the *Pew Research Center*, *Nielsen Research*, and *Common Sense Media* provided statistical information and large scale findings. The constant changes in this field in terms of available technologies and youth preferences made the use of non-scholarly articles vital to ground this study.

Sixty-nine percent of American adults utilize SNS (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2019), but terminology to refer to such sites ranges and shifts as technologies expand. To clarify these current terms, I begin by defining SNS and teen access to SNS. Second, I provide a review of the literature describing the human need for belongingness and connectedness. Third, I present feminist research on women and girls, including their technology use, and the impact of SNS on teens. Finally, I explore the literature on relational connectedness of girls on SNS that is central to the foundation of this study.

### **Social Network Sites**

This section defines SNS, clarifies vocabulary for SNS users, and identifies terminology based on user age. I explain criteria for SNS (boyd & Ellison, 2008), and examine subtle distinctions in terms, along with differing views of the terminology (Prensky, 2001; Thompson, 2013).

#### **SNS Definitions**

Boyd and Ellison (2008) define SNS as “web-based services that allow individuals to 1.) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2.) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3.) view and traverse their list of connections and

those made by others in the system” (p. 211). Blease (2015) refers to SNS as online communities, in which the community members offer photos of themselves, friends, pets, and accomplishments large and small.

### **SNS Age Groups**

Contemporary SNS are embedded in today’s culture, and media are a “natural part of a teen’s environment” (Clark, 2013, p.77). Ninety-five percent of American teens have a smartphone or access to one (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). Teens use digital and mobile media to connect, meet, share, fight, gossip, entertain themselves, and begin and end relationships. The ubiquitous presence of teens in such sites inspires technology theorists to develop specific terms to capture their use. Prensky (2001) refers to young millennials (born after 1994) living in developed nations as *digital natives*, in contrast to pre-millennials who can remember their very young years without cell phones. Natives not only grew up with technology, but process information differently than older individuals known as *digital immigrants*: Members of *Generation Y* or *pre-millennials* (born 1977-1994), *Generation X* (born 1966-1976), and *Baby Boomers*, born between 1945 and 1965 (Dimock, 2019; Generation X, Y, Z, n.d.; Prensky, 2001). Another digital generation is *Generation Z*, those who were born between 1995 and 2010, like the girls in this study (Bromwich, 2018; Parker, Graf & Igielnik, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

The term *digital native* is common and controversial. Thompson (2013) questions digital native terminology and the prowess the term implies. The results from her study of 388 college freshmen reveal that “digital natives use a narrow range of digital technologies,” and they may not direct their technology skills toward learning (p. 20). Continuing to parse the phrase *digital native*, MTV’s research arm *Insights* identifies younger millennials, aged 13-17, as *digital homesteaders* and calls 20-something millennials *digital pioneers* (Hillhouse, 2013).

Recognizing the need for a measure of digital use among students, Teo (2013) devised the

Digital Native Assessment Scale (DNAS) to measure students' perception of their digital nativity. Results support the notion of the digital native as someone who processes information quickly, parallel processes information, and prefers graphics to text (Teo, 2013).

### **SNS Yesterday and Today**

Social network site technology platforms are growing and show variation since the inception of the internet in 1982 (Griffiths, 2002). Access to computer technology was restricted to large corporations, governments, and universities until the *World Wide Web* was launched in 1991 (Griffiths, 2002). Computer technology was relatively limited when the program considered the first SNS, *SixDegrees.com*, initiated in 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2008). *SixDegrees.com* allowed members to create user profiles, list friends, and surf the site for friends (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

### **SNS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Ushering in the internet phenomena in the new millennium was *MySpace* in 2003, *Flickr* in 2004, and *YouTube* in 2005 (The History of Social Media, 2015). By 2004, teens were flocking to *MySpace* because of a corporate policy encouraging minors to participate. Allowing users to personalize their pages, *MySpace* made the terms *copy* and *paste* part of the internet lexicon as *MySpace* users created unique backgrounds (boyd & Ellison, 2008). A 2005 *News Corporation* purchase of *MySpace* led to mismanagement, an unsuccessful merger, and accusations of sexual interactions between adults and youth (Gillette, 2011). Dwindling members and fast-moving technology led internet users to other SNS (Gillette, 2011).

### **Current SNS for this Study**

To investigate girls' use of SNS for belongingness and connectedness, I examined *FB*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Twitter*. At the time of this writing, *FB* was the most popular SNS for all ages in the United States (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2019). Mark Zuckerberg launched the data program *TheFacebook.com* in 2004, originally designed exclusively for communication



among Harvard University students (The History of Social Media, 2015). Expanding in 2005, *FB* allowed virtually everyone to join (boyd & Ellison, 2008); thus, the current *FB* user base is enormous and diverse (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). *Twitter* was created in 2006 as a result of text messaging popularity, with the unique opportunity for users to create and deliver a thought in a mere 140 characters or less (Sagolla, 2009). *Instagram*, founded in 2010, is a community of more than one billion monthly active users who capture and share the world's moments on the service (Number of daily active Snapchat users, 2019). *Snapchat*, released in 2011, allows its 190 million users (Number of Daily Active Snapchat Users, 2019) to send photos and videos that vanish (from the user's perspective) after ten seconds (Pittman & Reich, 2016). In October of 2013 *Snapchat* revealed a new feature called "stories" which allowed posts to remain visible for twenty-four hours (Miners, 2013).

*Facebook* is the prototype for a powerhouse SNS. Monthly active users on *FB* number 2.4 billion as of May 2019 (Number of Facebook users, 2019). Members create a personal profile, and search other users' pages (Blease, 2015). The popularity of a post is quantified in the number of *likes* a post receives. In a 2016 update of a simple form of online communication, the *FB like* button is now accompanied by emotive icons (*emoji*); most new emojis are positive, but two allow expressions of anger and sadness (Dong & Baumeister, 2016a). American teens' use of *FB* has decreased from 71% in 2015 (Lenhart, 2015) to 51% of teens aged 13 – 17 in May of 2018 (Smith, 2019).

*Instagram* members choose which users to follow, and post photos and videos for others to view. Self-described as "a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures," members are encouraged to snap a photo with their cell phone, "then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever" (About us n.d., para. 2). Teens can create a digital diary on *Instagram* without the sidebars of the advertising prominent on *FB* (Bass, 2016). More than half of teens (52%) use *Instagram* (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b) and 17%

of girls call *Instagram* the most important social media site (Social media & user-generated content, n.d.), with girls accessing the site more frequently than boys (Lenhart, 2015).

*Snapchat*'s online page promises to "empower people to express themselves, live in the moment, learn about the world, and have fun together" (Snap Inc., n.d., para. 3). Ostensibly a camera company "reinventing the camera," (Snap Inc., n.d., para. 2) *Snapchat* users can add accessories or filters to an image and send silly or varied pictures to other users (Snap Inc., n.d.); *Snapchat* users love the platform (Freitas, 2017). *Snapchat*, with its ephemeral ghost icon, states that "life is more fun when you live in the moment" (Snap Inc., n.d., para. 3). Images, or *snap*s, posted on *Snapchat* are designed to self-destruct after ten seconds (Pittman & Reich, 2016). The temporal nature of these snaps allows *Snapchat* users to send their snaps without concern about consequences (Freitas, 2017). However, Bass (2016) states that the company's promise that images delete is a myth, and images may be permanent. A sharp viewer could quickly screen shot the image to save or share. Teen users know that others could save or share an image but feel if they are careful who they send to they can feel "pretty safe" the snap is really going away (Freitas, 2017, p. 132). Sixty-nine percent of American teens are *Snapchat* members (Anderson, 2018). Forty-seven percent of teens consider *Snapchat* their most important social media application (Social media & user-generated content, n.d.).

A blog is a website that contains text entries in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entry (*post*) first (Definition of: Blog, n.d.). Interactive online journals and blogs are popular among teens. With frequent updates and constant changes, blogs are personal, yet social, with links and comment sections (Kessler, 2016). A 2011 study of 20 girl bloggers shows an increase in levels of "self-expression and peer interaction" while blogging (p. 146). *Tumblr* is a blog application which claims that "*Tumblr* is your canvas" (About us, n.d.). The user is encouraged to post text, photos, GIFs, videos, live videos, audio, and anything that expresses the person's creative self. According to a 2007 study, girls blog more frequently than boys, with

41% of girls ages 15-17 blogging (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008), compared to 20% of boys (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

*Twitter* is a microblog (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010), a “blog that contains brief entries about the daily activities of an individual or company” (Definition of: Microblog, n.d., para. 1). Three hundred thirty million people are active monthly users (Hatch, 2018), and 82% of those users access *Twitter* via mobile devices (*Twitter* usage/Company facts, 2016). *Twitter* provides a link to other sites or photo/video files and limited the member to 140 characters per post, or *tweet* until November of 2017 when *Twitter* doubled the number of characters to 280 (Larson, 2017). Users send over 500 million tweets every day in this public platform (Social media & user-generated content, n.d.); anyone can access or share a tweet (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Thirty-two percent of teens use *Twitter* (Social media & user-generated content, n.d.). Teens consider *Twitter* engaging, even addicting, and some view it as “‘weird’ if their peers do not use *Twitter* (Gleason, 2016 p. 2).

### **The Business of Technology**

*Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Twitter* thrive by creating the belief that the member expresses themselves and makes empowering choices with their use; however, they commoditize their users (Silva, 2015). Like traditional media, SNS make money through advertising, and increasing the number of people using the platform causes more interest from companies in advertising their products and services. The money generated by SNS is increasing at a rapid rate: In 2014 SNS generated 17.9 billion from advertising, games, and apps; eMarketer approximated 41 billion in SNS earnings for 2017 (Silva, 2015). Investopedia’s Greg McFarlane (2014) estimates that *FB* earns \$5.32 a year from each of its users. *Instagram* is predicted to earn five billion dollars in advertising in 2018 (Hatch, 2018). Describing SNS use as the media company “renting your eyeballs to its advertisers,” McFarlane (2014, para. 2) states that the “very purpose of... existence” for *FB* and *Twitter* is advertising (para. 5). The friends and

connections made online are secondary to the financial benefits for powerful corporations. While social media is touted for creating bonds and facilitating friendships online, meaningful commercial relationships are also being made between companies and their social media advertisers (Onwuanibe, 2015).

Consider statistics which relate to technology and gender in the administration, ownership, and workforce of technology companies: 26% of the workers in the software engineering firms who work in Silicon Valley (SV) are women (Ashcraft & Quinn, 2017), down from 36% in 1991 (Lazarro, 2017). Most women in the information technology industry work in the area of assembly, while men dominate in the creative, decision-making domain (Rosser, 2005). Only 11% of executive positions in SV are held by women (Lazarro, 2017). The powerful region of SV is a man's world and women in SV face sexism, harassment, and blatant hostility toward pregnancy (Lazarro, 2017). Companies promoting relationships and connection between their users are commoditizing female users (Silva, 2015) but fail to employ women in equitable measure (Lazarro, 2017). Hiring practices and perceptions in the industry remain gendered.

### **Feminist Theories of Technology**

*Those who design technologies are by the same stroke designing society. (Faulkner, 2001, p. 82)*

There is a long history of feminist theorizing of technology. Some theories draw from liberal, radical, and socialist feminist perspectives, and more recently, technofeminism and cyberfeminism have emerged to consider technological developments and their implications (Faulkner, 2001; Wajcman, 2010). Feminist theorists of technology reflect a range of views. Some argue that women are passive subjects on the receiving end of technology (Faulkner, 2001), whereas others, such as cyberfeminists celebrate digital technology as liberatory for women (Wajcman, 2007). Faulkner (2001) observes that social constructivists believe technology develops based on male values, embedding hierarchical gendered structures and

heteronormativity in every aspect of technological design and expression. Other feminist approaches, such as Handewerk (2017), find virtual spaces of *Second Life* to be potentially empowering for members of underrepresented groups, including sexual minorities. Technology has an evident gendered nature, according to Wajcman (2009), which imbues machinery with feminine and masculine meaning, and a “mutual shaping” results (p. 7). As an example, computer artifacts reflect social constructions of gender in labels of “female” and “male” computer cables (Faulkner, 2001, p. 83).

Wajcman (2007), a technofeminist, articulates that “feminist theories of gender and technology have come a long way over the last two decades” (p. 287). Technofeminist theory combines feminism and science and technological studies (STS). Feminist STS scholars adopt a social constructivist framework and argue that technology is both a “source and consequence of gender relations” (Wajcman, 2009, p. 7). Technofeminism accepts the theoretical framing that technology is a sociotechnical product, “a seamless web or network combining artefacts, people, organizations, cultural meanings and knowledge” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 149). Wajcman (2010) believes that technological innovation is “shaped by the social circumstances within which it takes place” (pg. 149). In turn, connections and networks can enable activist efforts in varied social spaces. Without the internet, SPARK, the Women’s March, and the #MeToo movement would not have had a tool for social change (The Women’s March, n.d.).

Postmodern feminists shift their focus to the new relationship between women and technology based on mobile phone technology of the 1990s (Wajcman, 2010). Digital technologies provide access to machinery that requires brain power, not the brawn of patriarchal industry. Thus, according to Wajcman (2007), women are “uniquely suited to life in the digital age” with high rates of mobile phone and internet use (p. 291).

According to Sue Jackson (2018), “digital media are a key tool to connect girls with feminism and with other feminists in local and global contexts” (p. 32). From Malala’s advocacy

for girls' education (Jackson, 2018) to Greta Thunberg's passionate outcry against the effects of climate change (Rogers, 2019), young women have assumed worldwide prominence in social media. Girls are harnessing the power of social media to fight sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence in their world (Brown, 2011). In popular culture girls are lauded as the "vanguard of a 'new wave' of feminism" (Jackson, 2018, p. 33). Feminism is now viewed as "cool" and "just about anything" can be positioned as a feminist issue; on the darker side, rape culture proliferates, and anti-feminism continues to have a presence in media (p. 33).

### **The Human Need for Belonging and Connection**

As "No man is an island" (Donne, 1624, p. 48), no woman or girl can exist alone. Donne's allusion to humanity's need for belonging and connection penned in 1624 remains true in modernity. As intensely social creatures, humans live in groups and seek bonds with others. Groups are the fundamental units of human organization (Coon, 1946), and all societies, regardless of the level of structural complexity, form groups. Research as diverse as Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis (1995), belonging regulation (Gardner, Pickett & Brewer, 2000), and Gilligan's *difference research* (1982) points to a human need for acceptance, belonging, and connection.

#### **Maslow**

Belonging is an essential and prerequisite human need for growth. Abraham Maslow (1943) was among the first scientific psychologists to propose belonging as a critical human need. Maslow's (1943) formulation of a "positive theory of motivation" details five levels in human motivation (p. 371). The Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) places "love, affection, and belongingness needs" in the middle of the five-stage hierarchy (p. 380), with a base of physiological needs extending to an apex of abstract self-actualization needs.

## **Baumeister et al.**

Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) propose the belonging hypothesis. The hypothesis explains that belonging needs are fundamental, but not specific to a particular individual (Freud, 1923); mother, father, or other caregivers can equally fulfill belonging needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belongingness propels much of human social behavior and human desire toward establishing and maintaining connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The psychological need for belongingness is described as “almost as compelling a need as food” (p. 498). Adolescents express their need for belongingness in part through their friendships, and SNS provide an endless source of internet connectivity. A main feature of the need to belong proposed by Baumeister & Leary (1995) is “frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person” (p. 500). Social network sites offer the opportunity for a teen to meet belonging needs via the privacy of an electronic device (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Teens value acceptance and seek interactions which increase their sense of social approval. When one’s achievements receive social approval, needs for validation and recognition are met (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Connections through SNS may provide prerequisite social opportunities to people seeking acceptance and validation (Dong & Baumeister, 2016a). One type of validation occurs when an *Instagram* user accepts a friend request. Another form of approval occurs as increasing numbers of *FB* friends are displayed on the profile page, and as the *FB* member garners *likes* for posts. Both forms of approval encourage and sustain social bonds (Dong & Baumeister, 2016b).

The need for connection stimulates goal-directed activity designed to satisfy belonging needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) as teens search for possible relationships and friends on SNS. Positive responses to SNS posts create a feeling of social acceptance, and the SNS member experiences validation of belongingness needs (Seidman, 2013). Eighty-one percent of American

teens say that social media makes them “feel more connected to their friends” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2). Teens require frequent positive interactions online; a sense of ongoing relationships encourages continued online interaction (Tobin & Chulpaiboon, 2016). Comments, shares, or retweeting can strengthen and support offline relationships (Dong & Baumeister, 2016b). Reich, Subrahmanyam, and Espinoza (2012) find that teens in their study know 95% of their SNS friends and interact with them in face-to-face situations. The public forum SNS provide offers a substantive avenue for personal connections (Dong & Baumeister, 2016a). Announcing a relationship change from “single” to “in a relationship” on *FB* is significant enough to warrant the acronym, *FBO - Facebook official*, and approval of the relationship is monitored via numbers of likes (Five Things to do Before Becoming FBO, n.d., para. 1).

Dissolution of bonds within even transient groups can cause distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Unfriending on *FB* and *Twitter* fights prompt grief on SNS for today’s teens and adults. Forming social bonds should create positive emotions, but negative emotions result from relationships that are “broken, threatened, or refused” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 500). The modern term for dissolution of bonds is “unfriending” or “unfollowing” on social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 3). Forty-four percent of teens say they “often or sometimes unfriend or unfollow others on social media” (p. 3). Watt and Badger (2009) theorize that the need to belong is so robust that humans will invest as much effort preventing social bonds from dissolving as they do in creating bonds.

### **Regulation of Belonging**

Despite the wide-spread acceptance of Maslow’s classic theory of the hierarchy of needs (1943), and continuing recognition of the importance of human needs for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), mechanisms of belonging regulation did not gain recognition until the twenty-first century (Gardner, Pickett & Knowles, 2005b). Gardner and colleagues’ (2005b) research on regulating belonging needs indicates these needs must be met or opportunities for more social



interaction are required for balance. They propose a *social monitoring system* (SMS) for conceptualizing how people regulate belonging (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000).

As other systems in the human body require homeostasis, when the belonging regulation system detects unsatisfactory levels of belongingness and social bonds, the person feels motivated to increase belonging levels (Gardner et al., 2005b). When the assessment mechanism indicates requirements are met, belonging needs are satisfactory (Pickett & Gardner, 2005).

Pittman and Reich (2016) find that when belonging needs are deficient, SNS such as *Instagram* and *Snapchat* can provide a sense of belonging for teens by depicting photographs and video memories to rebalance needs.

### **‘In a Different Voice’**

Classic feminist author Virginia Woolf observed, “Values of women differ very often from the values of the other sex and ... the masculine values prevail” (Woolf, 1929).

Anchoring the central concepts of this research is the feminist work of Jean Baker Miller (1976), and Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research on differing needs for connection and belonging in girls and women from those of boys and men. Fifty-three years after Virginia Woolf’s tart social description of female and male values, a now famous feminist psychologist produced a “little book” that challenged widespread prevailing beliefs about gender (*In a Different Voice*, 1982). Gilligan’s (1982) seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, questioned and undermined decades of androcentric research in the field of psychology through describing women’s experiences with morality and psychosocial development as equal to that of men, but “in a different voice” (p. 2). Launching *difference research* in the field of psychology, Gilligan (1982) challenged the androcentric and uniform approaches to women’s and men’s experiences in research. The voice of girls and women differs from that of boys and males, according to Gilligan (1982), and that construct grounds this study. Girls value belonging and connection in a different way than boys, and that difference extends to their SNS actions.

## **Belonging Needs and SNS**

The internet has changed the way we communicate, and satisfaction of belonging needs is correspondingly changing (Seidman, 2014). Offering additional support for Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belief in the fundamental need to belong, Seidman (2013) identifies *FB* communication as a method for fulfilling belonging needs. Research subjects ranging from early adolescents (age 11-13) to college undergraduates indicate SNS use results in belonging need satisfaction (Lee & Chiou, 2013; Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013). The ability to connect to others 'anytime anyplace anywhere' when using SNS on a mobile device relates to higher levels of belonging in early adolescents, aged 11 – 13 (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013, p. 238). Quinn and Oldmeadow (2013) note that belonging is "particularly important during early adolescence", especially to the peer group (p. 238). Social network sites offer a feeling as if "one is permanently connected to a group of friends" and strong feelings of belonging to that group (p. 239).

Researchers have noticed that SNS use is fraught with negative effects. Jean Twenge (2017) has studied generational differences for twenty-five years and she notes the skyrocketing rates of teen depression and suicide since 2011, as do others (Blease, 2015; Haselton, 2017; Howard, 2019a; Howard, 2019b; O'Keefe, Clarke-Pearson, K., and Council on Communications and Media, 2011). To what does she attribute this dramatic shift? 2012 was the year that the proportion of Americans owning smartphones passed fifty percent (p. 3). Seventy-five percent of American teens owned an iPhone by 2017 (p. 3). Twenge's research reveals that "the more time teens spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression" and all screen activities are correlated to less happiness (p. 9). The "hegemony of *FB*" is evidenced by the phrase "*FB* Depression" according to Blease (2015, p. 3). Studies of the impact of *FB* on wellbeing indicate a positive correlation between the amount of time spent on SNS and rates of

depression in teens (p. 3). Turkle (2015) claims that teens experience “disconnection anxiety” when they are forced to spend time alone without access to social media (p. 68).

### **The Impact of SNS on Teens**

The term connectedness is synonymous with “plugged in” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section explores research in three areas on the impact of social media on teens and findings regarding how the digital relationship meets their desire for belongingness and connectedness. I begin with teen access to technology, next examine teen attitudes toward use of SNS, and continue with teen interaction on SNS. This provides a foundation for understanding the need for my research to examine girls’ use of SNS to pursue belongingness and connectedness needs.

#### **Teen Access to Technology**

The explosion of mobile phone use among American teens is documented in the *Pew Internet Report of 2013* (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013), the *Pew Internet Study of 2015: Teens, Social Media, and Technology Overview* (Lenhart, 2015), and followed up with the *Pew Social Media Fact Sheet 2019*. Findings show that in 2015, almost 75% of teens could access a smartphone (compared to 37% in 2013), 13% of 13 to 17-year-olds could use a cellular device without internet capability, and 92% were online daily, up from 78% in 2013 (Lenhart, 2015, p. 2). Since fully 88% of teens have access to a cell phone, and smartphone usage saw a two-fold increase in two years, the value teens perceive in this technology is clear. In 2018, 97% of teens aged 13 to 17 had access to a smartphone and the same number were using at least one of seven major online platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a). Teens consider access to SNS essential, and they avoid shutting off their phones completely unless the battery is dying (Lenhart, 2010). Access to social media is not uniformly available to teens; socioeconomic status plays a role. Low-income teens are less likely to use a smartphone and without an advanced device, apps like *Snapchat* and *Instagram* are not available (North, 2015). In Martin & Ito’s

(2015) interview with low-income youth, those without a smartphone call themselves “ghosts” on social media (p. 2).

Common Sense Census (2015) studied media use of more than 2,600 young people in the United States, separating reading and music from online social media. Defining screen media as watching and/or using television, movies, video games, social media, and the internet, the report indicates that 57% of 13 to 18-year-olds in the United States spend more than four hours per day with screen media (Common Sense Census, 2015). While 6% of teens do not use screen media daily, 26% of teens report spending more than eight hours per day engaged with some form of screen media (Common Sense Census, 2015). Forty-five percent of American teens describe themselves as online “almost constantly” but there is a gendered effect with half (50%) of teenage girls and 39% of teenage boys near-constant users (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a, p. 9).

Livingstone (2002, 2008) refers to the middle-class home as a “media-rich environment” for teens who can text, check SNS, talk on their phone, and watch television at the same time (2002, p. 405). Increasingly, the closed bedroom door signifies teen social media use. Studies examining the nuances of teenage bedroom culture compare the privacy of cyberspace to the bedroom; SNS are a virtual bedroom, especially for girls (Baker, 2011). Teens are less likely to use a desktop or laptop computer in a central area of the home. For teens, computers are *in-hand* and *in-pocket, moving with the user, and always on* (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). The fact that social media is always on complicates measuring SNS use. Access to many sites occurs in short bursts (e.g. text messaging, *Twitter*) while others remain on (e.g. *FB* in the background) all day (Common Sense Census, 2015). How pervasive is the use of SNS for youth? Forty percent of young adults (18-24) report using social media in the bathroom (The U.S. Digital Consumer Report, 2014).

## Use of SNS to Connect

Does the need for connection differ from earlier analog times? A note passes in class, a letter arrives in the mailbox, whispers pass messages; teens always seem to find ways to connect. Today's teen needs not wait for a private moment to read the note or letter, privacy is available on their phone. Admittedly, the means of connection for today's teens is a stark contrast with the methods of their digital immigrant parents. A jarring ring and a phone cord distended into the bedroom signaled a private connection two generations ago. One generation ago, a cordless phone in the shape of a brick represented the latest technology. In the twenty-first century, technology for teen connection looks very different. Communication occurs through quick keystrokes or by clicking a *like* button (Dong & Baumeister, 2016a). Access to a cell phone slimmer than a deck of cards occurs under the table during dinner. An incoming message tone and a downward glance alert parents that their child is moving into the SNS world.

Text messages allow nearly constant connection with friends and parents (Davis, 2012). A click of an icon or the swipe of a finger allows communication. A 13-year-old girl interviewed by Turkle (2011) explains that she “hates the phone and never listens to a voicemail” because texting offers the right amount of control for connection on her terms (p. 15). Sixty percent of teens text with friends each day (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b), while only 19% talk with friends on the phone (Lenhart, 2015). These types of trends concern Turkle (2015), as they accompany decreases in face-to-face interactions.

Adults are surprised to learn how little a teen's cell phone is used as a telephone. “I don't use my phone for calls any more. I don't have the time to just go on and on” states a young woman interviewed by Turkle (2011 p. 15). “I like texting, *Twitter*, looking at someone's *FB* wall. I learn what I need to know” (p 15). Taking photos or texting frantically to connect with a friend is common; an actual phone caller is likely a parent (boyd, 2014). A ringtone is followed

by an exasperated, “Mom!” or “Dad!”, seldom “Hey!” to a friend. Real-time communication via a phone call occurs infrequently among teens (Turkle, 2011).

Today’s teens are engaging with peers after school and on weekends through SNS (Wallace, 2014). The demands of friends on social media never seems to stop; 87% of adolescents who use text messaging in the United States report sleeping with their cell phone on or near their bed (Underwood, Ehrenreich, More, Solis, & Brinkley, 2013). The desire to check *Twitter*, count *FB* likes, view an *Instagram* post, or reply to a text message is intense. One teen states, “I have to look” (Turkle, 2011, p.171). A cell phone creates a perception that the teen has an obligation to be reachable, especially if parents pay for the phone (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Generation Z settles in the social media terrain, savvy about the use of technology, creating *gated* groups where an existing member invites or allows access to online content to a potential new member (Chandler & Munday, 2016). Teens curate their SNS groups and increasingly prefer the lock of an *Instagram* feed to a broadcast *FB* post (Hillhouse, 2013).

### **Interaction on SNS: Connection, Addiction, Drama Production**

Teens run the gamut in their use of SNS, from strengthening friendships to harassing other users (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Use of SNS is generally conceptualized in a binary fashion of good versus bad, yet teen use of SNS can also be viewed as a ternary concept, with “three participating entity sets” (Ternary, n.d., para. 1). Three elements recur in the literature: Researchers use the terms *connection* (boyd, 2014; Clark, 2013; Davis, 2013; Fitton, Ahmedani, Harold, & Shifflet, 2013), *addiction* (Andreassen, 2015; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Fineman, 2013; Turkle, 2011), and *drama production* (Allen, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) to describe teens’ relationships with SNS.

Digital technology provides teens with immediate access to current friends with the opportunity to broaden friendship circles, and builds and maintains connections through SNS (Damour, 2016; Anderson & Jiang, 2018a). Social network sites can provide a platform for

strengthening relationships (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b; Dong & Baumeister, 2016b; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), especially in girls, who are more likely to interact with known friends (Lenhart, 2015). Eighty-one percent of teens say social media “helps them feel more connected to their friends” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2). Fitton, Ahmedani, Harold, & Shifflet (2013) report that teens stay connected with their friends on a “constant basis,” and friends provide “coping strategies for life events” (p. 409). In Davis’s (2012) interviews with 32 teens, her findings indicate that SNS contact, texting, and instant messaging foster feelings of belonging among the subjects and validate teen thoughts and experiences. A larger study of 2,079 Bermudan teens (Davis, 2013) indicates that communication and interaction with peers online is linked to positive friendship quality. Teens report positive self-esteem and self-confidence based on their technology competence and pride themselves on their ability to use multiple SNS simultaneously (Fitton et al., 2013).

Social media is the American teen hangout (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Teens live in “cyber cliques” (Fitton et al., 2013 p. 408) because they no longer meet at the local shopping mall or the coffee shop. *Twitter* and *FB* provide a location for millennial teens to connect in a public space (boyd, 2014). Methods of interaction change, but adolescents continue to share interests, concerns, pictures, activities, and accomplishments (Davis, 2012). Social network communities such as *FB* and *Snapchat* allow a teen to connect with a variety of groups (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b); for example, a junior in high school might follow a school club page, soccer club page, pages for favorite entertainers, and follow friends and family (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Pittman and Reich (2016) propose that SNS such as *Snapchat* and *Instagram* provide a sense of belonging for teens. A participant in danah boyd’s study (2014) calls *FB* a “social lifeline,” where “everyone hangs out” (p. 20). Social network sites serve as an “avenue of escape” from unwanted family demands (Clark, 2013, p. 69). Home is considered an adult space where parents establish the rules and norms (boyd, 2007); however, in part, the appeal of the

internet is that it allows teens to find friendship and engagement while physically in the home (boyd, 2014). Teens are spending more time in the home, they are less likely to go out in groups than the previous generation (Terkle, 2015). The digital milieu allows a teen to interact with their friends as they sit in their room as Twenge (2017) explains. In an interview with Twenge (2017), a girl describes spending “most of the summer hanging out in her room alone with her phone” (p. 2). According to Twenge (2017), who researches generational differences, high school seniors in 2015 were going out less than eighth-graders did in 2009.

Negative tropes depicting girls as SNS victims of predators and bullies are widespread in popular and scholarly literature (Anderson, 2018; Davis & Koepke, 2016; Fineman, 2013; O’Keefe & Clark-Pearson, 2011; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2014). Some teens use the word addiction to describe their need to have their phone near while sleeping (Andreassen, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Social network sites provide teens the opportunity for positive online interaction with adults and peers (Davis, 2013), but the networked world can also encourage evasion and avoidance of face-to-face interaction. Screen connection allows an avenue for users to “reflect, retype, and edit,” but it also provides “a place to hide” (Turkle, 2011, p. 187). Referring to her phone as “the glue that ties her life together,” a 16-year-old passes messages between her estranged parents saying, “I am their IM” (p. 189). Twenty-four hour-a-day responsiveness is the price of staying on call for social media and text messages. Some teens indicate that they begin to resent the devices that force them to respond to their friends and family 24 hours per day (Turkle, 2011).

Technology is seductive, and public platforms such as *FB* create “intimacy without privacy” (Turkle, 2011, p. 172). Teens post their most personal information as if it were only read by a select few. Sharing comments and posts of friends and strangers, teens are following lives of pop celebrities by the minute. Girls are more likely than boys to post a *selfie*, a “still picture of one's self, typically taken with a smartphone that has a front-facing camera”



(Definition of: Selfie, n.d., para. 1). Donna Freitas' (2017) interviews with girls in *The Happiness Effect* consistently identifies girls as the most frequent selfie posters. While girls acknowledge the stereotypes of narcissism and entitlement that selfies promote (Moses, 2018), they also view them as a way to “honor ourselves” (Freitas, 2017, p. 88). Freitas (2017) identifies girls' online activity as “relationship-centric”, while boys are more about “displaying your successes” (p. 96).

Clark (2013) refers to youth culture as experiencing a “voyeuristic” tendency inherited from previous generations (p. 96). Boyd (2014) calls *MySpace* a site for “social voyeurism” as teens followed the musicians they adored at the height of the SNS's popularity in 2007 (p. 122). Yang (2007) explains the *MySpace* explosion as resulting from “online chatting, voyeurism..., and secret lives” (p. 23). Cyberspace lexicon reflects awareness of voyeuristic behavior among SNS users. Teens refer to *FB* “creepers” as people who constantly “browse through friends' pages, pictures, and walls, but doing so without comment” (Muisse, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2013, p. 3), and “lurkers” (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne & Saeri, 2014, p. 1), a member who visits an online community or social networking site “on at least an occasional basis, but who post rarely or not at all” (p. 2).

*Instagram* may be the quintessential SNS for online voyeurism. Each *Instagram* post is a comparison to someone else's “glossy, *Instagrammed* existence” (Fineman, 2013, para. 9). Fineman (2013) states that people now look at the events in their lives as opportunities to showcase their experiences and notes that we are “obsessed with photographing our lives, down to every first dance, every flower, every sandwich” (para. 4). *Instagram* could create a *fear of missing out* (FoMo) in the user (Freitas, 2017; Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont, 2016). Defining FoMo as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent,” Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell (2013) characterize FoMo as “the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” (p. 1841). Twenge (2017)

agrees, stating that young Americans are experiencing an increase in feeling left out, especially among girls (p. 11). Girls use social media more and are more likely to feel excluded and hurt when they see posts of friends having fun without them (p. 11).

Some research suggests that participating on SNS encourages narcissism, (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Turkle, 2011). Ryan and Xenos's (2011) findings link *FB* use with narcissism, extraversion and lack of conscientiousness. Buffardi and Campbell's (2008) seminal research on narcissism and SNS states that SNS allow control of self-presentation and foster superficial relationships that attract narcissists. Digital culture "enhances an environment of self-focus" and can drive a wedge between teens and adults (Clark, 2013, p. 209). Social network sites offer the opportunity for narcissists to fulfill their goals of "seeking attention and being admired" (Dong & Baumeister, 2016a, p. 84).

Research results reveal a relationship between a preference for technology communication in social situations and maladjustment in teens. Cyr, Berman, and Smith (2014) studied 268 public high school students, finding that communication technology usage "might be exacerbating the level of anxiety and distress related to adolescent identity development" (p. 89). Kim (2017) notes the effect of increased loneliness from SNS, while Blease (2014), indicates that *FB* increases the risk for negative evaluations, presenting teens "more opportunities to feel like a loser" (p. 14).

The *American Academy of Pediatrics* credits the ubiquitous *FB* with spawning its own disorder: *Facebook Depression* (O'Keefe, Clarke-Pearson, K., and Council on Communications and Media, 2011). The academy reports that teens may experience *Facebook Depression* due to social media use. The definition of *Facebook Depression* is "depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as *FB*, and then begin to exhibit classic depressive symptoms" (p. 802). Females spend more time than males on *FB* and invest emotionally in its usage with a resulting gendered effect; hence, women more likely to

encounter negative outcomes (Denti & Barboulus, 2012). Teens describe the online world as intense and that intensity is thought to be a triggering factor for envy (Haselton, 2017; Tandoc, Ferrucci & Duffy, 2015) or depression in some adolescents (Haselton, 2017; Howard, 2019a; Howard, 2019b; O’Keefe, et al., 2011). Preteens and teens experiencing *Facebook Depression* are at risk for social isolation and they may turn to risky internet sites promoting unhealthy and unsafe practices (O’Keefe, et al., 2011).

Sexting is a pejorative term which a range of popular literature describes as unhealthy and a moral crisis (Damour, 2016; Kearney, 2011; Sales, 2016). Sexting is common among youth and adults, according to Ricciardelli and Adorjan, (2019). Damour (2016) calls sexting “the practice of sending or receiving racy texts and pictures” (p. 165) and reports that 12 to 15% of teens send sexts, while 15 to 35% claim receiving sexts (Damour, 2016, Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019)), and 25% of adolescents admit forwarding sexually explicit pictures (Underwood et al., 2013). Fifty-one percent of girls report that pressure from a male is the reason for their sexting (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019), but only 18% of males report pressure from a girl as their motivation for sexting (Lenhart, 2015). Girls are “more likely” to receive sexting requests (Damour, 2016, p. 165) and boys were more likely to be the one asking for a sext (Anderson, 2018). Twenty-five percent of teens have received explicit sexts they did not request (p. 2), while 61% of teens sending a naked photo felt pressured to do so (Klettke, Hallfor, & Mellor, 2014).

The research of Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone (2013) notes the gendered nature of the sexting “panic,” with the risk of self-exploitation and need for criminal regulation focused on *girls* (p. 308); thus, academic research reporting meaningful teen interaction on SNS is dismissed, and a “hyper discourse” on sexting takes its place (Shade, 2011). Ricciardelli & Adorjan (2019) note that digital spaces are permeated by “misogyny, patriarchy, and structured by dominant...gender norms” (p. 563). The age-old double-standard of male versus female

actions is clear as the online behavior of males who send “dick pics” is considered a prank and normalized, while girls who sext are called “sluts” (p. 563).

Cyberbullying, “bullying that occurs through electronic communication technologies” is an increasing problem (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2014, p. 11). Acts of cyberbullying are intentional, repetitive, used to intimidate or insult, humiliate, embarrass or hurt the person, and psychologically violent (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Sixty-three percent of teens call the online harassment a “major problem” (Anderson, 2018, p. 3). Twenty-six percent of teens report spreading false rumors on cell phones to “indirectly harass others behind their back” (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 5). Technology for cyberbullying changes with the times, as instant messaging was the most frequent method in 2007, and social media the most common venue in 2014 (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2014) and in 2018 (Anderson, 2018). On SNS fights escalate, exchanges go on for days, and people stop speaking to each other in person. Fifty nine percent of teens report being the target of cyberbullying; the most common type is name calling (42%) (Anderson, 2018, p. 2). After interviewing hundreds of youth, Turkle (2011) reports that when freed from face-to-face interaction, teens find it easier to bully online.

*Drama* is a third element of teen life on SNS (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The term drama is an emic term young people use and adults recognize to refer to “interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2014, p. 1187). Allen (2012) defines drama as social interaction “characterized by overreaction and excessive emotionality” (p. 109). Unpacking the term drama in SNS research, Marwick and boyd (2011) identify five key components:

1. Drama is social and interpersonal
2. Drama involves relational conflict
3. Drama is reciprocal
4. Drama is gendered
5. Drama is often performed for, in, and magnified by *networked publics* (p. 5)

Drama is not unique to the internet, and behaviors teens and adults identify as drama have long been a feature of girl interactions. In the musical *Grease* (Jacobs & Casey, 1972), Sandy's new friends, the Pink Ladies, bully and goad her into mimicking their attitudes and style. The movie *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004), a prototype for antisocial youth behavior slightly predating the SNS explosion, depicts high school girls intimidating and bullying other girls. What the *Mean Girls* or Pink Ladies characters lack is an online social media for showcasing their teenage conflict.

Drama is a form of gossip (Allen, 2012) that teens share to create a sensation, and SNS makes communicating gossip instantaneous. Some describe drama as a form of cyberbullying (Allen, 2012; Davis & Koepke, 2016), and Hoffman (2010) calls it *cyberdrama*, but, the critical and damaging nature of drama is similar. Cyberbullying is a gender-neutral term, while drama is a term applied to describe girls' "immature, petty, and ridiculous behavior" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 4). Girls and boys alike describe drama as a "girl thing" (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019).

Research indicates that text messages contribute to drama and youth often regret a text, with 47% overall, and 54% of girls feeling sorry they sent a text message (Lenhart et al., 2010). Forwarding and sharing a post or text adds fuel to the fire of drama and conflict. A teen's pride in multi-tasking with *Twitter*, *FB*, and text messaging while listening to music and doing homework can backfire when a teen sends a text to the wrong person (Lenhart et al., 2010). Expressing thoughts via posts, tweets, or text messages may be more hurtful than words spoken face-to-face (Underwood et al., 2013).

Pew Center Research (Lenhart, 2015) reports that 23% view friends as *frequently* "stirring up drama" on social media, and forty-five percent describe friends "stirring up drama" *occasionally* (p. 5). Forty-five percent report feeling "overwhelmed by all of the drama" on social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2). Youth criticize a peer who creates drama, yet Marwick and boyd (2011) find that the girl who instigates drama can boost her popularity and

create *social capital*. Sociologists and political scientists use Bourdieu's term (Julien, 2015) *social capital* to describe an "investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin, 1999, p. 30); psychologists prefer the term *social support* (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). While many consider drama a negative behavior, Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007) find that users consider greater social capital a positive outcome of *FB* use. Drama draws its participants together, even as the targeted girl is isolated.

Research clearly reveals that users, youth included, can use technology in both positive and negative ways, exchanging information with a close friend, for harassment (Anderson, 2018, Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), or online conflict (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

### **Connectedness for Girls**

This section first addresses scholarship on the history of research on females. The next section focusses on the importance of connecting through relationships. The final portion addresses the intersection of belonging and connection in girls' SNS activity.

### **Background Research on Females**

The 1970s marked a "vibrant period of social transformation" with new interest in the history and concerns of women and girls, including the introduction of feminist methodologies within women's studies (Bailey & Graves, 2016, p. 684). However, research on women's issues historically has emphasized adult women rather than girls, leaving an important area of gendered lives under-researched (Johnson & Ginsburg, 2015). A cultural shift and a new interest in girls occurred in the 1990s after scholars recognized an underrepresentation of "girls' own voices" in research (p. 4). In fact, Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggested that researchers did not know how to listen to girls and the pair authored a listening guide for scholars.

Traditional androcentric research overlooks the fact that "women's development is proceeding, but on another basis" (Miller, 1976, p. 83). Feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) critique development models based on research with men and boys (Erikson, 1963;

Kohlberg, 1973; Levinson, 1977) which indicate women's responses are deficient. Miller (1976) proposed "richer and fuller" explanations of life when researchers consider the full population of females and males (p. xi). Dichotomous beliefs regarding gender and/or biological sex abound. Referring to binaries of girl/boy, female/male, or women/men and Black/White assumes universal gendered and racial experiences for children and adults. The description of boy's experience as the "single line of adolescent growth for both sexes" is unfair to girls (Gilligan, 1982, p. 39). Females receive social messages that male behaviors are the desirable norm and female behaviors are deviant. Gilligan's pioneering research points out that there is "something wrong" with a theory that insists woman must develop the same way as men (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 55) and research has only recently begun to include transgender and gender non-conforming youth.

Androcentric theories in the field of psychology have measured women by a standard based on male development. They prize independence, reason, and justice understood in particular ways (Tong, 2014). According to Gilligan (1982), women find compelling the promise of connection and concern for the well-being of others, respecting interdependence and relationships (Gilligan, 1982). Contrary to the male-based theories which denigrated female ego viability (Freud, 1923), moral thinking (Kohlberg, 1973), and psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963), Gilligan argued for understanding and valuing differences in female and male voices. Gilligan (1982) spent her career researching and proposing that women and men differ in the language they use when discussing morality, psychological growth, and priorities in life. Society has listened to the voices of men for centuries, Gilligan (1982) proposes, but only recently recognized not only the "silence of women but the difficulty of hearing what they say when they speak" (p. 173).

Questioning the view that masculine qualities were the "markers of maturity" (Gilligan, 2011, p. 1), Gilligan's challenge of the androcentric norm-based works of Erikson (1963) and

Kohlberg (1973) was likened to a revolution (Gross, 1982). In a 2011 interview, Gilligan (p. 4) describes the response to *In a Different Voice*: “People whose voices were dismissed felt heard.” Pre-dating wide spread use of digital technology and social media by more than two decades, Gilligan’s research (1982; 1995; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Brown & Gilligan, 1992) provides foundational understanding of the ways SNS may serve contemporary girls in their pursuit of belonging needs.

### **Connection through Relationships**

Women’s lives are described as “embedded in ...attachment” by Gilligan (1982, p. 171). Feminist scholars in psychology have argued historically that women develop in a context of connecting with others (Miller, 1976). With a direction toward affiliations, relationships, and the “well-being of the other” (p. x), “nurturance, responsibility, and care” in relationships inform a woman’s view of self (Gilligan, 1982, p. 159). Women self-define as adults through relationships, and men express their sense of individuation through separation and competition (Coy & Kovacs-Long, 2005). When Gilligan (2011) asked a young female medical student, “How would you describe yourself?” the young woman’s reply illustrates the premium that women place on relationships: “...It’s hard to think of myself without thinking about other people...” (p. 3).

Adolescent girls are on the threshold of womanhood with their experiences that reflect the liminality and “in-between” nature of the spaces they inhabit (Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. xi). From the school hallway, to the bedroom, to the internet, girls exist in multiple geographies where they meet, befriend, fight, and negotiate adolescence. These locations provide a backdrop for the work of figuring out “who they are as females in the culture” and accepting or rejecting the mantle of normative femininity (p. xii). While a significant portion of adolescence is spent in schools, Bettis and Adams (2005) state that the formal curriculum of the school has little to do



with the way girls define themselves. The in-between space of the internet is the space of interest in the present study.

An ongoing problem in the girls' studies field is the makeup of the girls researched. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) point out the inequities in the range of girls studied and state that, "Black girls are generators and producers of knowledge, but this knowledge has been historically silenced by a dominant, White patriarchal discourse" (p. 304). Black women and girls have been neglected, marginalized, depicted as "at risk," and underserved in research (Mooney, 2018; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Black girls are situated as "both/and" as African American and young women (p. 305) and the intersectionality of age, gender, and race is significant for understanding their lives. Muhammad and McArthur (2015) believe that American Black girls are under attack and that scholars and educators need to realize the complex demographic they represent. Black girls are constantly aware of their status as "other" and believe that they are judged by their hair, are seen as angry, loud, violent, and sexualized (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015, p. 133). Negative stereotypes directed at Black women are widespread enough that a movement called #carefree has grown up on *Twitter* with pictures of happy and winsome Black girls and women displayed (Lubanga, 2015).

Girls in this study represent a diverse group; my original population was expanded twice in order to include more girls of color. In doing so I intended to represent a broad group of girls in the research. African American, Native American, and Latina girls were interviewed for this study, along with White girls. I do not want to capture the girls of color as a "corollary" to the White girls' experiences (Tokunaga, 2018, p. 10). Bringing the experiences of the girls of color to the center of the analysis allows for a new understanding of their lives. Tokunaga (2018) makes it clear that sexism, racism, and xenophobia are a part of these girls' experiences. "Meaningful spaces" for teen girls do not have to be physical spaces of schools and homes (Tokunaga, 2018, p. 13), but may be the virtual space of the internet. Girls of color are using the

internet and making online connections just as their White counterparts do (Lenhart et al., 2017; Tokunaga, 2018)

### **Girls' Belonging and Connection**

Twenty-first century girls express their need for relationships through the modern means of digital communication, posting their thoughts, pursuing and maintaining relationships, and for some, blogging and advocating for social change through SNS (Bent, 2016). According to Freitas (2016), social media is a girl's world. Twice as many girls as boys use *Twitter* and girls are more active on *FB*, *Myspace*, and *Flixster* than their male counterparts (Freitas, 2016). The pattern continues in adulthood, with young women the “most likely demographic group to frequent a social networking site” (p. 315).

Ellison and boyd (2013) describe the teen's social network as the “collection of social relations of varying strengths and importance that a person maintains” (p. 5). Girls connect and express concern for friends through their SNS activities and are more likely than boys to make new friends on social media (78%), whereas boys make more friends through online gaming (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b; Lenhart, 2015). According to Davis (2012), girls spend more time interacting with other girls than boys, and their online interaction strengthens relationships and connectivity (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Teens find it easier to connect with friends, family, and meet new people on SNS (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b).

Online environments can be beneficial for working on identity and mental health (Thompson, 2012). Advocating for a healthy body in a culture saturated with sexual messages is the ambitious goal of SPARK (Brown, 2011). Blogging in an online journal (or digital diary) affords a girl self-expression and self-affirmation when like-minded teens respond supportively (Livingstone, 2008). Tennent and Jackson (2017) describe feminism as “cool” in popular culture and girls are encouraged to blog about their feelings, concerns, beliefs, and their fashion. Rosemary Clark-Parsons (2018) discusses online communities that offer safety for marginalized

girls, specifically the *FB* group *Girl Army*, and encourages blogging about their experiences. Livingstone calls the act of deciding what to say or post online “agentic” for teens (2008, p. 409). An example is Megan (2015), a young blogger at <http://skinnyfitalicious.com/>, who writes a piece encouraging women to stand up for other women, and responses to her blog (twenty) are overwhelmingly positive. Response posts are emotional, replying to Megan’s blog with comments such as, “beautiful”, “a breath of fresh air,” and “YESSS!!!” (Megan, January 21, 2015). On *Pinterest*, the online blog site for design and fashion, a passionate pin to a board titled “I am a feminist” by Chelsea charges girls to support each other (Chelsea, n.d.).

Active *FB* use among adolescents, the girl posting and responding to the posts of others (as opposed to passively lurking), links to the increase of social capital (Aubrey & Rill, 2013) and relates positively to social support from peers (Burke et al., 2011). While separated by time and space, *FB* friends and *Instagram* followers can provide approval and fulfill a need for connection with peers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b). Teens can gain a sense of community interacting with their friends (Valkenberg & Peter, 2011) and girls more than boys are drawn to sites that encourage expressions of care between users (*The Power to Lead*, n.d.). On *The Power to Lead’s* (n.d.) website, the online program highlights 13-year-old Sandhya, a girl of color who writes, “I want other girls to have the same opportunity as me” (para. 1).

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed relevant theory and literature on girls and social media. I examined SNS history and current SNS platforms, feminist theories of technology, belongingness and connectedness theories, girls’ use of SNS for relationship building, and relationship affirmation. A consistent theme among adults is the teen preoccupation with their cell phones and fears of unsafe online activity (Clark, 2013; Damour, 2016; Sales, 2016; Twenge, 2017). Turkle (2011, 2015) voices concerns that teens are losing their ability to converse face-to-face and interact in real time. This chapter recognizes negative consequences of

texting, cyberbullying, and drama, alongside research which challenges the notion that SNS use is harmful to girls. Anderson and Jiang (2018b); boyd (2014); Edell (2015); Pittman & Reich, (2016); and Seidman (2013) find evidence for positive effects for teen SNS use in their research. Social media is here to stay, and American girls partake enthusiastically; we need to know more about the positive effects of SNS use and the other personal meanings for girls engaging online. For educators, parents, and educational psychology scholars or theorists, SNS provide compelling avenues to study pursuit of connection and belonging needs for contemporary girls.

Although SNS research is an active area of scholarship, research thus far does not reflect the experiences of diverse girls specifically, viewed through a feminist lens, and with their voice. The current study contributes to the small number of qualitative studies on girls, including girls of color, SNS, and belongingness and connectedness where girls express their understanding of social media use in their own words. I add qualitative interviews with a diverse population, as I discuss in the chapters to follow. I proceed from the feminist perspective that presents a new picture of girls with agency acting as meaning-makers in their digital world. The “storm and stress” of adolescence (Hall, 1904) continues for contemporary girls as they face their teen years with the added opportunity and challenges of a fully networked life.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

*The medium is the message.*

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (p. 1)

In this chapter I review the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives which ground this research. I describe the research problem, purpose of the study, and research questions. I detail choices regarding selection of participants, data collection, initial ideas for analyzing data, and explain the rationale for selecting and applying a feminist critical theory perspective for this study. I describe the setting, the selection and recruitment of participants, and I conclude with ethical quality criteria limitations. Within this discussion I outline an initial research project I conducted during doctoral coursework in 2014 which informs this study.

#### **A Short Review**

I offer a brief review of the problem statement and purpose statement, as well as present research questions before I consider my methodological information.

#### **Problem Statement**

Adolescent girls' use of SNS is a subject that adults discuss with despair, but minimal scholarly research exists to explain girls' positive experiences of belongingness and connectedness on SNS. A preponderance of research predicts a negative outcome for Generation Z and young millennials "addicted" to their phones (Turkle, 2011; 2015; Twenge, 2017). Popular media marginalizes, objectifies, stereotypes, and commodifies girls online (Damour, 2016; Edell, Brown & Montano, 2016; Silva, 2015) and there are few examples which provide an optimistic outlook for girls. Scarce qualitative research exists describing SNS use from the perspective of

girls themselves, including insights into girls' use of and experiences with SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs. I study girls' use of the online platforms *FB*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Twitter* to explore how girls use and experience SNS for connectedness and belongingness.

### **Purpose for the Study**

This study examines how girls use SNS to pursue belongingness and connectedness through digital relationships, for communication with friends and family, as well as the other personal meanings girls find in their SNS activities.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions emerged for this study:

1. How do girls pursue their needs for belongingness and connectedness through their SNS activities?
2. How do girls describe other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities?

### **Coursework Project: The “Pilot” Study**

An earlier project in one of my doctoral courses, Qualitative Methods II, provided the impetus for this study and an opportunity to explore girls' use of SNS on a small scale. Given the chance to devise a qualitative study as part of the requirements for a course, I chose to interview high school girls about their use of social media. In 2014 I questioned eight girls between the ages of 13 and 18 about their social media usage, sparking further interest in girls' use of SNS. Consisting of 15 open-ended questions, the interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The participants were students attending a high school of 1,100 in a Midwestern state. High school instructors gave students information about the opportunity to participate in the study, with the school superintendent and the high school principal providing permission to conduct the study. I provided assent forms to the girls and consent forms for parents to sign.

I interviewed each of the eight girls in a small high school conference room, and later held a focus group discussion with four of the girls in the same room. After identifying the SNS *FB*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Pinterest* as social media sites of interest to the girls, a discussion of their merits took place; *Twitter* was not in use by any of the girls. Girls indicated that they enjoyed SNS use, especially the four above-mentioned sites. Describing their cell phone use, participants spoke of using their phone extensively for texting with friends and family. One girl I called Elizabeth described deleting her social media apps, indicating that she found social media too demanding. The other girls described their use of social media as relaxing and entertaining.

A benefit of this pilot study was my increasing interest in girls' use of SNS and the primarily positive advantages they receive from online interaction. Conducting interviews with girls also gave me the opportunity to apply methods learned in course work, practicing interviews and observations, and analyzing qualitative data. Knowing this topic would be of long-term importance to me, I thought about modifications I would make in the future. I carefully considered whether to engage girls in a focus group and decided not to use that method for the current study. In using a focus group in the pilot study, I saw signs that younger girls would defer to older girls in subtle ways. Another adjustment would be a larger number of participants to gain a broader sense of the phenomenon. This process helped inform my dissertation proposal and research design which focuses on qualitative feminist interviews of a diverse group of girls aged thirteen to eighteen.

### **Organizing the Study**

The organization of the study sets out the parameters for understanding the work. This study employs an epistemology of constructionism, the theoretical perspective of feminist critical theory, and the methodology of critical feminist inquiry.

## **Epistemology: Constructionism**

The epistemology of a proposed study establishes a “nature of knowledge” which guides the research (Merriam, 2009, p. 8), in this case, constructionism is the epistemological framework for this research. Constructionism is the view that all knowledge exists only because human consciousness interacts with and constructs knowledge about the world (Crotty, 2003). As opposed to the positivist view that objects in the world, “have meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them” (Crotty, 2003, p. 27), constructionism holds that we construct meaning as we interact with the objects, people, environments, and in this case, SNS of the world. In the constructionist view, humans alone convey, construct, and create meaning through such interactions (Crotty, 2003).

Constructionism brings objectivity and subjectivity together by identifying an object or construct (objectivism) and constructing meaning (subjectivism). Constructionism suggests that meanings are “at once objective and subjective, their objectivity and subjectivity being indissolubly bound up with each other” (Crotty, 2003, p. 48). Because humans construct meaning, and we have the world, people, and objects in the world around which to construct meaning, they are partners in generating meaning (p. 44). A foundation of constructionism is ontological relativity, the belief that “all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical sense data about the world” (Patton, 2002, p. 97). The researcher focusses on understanding the meaning the phenomenon has for the participant (Merriam, 2009). In this study I ground my epistemology in a constructionist approach and focus on understanding the participant’s view of their SNS use.

## **Theoretical Perspective: Feminist Critical Theory**

A theoretical perspective informs the methodology and is the “underlying structure, the scaffolding” of the study (Merriam, 2009, p. 66). It provides the logic and worldview that guides the choice of methodology and methods. Feminist critical theory guides this study. I share some



components of critical theory, yet foreground gender as a fundamental component of power relations. The essence of critical theory is to “respond and adapt to perceived power relationships and resulting subjugation and oppressions of individuals and groups” by studying social and historical interpretations of people’s lives (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 54), and feminists add a gendered perspective to that essential interrogation of power and oppression. As constructionism posits that we do not discover but construct meaning, feminist theoretical positioning emphasizes the androcentric nature of the construction of meaning in the world. Gender-based issues of power and oppression are the focus of feminist research (Merriam, 2009). Feminist theoretical perspective views the world as patriarchal and cultures as masculinist (Crotty, 2003). Feminist researchers develop new theories and schools of thought for understanding the lives of underrepresented groups and of women and of working to change the social conditions in which people live.

Feminists “re-vision” the man-made world (Crotty, 2003, p. 160), and Crotty (2003) notes that several types of feminism exist (e.g. liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, postmodern, as well as technofeminist). Hesse-Biber (2014) states that all the forms of feminism recognize “gender bias exists systemically, and it manifests in society in multiple ways” (p. 333). Feminists, with different stances and beliefs, proceed from one common view that gender informs the structure, dynamics, and relationships of the world, including in this case, technological interactions. Technofeminism prioritizes as a focus the “mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology” (Wajcman, 2004, p. 6). Today’s technofeminist is optimistic about the ability of digital technology to “empower women and transform gender relations” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 147). The present study acknowledges the uniqueness of a girl’s use of technology for connection (Tierney, 2013) and seeks to understand those uses, processes, and experiences in greater depth, significantly from girls themselves.

Research supports the notion that girls are shaping SNS with their more frequent use of particular sites such as *FB*, *Instagram*, and *Snapchat* (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a; Lenhart, 2015).

### **Methodology: Critical Feminist Inquiry**

Feminist critical theory provides the lens through which I construct my questions, collect my data, and analyze my findings. The goal of feminist critical theory is to “construct new theories and paradigms with which to examine and explore the lives of women” (Hesse-Biber, 2015, p. 55). Feminist critical theory allows feminist researchers to treat women as women, and not as a variant of men. It examines the power relations that determine the ways people’s “lives and identities are interpreted” (p. 55).

The methodology for this research is critical feminist inquiry, which informs my choice of the feminist interview as one of the methods I will enlist. In feminist research the goal is to “critique and challenge, to transform and empower” (Merriam, 2009, p. 34). The 1980s and 1990s saw feminist researchers challenging traditional research and asking the question, “What is the nature of social reality?” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 4). New epistemologies and methodologies came to fruition, critiquing and challenging positivism. The introduction of this new attitude among feminists saw them move toward a paradigm that seeks out women’s lived experiences rather than supplementing androcentric studies with more women (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Previously, feminist challenges to research omitting women were met with research for “correcting” mainstream studies by including women (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 4).

According to Fonow and Cook (2005), there has never been “one correct feminist epistemology generating one correct feminist methodology for the interdisciplinary field of women’s studies” (p. 2213). It is common for feminist scholars to “work within, against, and across epistemologies,” and combine features of different perspectives (p. 2213). However, Taylor (1998) describes five features of feminist methodology: “A gender perspective, accentuation of women’s experiences, reflexivity, participatory methods, and social action” (p.

357). Making the experiences of underrepresented groups, including diverse feminine persons and children, known and challenging gender inequality are elements of feminist methodology (Taylor, 1998) and feminist scholarship is oriented toward improving the status of those groups (Eichler, 1997).

Feminist research approaches can include any number of methods, such as interviews, ethnography, surveys, experiments, cross-cultural approaches, oral history, case studies, and action research, to name a portion (Eichler, 1997). Feminist methodology offers choices which select strategies for specifying connections among ideas, experience, and reality (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). At the same time, feminist researchers seek to “eliminate hierarchies of knowledge construction” (Presser, 2005). Presser (2005) posits that women are sensitive to their place in a hierarchy and they disclose their position in relation to both the study questions and the participants. The feminist researcher is “highly self-reflexive” and a great deal of the reflection focuses on the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Eichler, 1997, p. 4). The researcher is a person, and she attempts to “develop special relations with the people studied” (Eichler, 1997, p. 3).

As a feminist researcher I aimed to balance the differing power and authority held by myself and my participants in our interactions (Hesse-Biber, 2014). I practiced reflexivity, taking into account the “researcher’s own subject position in relation to the discourse the person is researching” to account for my own biases (p. 47). I support social justice and social transformation and seek an understanding of girls’ needs and unique ways of interacting with SNS (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

### **Methodological Developments and Adjustments**

For the present study I planned to conduct the first interview employing interactive voice diaries. I would record interview questions on an MP3 player for the girls to consider privately in their own time; they would return the players to me with recorded responses. In two face-to-face

semi-structured follow-up interviews I would pursue and probe for a more in-depth understanding of girls' online lives. After the second interviews were completed, I planned to organize 30-minute sessions with the participants in front of a computer accessing specific SNS sites. When I implemented the process, I altered my original plan. I realized that sitting before a laptop computer would be inappropriate; few girls access their SNS through a laptop or desktop computer. Mobile digital device applications are the means of reaching their favorite SNS for today's girls. The girls and I would access social media via our phones. We would view social media sites together, and my hope was that the girls would feel comfortable sharing their pages with me, as I shared mine with them.

### **Edell's Interactive Voice Diaries (IVD)**

My desire to give voice to my participants without *being in the way* led me to try a technique developed by Dana Edell (2015). I created groups of open-ended questions for pilot girls and recorded the questions on an MP3 player. I initially planned to meet with each girl at her school or home, introduce myself, explain the procedure and give her an MP3 player containing my list of questions. After the girls listened to the questions, they would answer as they felt appropriate. My goal with this method was to encourage a girl to "express her voice" and obtain more candid responses (pg. 59). The technique does not guarantee authenticity (Edell, 2015). I was aware that the probes and prompts of the interview could not be present in the usual style, but the second tapes, created in response to the initial tape replies would contain my probes (Edell, 2015).

I began my efforts at IVD with two pilot interviews of colleagues' daughters. The participants were 13-year-old and 17-year-old girls. I explained the workings of the voice recorder to the girls one at a time and included written directions for use of the recorder in the package containing the recorder. The study was explained to the girls and paperwork, including Appendix B Participant Information, Parent or Guardian Permission, Assent Form, and

Appendix E Demographic Survey, was given to the girl in a file folder. Each girl selected a pseudonym for the study: The 13-year-old selected Shannon and the 17-year-old Michaela. Shannon took two weeks to return the recorder and forms via her dad with his coaxing, according to him. Michaela's father returned the recorder and forms after five days. Shannon's replies were spoken quietly and hesitantly, even timidly, and were brief. The IVD responses from Michaela were more robust than those of Shannon but were still disappointing in their overall brevity. The impression I garnered when listening to the IVD interviews was a general lack of interest or enthusiasm for the interview process.

After considering the two pilot IVD interviews and consulting with my advisor, I determined that IVD would not be an effective or efficient method for gathering data. The IVD process, as I set it up, left too little control over the interview time frame. Waiting for the girls to return the recorders at their leisure could turn the interview process into a weeks or months long endeavor. Without the ability to respond or probe in the initial interview, the girls' replies were not detailed or expressive. I made the decision to use two semi-structured interviews for gathering data. I would combine the second and third interviews, asking interview questions based on their responses to the first interview, and the girls and I would view social media together in a method Livingstone (2008) calls *online data sharing*.

After these initial adjustments, the actual data collection involved two semi-structured interviews. The first interview composed of 19 open-ended questions, lasted approximately twenty minutes. A second interview consisted of 36 questions and lasted closer to 40 minutes. After the interview questions were asked, I enquired whether we could look at the girl's social media apps on their phone. In all cases the girls acquiesced and allowed the perusal of their SNS; also opened my *Instagram* app and we discussed it. In the online data sharing method developed by Livingstone (2008), I sat with girls as we accessed our SNS applications and we considered

the information. The second interview and online data sharing took place within two weeks of the first interview in most cases.

## **Methods**

This qualitative study relies on the traditional semi-structured interview to increase the understanding of girls' use of SNS for connection. Fontana and Frey (2005) describe the interview as “one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand” our participants, and it is one of my primary methods of data collection (p. 697). Feminist research methods reflect the theoretical investment in feminist methodology. For this feminist study, the primary methods employed to collect data are feminist interviews and online data sharing. These methods are compatible with Taylor's (1998) five features of feminist methodology: Data gathering is gendered, accentuating women's (girls') experiences, reflexivity is a part of each method, the methods are all participatory, and the potential for social action exists in the subject's reflection on their experience in the study. Girls may consider their behaviors and practices online and place more import on their interactions. In my experience I saw relationships develop between myself and the participants as we engaged in the study together. A researcher working outside the feminist perspective may avoid a close relationship with their subject and approach to the interactions. Rather than interacting person-to-person, a researcher could “take the data and run” in the words of Margrit Eichler (1997, p. 18).

## **Specific Methods**

There are two types of data gathering methods I used over the course of approximately three months. Each of these methods promised valuable and unique insight into the participants' use of SNS. Methods I employed were semi-structured feminist interviews and online data sharing. I gathered the data in the following two phases. I began with feminist interviews in the last week of August 2018. I engaged in two traditional semi-structured interviews. After the second interview was completed, the participants and I sat down together for 30-minutes of

online data sharing. Qualitative documents included demographic questions about age and race/ethnicity. A pseudonym was selected by each girl and the pseudonym was the only name recorded on interview forms.

### **The Interview**

The qualitative interview is an “extremely versatile approach to doing research” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 3), and “probably the most common form of qualitative research found in education” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Exploring specific topics, the qualitative interview offers the researcher the opportunity to form explanations and theories of the phenomena of interest. Merriam (2009, p. 22) states that a central characteristic of qualitative research is, “individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds,” and the qualitative interview is well-suited to research with a constructionist epistemology. I was interested in the meaning that use of SNS had for the participants, but “meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it...” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Seventy-one interviews were conducted with 36 girls over the course of three months. One girl was not able to participate in the second interview and was dropped from the study. Each girl was interviewed twice; the first interview contained one list of SNS-related topics and the second interview consisted of questions designed to follow-up on particular topics, along with online data sharing to conclude the interview. Interviews were informal and semi-structured, focused on open-ended questions. The open-ended question is designed to reveal in-depth responses about girls’ experiences (Patton, 2002). In the semi-structured interview, the “largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). The semi-structured format allowed me to respond to emergent themes and ideas. Interviews began with a broad question such as, “What do you like to do when you are on social media?” I asked the girls more detailed questions related to their use of social media as the interview progressed. Rather than inquire about the use of *social network sites*, I used the emic

term social media. The semi-structured interview lasted approximately half an hour and took place in a classroom office at each school or at the participant's home. Some interviews lasted more than 45 minutes. Each interview was recorded with my personal digital device, and I fully transcribed each interview.

Sample interview questions included:

1. What is your favorite social media?
2. What do you really like about that social media? Do you have an example?
3. What are some of the things you dislike about that social media? Example?
4. How much time do you spend on social media each day? Could you describe a typical day's use of social media?
5. How do you feel about the amount of time you spend on social media?
6. Why do you choose to spend time on social media over other activities?

Each of these questions were followed with prompts and probes related to the response. Because the interviews were semi-structured, I had the opportunity to guide questions in a direction suggested by the girl's answer. For example, if a girl's response to question number one was *Snapchat*, I followed-up with the question, "Why is that your favorite app," "What do you like about it?" "How does it compare to *Facebook*?" In the next phase, within approximately two weeks of the first interview, a second semi-structured interview was conducted with questions related to the responses in the first interview.

The feminist outlook differs from a traditional view of the interview. Rather than maintaining the customary neutrality and objectivity of the interviewer, a feminist interviewer aims for "collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, and friendly relations with those studied" (Denzin, 1997, p. 275). I sought these relational qualities through smiles, inquiries about the girl's day/week, questions about school or extracurricular activities, and actively listening to their responses. Fontana and Frey (2005, p. 720) refer to the traditional method of interviewing as



“exploiting respondents”; feminists aim to lessen exploitation in interviews by decentering the emphasis on the higher status of the interviewer. Understanding individuals’ “lived experience” of the individual is a focus of feminist interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 189). In the feminist interview ethic, interviewers and participants are coequals, conversing about an issue (Denzin, 2005). Feminist interviews orient toward issues and aim to access voices that are marginalized (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Researchers who use feminist methodology go to lengths to make the respondent comfortable, minimize trappings of academia, and reduce status differences between the interviewer and participant.

### **Livingstone’s Online Data Sharing**

I engaged in an open-ended discussion with online devices as Livingstone (2008) recommends in her online data sharing method. At the end of the scripted questions of the second interview I requested access to the “unsanctioned youth space” of their personal social media accounts (Gleason, 2016, p. 137). I had ended the first interview with the statement that we would view their social media together in our next interview if that was agreeable, but some girls seemed taken aback by my request in the second interview. All the girls cooperated; they accessed their phones (which all had on their person) and visited their SNS as we discussed social media in a free-flowing fashion. I requested that the participants display their *FB* pages, *Twitter* feeds, *Instagram* pages, and *Snapchat* snaps for viewing. When a girl allows an adult to view their SNS pages, a commitment to engage is born. The novelty of taking part in a research study became reality with the use of a password and access to an account. The online data sharing was second in the data gathering methods in order to establish rapport between researcher and participant during the previous interviews, before the critical reveal of the online information.

I sat alongside the girls with their online accounts open to pursue an understanding of the girls’ interests. They opened their various accounts, such as *Instagram* and *Facebook* and we

discussed specific posts, the purpose for the post, and the positive or negative emotions they associated with the online activity. We considered the participant's choices and motivations, their thoughts on viewing others' profiles and pages, and the personal meaning of online interactions relative to face-to-face interaction with friends. They showed me examples of posts they liked and ones they did not like. Best friends were among their favorites, while advertising and posts from less-desirable contacts were sometimes "annoying." We considered how they made meaning-making and felt a sense of agency in the online experience. I recorded notes from the online data sharing sessions in my field notebook after the session.

Implementation of online data sharing was not the smooth process I expected it to be and outlined during my research design. To begin, I mentioned the concept that we would look at SNS together, but when the time came to undertake the activity an attitude of consternation and even alarm swept through one group of girls. Although I had explained the process during the interview assent and in the first interview, their teacher later related to me that one participant seemed shocked and concerned that I intended to look at her SNS accounts. Her attitude of apprehension was shared by several of her classmates. However, other girls in the study did not express the same level of unease.

As I noted earlier in my methodology description, I realized that my use of a laptop to access social media was the wrong method. It occurred to me that a girl would be using her hand-held digital device exclusively to go on social media. My use of a laptop would appear out-of-date and out-of-touch with their experience. When I shifted to the use of phones, however, other issues arose. When the girl used her phone to access social media the possibility arose that the school's wifi might be down or the girl's phone might load slowly or not at all. One girl came to the interview with her phone battery drained, another's phone was broken, and a third girl's sister had her phone. While the belief in the ubiquitous nature of the American teen on her phone prevails, the reality of phone access and availability can be problematic for some girls. When I

asked the girls to look at their social media, they usually asked which account I wanted to view. *Snapchat* was the wrong answer because no one was willing to open a snap that they had not viewed. *Snapchat* does not have a profile picture; it utilizes a cartoonish avatar selected by the user. Their *Snapchat* profile avatar could be seen, but previous posts could not be accessed. I was not able or allowed to see *Snapchat* posts, as they only last seconds. Many girls had pending *snaps* to open, but none chose to open them in front of the me. Girls that named *Snapchat* as their favorite social media invariably had an *Instagram* account to show me as an alternative to *Snapchat*. *Instagram* was the site I was allowed to view with the girls. The *Instagram* account had a photo for a profile picture; the profile image varied, some wore make-up and looked formal while others were casual pictures. Once the *Instagram* account was accessed, girls seemed genuinely willing to share the information and explain who-was-who among their friends, which people they knew personally, and which photos represented their favorite activities and people. Lila<sup>1</sup> (17) shared her *FB* account with me and when I asked Sophia (16) about her *Tumblr* account, she related that she does not access *Tumblr* on her phone, only on her laptop.

### **The Girls Shared their Experiences**

In retrospect, 13 and 14-year-old girls were more reticent to speak to an interviewer than the older girls. The two older groups seemed more relaxed and forthcoming in the interviews. When we sat together and looked at social media on our phones, I noted their facility with their technological devices. They scrolled quickly through their applications and moved from account to account with ease. All of the girls were open about their *Instagram* accounts; the posts had already been viewed and were visible to anyone who accessed the account. Common *Instagram* posts were school events, friends, romantic interests, pets, funny videos, and memes. We looked

<sup>1</sup>Girls' names are pseudonyms selected by the girls. High school names are also pseudonyms.

at *Instagram* pictures of friends, some made-up and glamorous, others in softball uniforms. Images of boyfriends covered in heart emojis were common, and family pet videos.

At the time of the second interviews, it was homecoming season for many girls and posts ranged from “spirit days” pictures of friends in matching M & M costumes, to the queen and her court. Sports posts as well as advertisements for clothes, shoes, make-up, and sporting equipment were ubiquitous. They showed me funny memes and humorous videos. We discussed their *Instagram* profile picture, how authentic it looked, whether it was a dressed-up version of themselves or an everyday look. The girls were polite and attentive when I compared my *Instagram* account, but they were not notably interested. The girls did not linger long over their social media accounts. The amount of time spent viewing social media accounts side-by-side was shorter than I anticipated, approximately 15 minutes. Girls were less willing to reveal their online activities and share their interests with me than I had hoped. The unknown adult role I represented was a barrier.

To summarize, 36 girls were interviewed at their schools and three girls were interviewed in their homes; one girl dropped out of the study. After the second traditional semi-structured interview (Merriam, 2009), we engaged in a session of online data sharing (Livingstone, 2008). We sat side-by-side and viewed the girl’s social media applications on their smartphones.

### **Confidentiality**

Complete confidentiality is the goal for every research participant in my study (Baez, 2002). My participants’ status as minors gives me a greater responsibility for confidentiality than if they were adults. Baez (2002) states that the researcher “must protect individuals in vulnerable positions” and these individuals include “children and adolescents in all contexts” (p. 42). In order ensure to my participants’ confidentiality, all identifiable information was changed to a pseudonym (Edell, 2015). If a girl accidentally wrote her name on a document labeled with a

pseudonym, I would remove her name. Interview materials did not include names, and names of the schools were also presented as pseudonyms. It would not be possible to identify an individual or from which participant data came. I de-identified names as I transcribed interviews, and the information was not be made available to any third party. Interview recordings were available only to the primary investigator and her advisor. Consent forms were stored separately from other data and the interview recordings were only available to the primary researcher. The data was stored in a locked file cabinet until the study ended.

### **Relationship between Researcher and Participant**

I recognized that the interview relationship between a middle-aged educator and a girl is inherently unequal. Our differences in age and life experiences were vast. My status as an adult educator, and my appearance set me apart. I clearly could not be their peer; I could not be one of “them”. My limited knowledge of their emic lives leaves a broad divide to be navigated. In the words of feminist methodologist Patti Lather (1997), I must “get out of the way” so I could understand the minds of the girls best I could (p. *xiv*). Our differences could overwhelm any chance for connection unless I made a concerted effort to connect with the girls. From informal language to casual clothing, I sought a presentation that welcomed youth.

In the following sections I outline my study. I describe the procedures for selecting participants, methods of collecting data, ethical considerations, and appropriateness of the methodology.

### **Recruitment and Selection Procedures**

Targeted recruitment took place in two local schools, as well as word-of-mouth recruitment among colleagues, my advisor, and friends. I used Appendix B, my participant information form, as a recruitment method. I reached out to colleagues working in the public schools and discussed asking their female students to take part in my research. I talked to colleagues in my workplace and requested their daughters’ participation. After gaining

permission from the public schools I visited classrooms and discussed the opportunity for girls to take part in my research. Girls that agreed to participate were given forms to take home: The Participant Information Form (Appendix B), the Parent/Guardian Permission Form, and the Assent Form. The girls returned the paperwork at their first interview.

The current study was conducted with girls at two recruitment spaces in the Midwestern United States and additional girls known to the researcher. I selected the recruitment spaces for their diversity and maximum accessibility. Given the predominantly White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant make-up of the Midwestern state, I was interested in recruiting a diverse sample of girls. The primary recruitment settings cumulatively had more diverse demographics than the state and a higher than average number of African American and Native American students (Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin, 2010). I had relationships with administrators and instructors at both recruitment spaces, and the administrators agreed to allow access to girls during the day and after school for interviews. I also reached out to my advisor and a friend who knew girls in the target age group. Three girls were recruited over the phone and interviewed after school in their homes. Parents of girls under age 18 gave their consent.

### **Sample Selection**

I used a typical purposive sample to recruit girls. The typical sample was selected because it “reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009, pg. 78). An *information-rich* sample is selected from which the most can be learned about the subject of interest (Patton, 2002). The recruitment spaces were selected for drawing samples based on their typicality. The majority of participants were recruited from two schools with these characteristics: Both spaces were accessible to the researcher and accommodating to the study. Three girls from a nearby city rounded-out the sample.

## Recruitment

The criteria for inclusion in this study were females aged 13 to 18. The majority were in high school, some attended a technical school, and others were in middle school. In the first school, AHS, where I recruited eleven girls, approximately 78% of students were white, 8% were Native American, 7% of students were black, 4% of students identified as Hispanic, 2% reported as Asian, and 1% self-reported as other (Students, n.d.). The population of the second school, JTS, where I recruited twenty-one students, was as follows: 62% white, 7% Native American, 20% black, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 1% other (Students, n.d.). Three girls I contacted through a friend were recruited from a nearby community and interviewed in their homes.

Recruitment began as soon as possible after IRB approval for the study during the fall semester of the school year. Initially, I reached out to colleagues, friends, and committee members to alert them to the study. I also contacted principals at the two high schools in the state where I had contacts, explained my research, shared my script and recruitment flyer, and requested permission to recruit participants from their students. There were teachers known to me in both schools who agreed to make their students available, with permission from the principal and parents. After permission was received, the recruitment flyer was distributed during the teacher's class periods, the teacher announced the opportunity to participate in the study to her students and read the script to them. Approximately 50 female students ranging from 13-year-old seventh graders to 18-year-old seniors received the information at AHS and JTS. From AHS I recruited two 13-year-olds, four 14-year-olds, one 15-year-old, one 16-year-old, and three 17-year-olds. Girls recruited from JTS included two 15-year-olds, seven 16-year-olds, nine 17-year-olds, and three 18-year-olds. One 14-year-old and two 16-year-olds were recruited from a nearby community. Despite sending the information out widely, no girls recruited by friends and colleagues agreed to participate. My final count for participants was 36, though one girl would drop out of the study, leaving a total of 35.

Administrators and teachers allowed me to interact with the participants during their class time at one recruitment site, facilitating the process and removing the necessity of after school time for the student. At the other recruitment site girls participated before or after school during their sports practice time. Students who volunteered received a participant information form, an assent form for the girl to read and sign, and a consent form for their parents to sign (See Appendix B).

### **Grouping Girls**

The participants were grouped by age as 13 and 14, 15 and 16, and 17 and 18- year-olds. A range from 13-years-old to 18-years-old represents a vast difference in interests, opportunities, and maturity. Their interactions online reflect some of these differences. An example of each age group was Emma, Maggie, and Daisey. Emma (14), a Native American freshman with cropped dark hair and huge liquid brown eyes, was chatty in her discussion of volleyball and her near-constant social media use. Maggie (16), a junior, was a vivacious brunette who barrel-raced and was extremely proud of her horse, laughed easily and was concerned about the number of “make-out” videos posted by her friends. Daisey (17), a senior, was another pretty brunette with long, lush hair and strategically torn jeans who enjoyed her *Instagram* account, though she kept the knowledge of her social media use from her mother, whom she described as “overprotective.” Marley (17), a pretty blonde senior, was more reserved. Through sharing their experiences, the girls related their understandings of connections and personal meaning in their use of SNS.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because my interview participants were adolescents, I was especially careful to follow the primary ethical concerns in research. Participants would not be subjected to any level of stress or psychological, social, physical, or legal risks that are greater than those typically experienced in daily life. The cooperation of counselors at both schools was ensured in case of



student concerns. I walked through the consent forms (Parent Consent Form and Assent Form) with each participant before an interview or data sharing session. Participation in the study was voluntary and a participant could decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. My study was designed to meet three critical criteria: A study descriptor explains the nature of the interview research in order to gain *informed consent*, I protect the identity of the participant to provide the *right to privacy*, and I create the interview questions carefully to *protect from physical, emotional, or any kind of harm* (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

### **Data Analysis**

Patton (2002) asks, “When does analysis begin?” and he notes that “in the course of fieldwork, ideas about directions for analysis will occur” (p. 436). Analytic insights occur during data collection and recording them is part of fieldwork and the beginning of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002). In this section I detail iterations of the analytic process. After interview sessions with girls, I recorded my analytic ponderings in my researcher’s field notes. According to Patton (2002), in allowing a natural flow of insights into patterns that seem to have appeared, the researcher has two sources for organizing the analysis:

- (1) The questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study, prior to fieldwork, and
- (2) Analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection (p. 437).

I began my analysis during the interviews with the girls as I noted patterns in responses to questions and the information conveyed in those responses (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Transcription offered another layer in this process as I was reminded of the girls’ tone, demeanor, and responses to the interview questions. I transcribed every word and utterance of the girls, including numerous “likes,” and I noted pauses and gestures. I printed and reviewed each transcript, highlighting comments, phrases, and emic terms. Poring over the transcripts, I underlined emerging themes that would be examined in cross case analyses. I color coded

themes throughout the interview transcripts, such as favorite SNS, the desire to share the digital space of their friends and families, the positive effects of social media on mood, and concerns about body image, among others.

In analyzing interviews, I could begin with case analysis or cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002). I chose to begin with case analysis and wrote an analytic memo for each girl. The memo described the girl corporeally, and included her demeanor, her age and racial/ethnic make-up, and her responses to interview questions. Each girl's interview transcripts (interview 1 and interview 2) were analyzed individually and then coded and compared across transcripts. I created a document which listed interview questions and indicated responses from girls in each age grouping. My field journal was combined with transcripts and tentative themes emerged regarding the girls' use of SNS for a variety of reasons: Belongingness, connection, support, entertainment, and relaxation. At that point I had a document which recorded each girl's interview responses grouped by question and organized by age. I also had an individual case memo for reference on details of appearance and demeanor.

After forming categories, the data were interpreted and participants' words were used to gain an understanding of girls' pursuit of belonging and connectedness needs, along with other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities, as well as ways SNS interfered with belonging and connectedness (Patton, 2002). The cross-case analyses were examined for overall patterns of girls' terms, phrases, interests, and concerns. Comparing across cases led to thematic elements of differences in interest in social issues, privacy concerns, and concerns about bullying and drama. I read and reread the cross-case information numerous times looking for the main ideas that emerged. Numbers of girls responding in similar ways were noted, as were unique cases that emerged from others in the same age group. I created color-coded charts depicting the themes that developed from the cross-case analysis. Empirical assertions based on age were written from the cross-case analyses. In creating the empirical assertions, I reviewed the cross-

case analyses repeatedly to “test the validity of the assertions that were generated, seeking disconfirming evidence as well as confirming evidence” (Erickson, 1986, p. 146).

### **Quality Criteria**

“It all depends on criteria” Patton (2002) states (p. 542). Qualitative research allows several sets of criteria for determining the quality of its research:

- (1) Traditional scientific research criteria
- (2) Social construction and constructivist criteria
- (3) Artistic and evocative criteria
- (4) Critical change criteria
- (5) Evaluation standards and principles (Patton, 2002, p. 542).

This study employs a constructionist epistemology which claims that both reality and meaning are socially constructed, and neither are fixed nor objectively measurable (Patton, 2002). The theoretical perspective of this study is feminist critical theory, and the methodology is feminist inquiry. The focus includes an agenda for empowerment and will “eschew any pretense of open-mindedness or objectivity” (Patton, 2002, p. 548).

Qualitative research is credible, Patton (2002) claims, when the researcher follows rigorous methods “that yield high-quality data” (p. 552); I have described my methods in a previous section. Credibility also measures how well the researcher conveys the subject’s thoughts, feelings, and concerns (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Triangulation, another quality method, requires the employment of multiple data forms. The premise of triangulation is that “no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations” (Patton, 202, p. 555). This study used two data forms: Word-for-word interview transcriptions and observations and thoughts from my field notebook. I also engaged in extensive analytic discussions with my dissertation advisor. Feedback from my dissertation advisor and colleagues was invaluable to keep me on the right track and ensured that I

considered all possible explanations for phenomena I encountered. Data triangulation strengthened my research by providing “cross-data validity checks” to verify the consistency of data (Patton, 2002, p. 247). My decades of classroom experience with girls in the setting of my study adds to my researcher credibility.

In seeking quality, I followed Erickson’s (1986) guidance and noted “disconfirming evidence as well as confirming evidence” in my analysis and creation of assertions supported by evidentiary warrants (p. 146). Exceptions were included alongside instances of support for the research questions in order to better understand the nuances of the girls’ behaviors.

### **Limitations**

The current study demonstrates the importance of SNS use for girls’ pursuit of belongingness and connectedness needs and other meanings, however; there are limitations to the study. We could only sample girls from the schools who allowed their students to participate in the study. Girls in this research came from several concentrated areas in the state rather than across the state. The participants in this study were from rural or suburban communities. Studies of girls in large urban schools could yield a broader range of results.

Triangulation was narrow in this study. Two interviews, my field notebook, and interaction with my advisor and colleagues does not meet a robust level of triangulation. Another limitation is my age. While I believe my years of experience in the classroom created credibility, my age and the vast gap between our ages is a restriction. Teens are naturally guarded with adults and are likely even more reticent with an older adult. I strove for and felt rapport with many of the girls, yet I imagine that a researcher nearer their age would elicit more heartfelt accounts.

Some interview questions I posed to the girls may have addressed the topic of SNS too broadly. There were a number of times during transcription of the second interview that I wished I could have another chance to ask a more detailed question. Much of what a girl believes about

their daily interaction on SNS may be beyond words. Putting highly personal thoughts and activities into words can be a challenge, especially for the youngest girls, as evidenced by the number of times the word “like” was used in their speech.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the problem and the purpose for the study, identified the research questions, and detailed a previous coursework project which inspired the present research. I explained the epistemology of constructionism, along with the theoretical perspective of feminist critical theory. I identified feminist critical inquiry as the methodology for this research, and methods of study, including feminist interviews and online data sharing. I described how I identified, recruited, and selected participants, and conducted data collection. Ethical considerations were discussed, along with the methodological appropriateness of critical feminist inquiry.

Guided by a constructionism epistemology, a feminist critical theory theoretical perspective, and a feminist critical inquiry methodology, my research plan was prepared. Girls, the subject of my research interest for years, were the participants I prepared to study. The online world would not wait for researchers who seek more knowledge of girls use of SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs. The work needed to move forward.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

*“It’s part of this generation”*

Chelsey, participant, 14

In this chapter I present findings from analyzing the data I collected through multiple interviews with thirty-five girls. I present them in the form of empirical assertions which are generated by “reviewing the data corpus repeatedly” to produce statements about the data and then “to test the validity of the assertions that were generated, seeking disconfirming evidence as well as confirming evidence” and supported by evidentiary warrants (Erickson, 1986, p. 146). As noted in Chapter three, I analyzed the data first by individuals, and secondly by sifting the girls into groups by age: (a) 13 and 14-year-olds; (b) 15 and 16-year-olds; and (c) 17 and 18-year-olds. These groupings emerged from noticing distinctions across age groups in the amount of time girls spent on SNS, their degree of interest in certain SNS topics, the concerns they voiced about body image, and their varying awareness of privacy concerns on SNS. My analysis focused on girls’ experiences with SNS. Girls explained their sense of connection and belonging to others through SNS and the ways SNS affirm relationships. They also detailed other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities. An iterative and inductive process of analysis, developing the assertions required compiling and analyzing data from all participants to recognize patterns in the data and identify meaning and significance.

The current chapter emphasizes analysis; I present ten themes related to the experiences, perceptions and meanings girls in this study attribute to their use of SNS. I separate them into

three sections organized based on the two research questions and an additional theme that emerged:

1. Social media fosters connection and belonging needs.
2. The other personal meanings associated with using social media.
3. Social media at times disrupts girls' social connections.

Each theme presents a different feature of girls' SNS use, from summarizing their favorite SNS to the reasons they provide for using SNS. In themes I highlight data salient to answering my two research questions. In addition, in the third section focused on the ways SNS also disrupted connection needs, I present themes that point to the complexity of teens' interactions with SNS beyond the original focus of the study. I provide information about girls' views on drama, bullying, and sexual content that underscore how engaging with SNS can complicate girls' efforts toward agency (Johnson & Ginsburg, 2015). These findings did not differ by race or ethnicity among the girls. Collectively the findings demonstrate the range of ways girls articulate that SNS can affect their lives.

### **Claim One: Using Social Media to Foster Connection and Belonging Needs**

Connecting with friends through social media was the normalized method of communication for the girls in this study. Belonging needs were met through participation in online communities and social media applications which were frequented by their peers. Being part of the social media world was essential for these girls.

### **Connecting Throughout the Day**

Connecting throughout the day on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* was integral to the young women's social lives. Social media was the locus for maintaining connections with existing friends, making new friends, and remaining in contact with the teens' school. Girls rarely noted using phone calls or email as mediums of communication, and their friends in their various social networks all used social media. As Sarah (16) shared, "it's so accessible and everybody is on it."

Girls contacted their friends daily or multiple times a day through social media. They valued knowing about their friends' activities and believed it helped their social lives. In fact, they considered their social media activity "part of what they do" and a norm for their generation. As Sophia (16) wryly stated, she accessed social media to "catch up on what's going on in the world of the teenager." This pattern of use is widespread; according to Anderson and Jiang (2018b), most teenagers consider their online interaction an integral part of their day. Charley (16), who reported using social media for three to four hours each day, stated, "I guess that's what's fun for people now days, just seeing what other people are up to." While two girls in my study acknowledged spending 12 hours per day on social media, others reported an average of two to four hours per day; the amount of time they reported varied by age group. Girls described a social media day that began in the morning and stretched throughout the day until bedtime. Significantly, that is what their friends were doing, too. The girls' experiences aligned with the Pew Research Center's findings that eighty-one percent of U.S. teens "feel more connected to their friends" through using social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2).

The first advantage of social media, according to Abby (14), CJ (13), Emma (14), Desiree (14), and Angel (14) was their interaction with friends. Similarly, staying in contact with both family and old friends was valuable to Annie (17), Britt (17), Nikki (18), and Marley (17). Daisey (17) described her *Instagram* posts as a "kind of summary of what has been happening in the last couple of years, who I am." While Daisey used social media to reveal her growth and change, Nicole (17) used social media to establish a ritual with her best friend of telling her "good morning" and "good night" every day. She felt that social media affected her social life positively because her friends could contact her when they wanted. Kaylee (17) expressed that social media "kinda ties together" with her social life more broadly. Other girls liked meeting new people online. For Chelsey (14), connections were stronger online. Whether connecting with



known friends or new ones, girls valued the contacts they made online and expected those interactions as part of their day.

**Frequency of use.** Girls in this study indicated they spent 15 minutes to 12 hours per day on social media. Thirteen and fourteen-year-olds reported spending the most time on social media, with an average of 4.9 hours per weekday. The 15 and 16-year-olds related engaging 3.5 hours per day, and the 17 and 18-year-olds described an average of 2.3 hours. The girls desired frequent daily engagement; they sent “good morning” “streaks” on *Snapchat* and checked *Snapchat* and *Instagram* regularly. When they received a *Snapchat* message, the recipient often “snapped” back. *Snap* and *snapping* refer to a *Snapchat* reply.

Approximately half of the girls engaged in streaks. *Snapchat* streaks are continuous daily pictures sent to a friend that must be returned to keep the streak alive (Snapchat Streak, n.d.). A streak is indicated by the fire symbol next to the name of the friend/user. Next to the symbol is a number which indicates the number of days for the streak. Girls discussed maintaining upwards of 300 streaks at a time with friends for months to sustain connections. For example, Desiree (14) had 85 streaks on *Instagram* and Abby (14) sent a “good morning” missive to her streaks each day. Most of the girls considered streaks valuable interactions. The streaks seemed to reflect investment in the person sharing the streaks because the practice required intentional, sustained attention to continue.

An online presence was required for some girls to meet their need for belonging and connection. Kar (18), of Jefferson Technology School (pseudonym), explained the need for posting on social media: “I don’t post daily, but if you don’t post every couple of days, it’s like you’re not really present.” Kar’s wording is telling because it speaks to the need for affirmation and visibility. “Being present” and posting regularly on social media made the girls known to their friends and followers. Without regular posting, a girl did not feel that she belonged to the

social media world of her peers and could easily disappear. The modern girl's activity on social media allows others to acknowledge her and validate her presence.

Social media engagement was of such value to the girls that most checked their accounts as soon as they woke up. Nena (17) reached from her bed to grab her phone and spent five minutes online while she woke up. Similarly, Lila (17), of Adams High School (pseudonym), checked Snapchat in the morning to "see what was pushed from the night before." She spent much of the school day online. Daisey (17) usually rushed out of bed without a chance to go online, but she described an occasional pleasurable morning when, "I kind of go slow and make tea, and I drink my tea and scroll through my *Instagram*." In Daisey's busy schedule, this practice was a type of relaxing indulgence. Delaney's (16) phone was downstairs and out of reach until she was completely ready for school, and then her social media day began. Marley (17) would check the night's posts before getting ready for the day. She spent her class time scrolling through *Instagram* and *FB*. After school, Marley would do chores related to her show pig and then spend more time online. Her whole family would get out their phones in the evening.

Girls navigated the boundaries imposed on their social media use with skill and strategized how to connect with their friends. Schools varied in the degree of online access allowed to students; some schools permitted students to engage with their phones without limit, others strictly prohibited cell access and confiscated devices when students disobeyed. Daisey went online when her class work was completed; when other teenagers at her school commented that the school wifi was unavailable, Daisey laughed and said that she was on the teacher network. Like many of the girls, CJ (13) checked her accounts upon waking. Although her teachers were lenient about social media use, the school did not have wifi, so her access was limited throughout the school day. She also checked at lunch and at home during the evening. Lunch was a prime opportunity for social media access for the girls, as well as between classes

and after school. Nicole (17) readied in the morning before she opened her snaps and sent 55 streaks. Her school was strict and access to social media was limited to lunch time.

Most girls chose to engage online at every opportunity. In fact, Emma (14) stated that she was on “all the time.” The phrase, *all the time*, may sound hyperbolic, yet Emma’s statement was congruent with Anderson and Jiang’s (2018a) research which indicates that 45% of American teens are online near-constantly (p. 9). While Emma chose extensive activity, Desiree (14) intentionally posted only every other day and limited herself to checking and observing on her “off” days. Emma’s engagement consisted of four to five hours per day, but she was surpassed by CJ (13) who spent six hours online on weekdays and 12 on weekends. Callie (15) spent 15 minutes per day on social media while Victoria (16) insisted that she was on 12 hours each day. The girls’ choices for time spent online reflect the importance they place on their digital interaction with friends and family

**Girls’ favorites.** *Snapchat* and *Instagram* were nearly evenly matched in the girls’ preferences for social media applications. The girls favored these SNS because their friends used them, they could sustain contact through streaks, and they provided creative potential with the filters they offered. Most teens had both accounts, but a few girls only had *Instagram*. Approximately half had *FB* and only a quarter accessed *Twitter*. One girl selected *FB* as her favorite social media application and one chose *Tumblr*; their reasons varied but all related to staying connected with their friends.

One reason for their preference was generational. Using these SNS conveyed belonging to a community of their generation. Marley (17) and Lily (17) noted that teens and young adults tended to use *Instagram* “like *FB* for younger kids, not your grandparents.” Girls commented that *Instagram* was the application of their peers and siblings, only occasionally were their parents on *Instagram*. Girls were invested in this distinction. *Instagramming* was good for communicating with friends and following accounts of famous people, noted Lexi (17) and

Reece (17). Nena (17), observed that she used *Instagram* for interacting with friends she did not see as often, such as those from elementary school, distant friends, and “just for entertainment.” Emma (14) stated that she used *Snapchat* to “keep up with what’s happening” with everybody, which was an important goal for her.

Girls also appreciated the control they perceived in circulating images on *Snapchat*. The SNS offers users a choice between a ten second post or a twenty-four-hour window for viewing a post, thereby controlling how long their images circulated as well as others’ length of access to them. Some preferred ensuring a snap disappeared quickly while others liked deciding they could save it for an established amount of time. The allure of an elusive post made *Snapchat* an attractive digital platform to teens from its inception given that comments disappeared after seconds (Freitas, 2017). In addition, the temporal qualities of this access encouraged teens to return regularly to their accounts for glimpses of fleeting images.

*Snapchat*’s lenses and filters were appealing because they offered users the opportunity to enhance images with decorations such as flower wreaths, sunglasses, or a dog face (see Figure 1). The adolescents said they liked the creative lenses and filters and used them frequently. For example, Britt (17) liked the silly photos she took with *Snapchat* and Kaylee (17) enjoyed the images that accompanied *Snapchat* dialogue. Desiree (14) commented that all her friends used *Snapchat* and CJ (13) called the filters “fun.” Figure 1 shows commercial examples of filtered photos (Snapchat basic filters, n.d.), the kind of enhancement to which young women referred in their interviews. Delaney (16), Rachel (16), and Tatum (16) praised the application as quick and easy to use. *Snapchat* was the app preferred for conversation. The girls quickly sent a snap or created a group chat for friends, family, or classmates.



Figure 1 *Snapchat* filters example (*Snapchat* basic filters, n.d.).

Brettley (13) discussed sending pictures on *Instagram*, usually without text, and watching make-up videos. Abby (14) liked that she could “share where you go” on *Instagram*. Daisey (17) praised the “artsy” and professional side of *Instagram*. She liked the way the app allowed her to set up pictures, with careful attention to lighting on photographs and drawings. *Tumblr* appealed to one of the artistic, poetic girls in the study who sought self-expression and anonymity. Sophia (16) admirably called *Tumblr* a, “community of awesome people who are kind of dorks.” Lila (17) was the only participant who chose *FB* as her favorite social media. She valued *FB* for watching singing and cooking videos and keeping up with people who did not live close by. Whether *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *Tumblr*, or *FB*, girls appreciated the creative nature of the application and employed it to express their funny, artistic sides.

### **Connecting Across Common Interests was Important**

Connecting across common topics was important to teens’ social media lives. Girls connected across topics familiar to their daily lives at school. The most common subjects of discussion for the younger girls were sports, school, and boys. CJ (13) joined in with discussions about boys “‘cause I kinda want to know.” Sports was a frequent subject for posting when a girl was proud of an accomplishment. Six of the seven girls in the youngest group participated in school athletics. Whether the sport was basketball, volleyball, or track, posting fostered connections external to the SNS environment by encouraging others to attend the school event

and celebrate a victory or a personal best. CJ was the exception; she played volleyball but thought posting an accomplishment was “showing off.” She rejected the performative aspect of social media that other teenagers encouraged with posts of their efforts.

The girls connected about topics in their daily lives as well as social events and celebrities in pop culture. Frequently the girls participated in daily enquiries from friends, such as, “How’s your day been?” and “Are you having a good day?” They covered common topics such as social drama and who was talking or fighting with whom, as well as posting updates about celebrities and movies. Other topics included breaking up on *Twitter*, hanging out, and “a lot of selfies” according to Reece (17). Partying, smoking, drugs, and sex were the subjects of discussion according to Tatum (16). Victoria (16) commented that the topics, “depend on who you follow.” With school friends the topics were parties or school events while “national accounts” of advertisers and celebrities had funny videos and memes, along with ever-present ads. Sophia (16) felt happy and inspired when she reposted information. Reece (17) posted selfies, videos of her dog, and pictures of her food.

Posting about both troubling and positive events invited support that fostered feelings of connection. Nicole (17), for instance, described a recent episode of feeling connected to others on social media when she posted about an incident at work where a couple were rude and disrespectful to her. After posting about the occurrence, “a lot of people talked to me about it and it made me feel better.” Kaylee (17) had a good experience online when she posted her interest in shadowing a game warden; she received contact information and arranged a meeting. Her online connections seemed to advance her future opportunities.

**Positive effects.** The adolescents generally felt that engaging with social media was a positive force in their social lives. The positive effects were numerous: Contact with friends and out-of-state family, online support when they needed it, and constant availability of online resources. Social media was available at any time and transcended geographic limits of the

circles in which girls traveled in their daily lives. Chelsey (14) thought she could benefit if colleges would view her social media page online, Emma (14) stated she could “see what’s going on in the world,” and CJ (14) advised, “look at happy posts if you’re feeling down, it makes you happy.” Ella (16), who thought her mother was overprotective and “has to know everything,” went online to access a broad array of friends that she enjoyed. Using social media helped her forge relationships with friends that her mother might not have allowed otherwise.

Prayer chains were positive features of social media for Kaylee (17). Kar (18) framed social media as a place where people came together and “uplifted each other.” Daisey (17) described how social media helped her overcome homesickness when she moved to Oklahoma from another state. JJ’s (17) use of social media differed from her peers; an aspiring artist, JJ posted her work and people commented on how she could improve it. Her online friends and followers gave her ideas to draw and feedback which made her art more realistic. She relied on the support and constructive criticism she received for her photography and artwork online. Charley (16) viewed social media as “just a part of my social life.” Jenny (15) believed that using it made her social life “better, more fun,” by helping her “connect with friends.”

For some girls, being “online with everyone” also had practical value. Delaney’s (16) father was an educator at her high school and she lived an hour away from school. Her only opportunity to hang out with friends after school took place on social media. For the girls who took college courses during the day (concurrent enrollment) and spent few hours in their high school buildings, valuable information was available on their online school pages. Kar (18) called her phone’s access to social media “critical,” and she used it to stay in touch with her school groups; Lily (17) also used it as “a way to check in” with school-related pages.

Most girls described their online friends as supportive and said that interactions compared favorably to in-person friend support. Girls experienced posts and snaps as valuable confirmation of their relationships and the ready access to a source of immediate support when needed. Online

support made people “feel connected” according to Chelsey (14) because her online friends “back her up.” Only Britt (13) called the two kinds of support -in person and online- “about the same.” The girls indicated that online friends were helpful, “back you up in a bad mood,” and helped build their confidence. Even Sophia (16), who spent a minimal amount of time on social media, discussed supportive friends who “have my back” when she was fighting with her boyfriend. Kylie (15) described her online friends as supportive, and if she received negative comments, she took action to delete them or unfollow the person who posted them.

Nena (17) believed that teens felt more confident in certain ways and protected behind their phones which made giving online support easier. In fact, Daisey (17) noted that, “When something is good the support is almost better on social media and there is so much more of it!” Lexi (17) stated that “people you don’t talk to everyday will compliment you online and say nice things.” Similarly, Jenny (15) stated that some friends on social media were friendlier online than when she saw them at school, which she thought was “kinda weird.” Nicole’s (17) response indicated the emotional scaffolding teens could experience online because the constant availability of social media interactions transcended those they could have in-person during the day. Online friend support helped her self-esteem because she received compliments on her appearance. She knew that, “there is someone out there that thinks that I’m pretty.” The positive aspects of social media were as diverse as the girls themselves: They contacted friends, built their confidence, felt support from friends, and used the medium to improve artistic skills.

**Relationships were strengthened.** The younger girls offered a strong critique of cultural fears that teens are losing their ability to converse and interact face-to-face (Clark, 2013; Turkle, 2011; 2015). They appeared fully aware of the widespread views of social media overuse. Although many agreed they used social media too much (see Claim Two), the girls defended their ability to conduct themselves socially while they were immersed in social media. Abby (14) claimed that social media had not damaged her social skills; she could “have a normal



conversation.” Emma (14) quickly stated that despite her social media use, “I’m still social” in her face-to-face relationships. Some girls emphasized that they used social media alongside their in-person connections. Nikki (18) noted that she communicated with her friends both on *Snapchat* and in person. Brettley (13) and CJ (13) indicated that their digital communication did not affect their relationships “at all,” and Brettley said that what she put online she could say in person. The girls’ defensive statements indicated awareness that adults believe teens risk their ability to interact socially through using digital media. Abby (14), CJ (14), and Chelsey (14) observed flatly that social media did not affect their face-to-face social life. The girls sensed that society viewed them as deficient because they choose to use social media extensively to interact.

Most girls in the study indicated that interacting with friends online strengthened their relationships and described becoming closer to friends and family through their social media use. Abby stated that her relationships deepened, “I think it has helped me.” Lila (17) and Annie (17) said that online interaction improved their relationships through sharing laughter. Chelsey noted the online connections that strengthened friendships because they had more time to interact. This comment echoes others’ appreciation for the unbounded access social media provides teens to connect at any time, at their convenience, as often as needed, that is simply not accessible for in-person interactions. Tobin and Chulpaiboon (2016) propose that teens need regular online interactions to gain a sense of a relationship. Social media use might strengthen relationships by allowing friends more time for interaction, supporting Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) view that the need for connection is essential.

The geographic reach of social media, too, was relevant for strengthening relationships. Marley (17) believed that online interaction improved her relationships with people who lived in other places and Nicole (17) said that social media interaction “boosts” her relationships because she was not limited to just talking to friends at school. Daisey (17) shared a story online which

resulted in a direct message conversation “for the first time in a long time.” According to Kylie (15), she interacted with people more since she was on social media.

Girls also joined social media groups that fostered feelings of belonging. Ella (16) noted people interacting in what she described as “cliques.” Within the cliques, teens talked about common interests, such as movies and bands. Ella made friends with people who shared her interest in K-Pop bands. Ella’s K-Pop band clique gratified a need for inclusion with like-minded teens who have discovered a unique musical style. Sophia’s (16) admiration for the users on *Tumblr* reflected her desire to join in those communities. “Cyber cliques” are features of modern living for the American teen (Fitton et al., 2013, p. 408). Some teens joined online groups for community, belonging, and connection. Groups satisfy the adolescent’s need for affiliation and companionship, and cliques form based on the “similar interests of the identity” (Santrock, 2007, p. 323). As affirming as the girls were about online friend support, the girls recognized the varying depth of connections online and appreciated person-to-person support. Abby (14) noted that face-to-face support “gives you a shoulder to cry on.” Marley (17) said that “in-person support is more real and true.” Nikki (18) observed that “face-to-face friends are her actual friends.” Girls reiterated a previous point: Their relationships were healthy online and in-person.

There were some exceptions to the view that social media strengthened relationships. Nena (17) observed that online interaction did not affect her relationships and she mainly talked to her friends in person. Kar (18) stated that she did not go through social media to get support, “it’s not an emotional tool for me.” She continued and said that people were not always genuine online. Other girls criticized online interactions. Callie (15) and Charley (16) found less support from online friends. Callie noted that sometimes even people she did not know said bad things and Charley stated that she “doesn’t get a lot of positive feedback.” Marley (17) concurred; she said that her online friends would often post more negative than positive responses.

**“Friends” and “followers”.** Girls emphasized the importance of online friendships, but they held mixed beliefs about the significance of connections through the number of *friends* or *followers* they had. Friends and followers symbolized connection for some girls, but not others. Social networking sites encourage their users to designate “friends” and “followers” but these terms do not convey the depth of the relationships. Some “friends” are simply superficial online contacts. Many “followers” do not actively follow all posted media feeds. Accordingly, several girls dismissed the number of followers as immaterial. For example, Emma (14) bluntly stated that the number of one’s followers was not important. Yet, others valued knowing they were connected to hundreds or thousands of people through their apps. For the girls who desire followers, they represent a connection, however undeveloped, to people known and unknown who show interest in linking to their online lives. Followers can represent a girl’s visibility in the online world and symbolize her desirability as a person with whom to connect. A connection is made between the girl and her follower with each click of the follow button. The number of followers a girl accumulates suggests she is worthy of observing and emulating.

Girls can feel validated through the implied approval that having friends and followers provides, regardless of the depth of that connection. Some believed having friends and followers was quite important. Brettley (13), who had 2,000 followers on *Instagram*, observed that some people became competitive about having followers. Despite having many followers, she emphasized she did not care how many she had. Sophia (16), who was among the least active on social media, expressed that followers were valuable and “they’ll be there for you, because people are always online.” Chelsey (14) commented that it is “kind of important because it gets your name out there with sports or colleges.” Desiree (14), who had 912 followers on *Instagram*, stated with enthusiasm that, “I think it’s really important. If you don’t have much, people won’t follow you.” While followers may be only distantly connected, the knowledge that people are following her activities matters to Desiree and other girls.

The importance of followers on social media drew varied responses among the 17 and 18-year-olds. Eight girls dismissed followers as “not important.” Lila, (17) who had 1,000 followers, said that followers were a big deal and “people judge you on it.” Lexi (17) noted her awareness of the symbolic meaning of followers mentioned above: That some people saw their numbers as validation of their online value. Reece (17) believed that her 2,000 *Instagram* followers were important for “letting people know what you’re doing in life.” Zoe (18), with ten followers on *Instagram*, believed that people get obsessed with social media and just wanted more followers. Britt (17) saw the potential of long-term connections for her 700 *FB* friends; she could track these people after high school or college graduation.

In addition to some girls’ feelings of affirmation and validation from having followers, others thought followers expanded their horizons through enabling connections with a wider group of people and institutions. Abby (14) noted that online followers are important “just so you can look and see what they’re doing and stuff.” JJ’s (17) view was similar: Followers “kinda open your eyes up to the world” she observed. When she talked to people from different places in the world, it made her say, “Hey, we pretty much have it good over here.”

JJ’s optimistic response to her followers indicates a maturity that goes beyond mere numbers and popularity. She believed these online connections provided an opportunity to experience a broader world outside of her hometown and appreciate the good in her life. To those who value followers, each one is analogous to a single link in a long chain of connection. When some girls see that they have a 1,000 followers, they feel visible, affirmed, and connected to other followers who share their interests. Regardless of the depth of the relationship, the person being followed feels a validation of their pursuits from the people who choose to link with them through social media.

## **Claim Two: Other Personal Meanings of SNS**

Girls expressed a wide array of other meanings they found in using social media beyond their interest in connection and belongingness. In fact, these findings indicate the “other meanings” of SNS in this study exceed those related to girls’ need for connection and belonging. The meanings were both positive and negative and they varied by age. Older girls valued the ability to access the larger world of social and political issues available through social media. Others expressed a range of concerns about the dangers of online interactions and the degree of privacy available. Age also influenced their attitudes toward privacy and awareness of the surveillance culture that shapes technological use in their everyday interactions online. Physical limitations, habits developed over the years, an alternative to television, and safety from the real world were all reasons given for social media use. I will discuss girls’ views of social and political issues, safety concerns, negotiating parental awareness of social media use, posting personal information, and body image postings in this section.

### **Following Social Issues Online**

Older girls valued following social issues online more than younger girls. Charley (16) summed up her attitude toward issues related to politics, race, women’s issues, and climate change on social media with the statement that, “social issues are of more interest to older people.” The youngest teenagers showed the least attention to social issues while interest increased with the 15 and 16-year-olds and peaked in the oldest group. Older teens found it meaningful to follow *Snapchat* and *Instagram* online. However, as many girls chose not to follow social and political issues as those who did. Six girls, Nena (17), Victoria (16), Lexi (17), Daisey (17), Chelsey (14), and Sophia (16), noted following feminist feeds.

From young teens to their grandparents, people rely on social media for information and conversation about important events in their world. Socially conscious girls are encouraged to adopt a “can-do” attitude and become activists through social media (Edell, Brown & Montano,

2016, p. 697). In this sense, social media expands users' political horizons. Some girls found meaning in following politics on SNS, especially observing current issues with Donald Trump on *Twitter* at the time of data gathering. Kylie (15) was only aware of the social issues that were communicated by the celebrities she followed. Many of the girls said they saw few social issues appear on their SNS feeds, but Maggie (16) noted that she viewed information about climate change on her accounts. Sophia (16) followed the broadest range of social issues; she noted sexuality, racial, and immigration issues on her feeds that she thought were important to follow. She expressed empathy for others when she observed, "We are all people, part of the human race, and if you can't accept that, then there's something wrong with you, not with the person you're trying to go against." Her statement reflected the importance for her of the wide-ranging social issues she followed on social media.

The seventeen and eighteen-year-old girls shared more robust comments about social issues than the younger teens. Daisey (17) stated that, "I really get into politics." She viewed posts about voter registration, the importance of voting, and environmental issues such as the danger of plastic use. Interacting with teens from around the world opened a broader world for Daisey. Lexi (17) followed The Women's March account which detailed the January 2017 event protesting the presidency of Donald Trump and subsequent marches (The Women's March, n.d.). Nena (17) felt a sense of belonging through interacting with other users who posted about politics, the LGBTQ community, Black Lives Matter, and what she called "social justice warriors." Nicole (17) commented about politics and said she followed *The Huffington Post*. She noted that she would turn 18 soon and she "wants to know what's going on in the world so I'll be ready for voting." Sophia (16) described joining in to discuss a variety of issues related to sexuality, race, and immigration and feeling like she belonged to a larger group of "like-minded" young people. This description offers an example of feelings of belonging like those discussed in the previous section in relation to social cliques; in addition, it conveys that Sophia finds

personal meaning in learning about social and political issues beyond interpersonal matters in her peer circles. Anderson and Jiang (2018b) report that American teens believe social media “helps them become more civically minded” (p. 2).

Others noted the power of social media as a social and political force. Reece (17) expressed apprehension that social media could have negative effects on current events, giving the example of a tragic gun violence incident in a nearby community the day before our first interview. She described social media “blowing up” with speculation and inaccurate information about the shooting. Britt (17), Annie (17), and Marley (17) were concerned about the frequent posts they viewed on police violence. Britt had concerns about what she referred to as “the racial thing.” Marley stated that her family was involved in law enforcement and negative posts upset her. In a climate in which police have become scrutinized for violence against people of color, and social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Roberts, 2018) and National Black Justice Coalition (About us, n.d.) have taken on prominence, social media allows debates and dialogue about current events and social justice movements. Some also commented on social media as a political tool. JJ (17), for instance, noted that the president and other politicians used social media for communicating about controversial social issues, and “even my grandpa has social media to keep up with the news.” While a teen’s account might “blow up” with posts over a sensational topic, what young women found meaningful was that social media provides them opportunities to learn about, discuss, and debate important topics with teens and adults all over the world.

### **Social Media Shaped their Mood**

The girls in this study found other personal meanings in social media use. The adolescents believed that social media shaped their mood. Although Abby (14) and Kar (18) asserted that social media had no effect on their mood, other girls described experiencing emotions varying from excited to nostalgic, entertained to relaxed, depending on the topic

viewed. Marley found some social media content upsetting or depressing. In contrast, CJ (13) stated that happy posts made her feel good when she was down. “Watch cute dog videos” she recommended. Several girls commented that they followed accounts that “brightened” their day. Tatum (16) admitted that it “kinda excites me to see who *Snapchatted* me.” She liked a guy who also was a *Snapchat* user and every time she saw a snap from him, she thought, *Oh, it’s him*. Emma (14) claimed that going onto social media made her “pretty much happy” and Nena (17) agreed. In one study, researchers found that seventy-one percent of American teens claim that their use of social media is associated with positive emotions such as feeling included and confident (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2).

Social media could serve as a pick-me-up or reinforce a negative mood for girls. Kar (18) commented on the ambiguous meanings of online posts. She said that “when someone posts something sarcastic, it’s kinda hard to read that.” Kar continued, “It’s important to ask them instead of just getting mad about it. Clear things up face-to-face.” Callie (15) admitted that it gave her a sense of relief when she posted about her problems and Ruby (16) felt “pretty good” about her posts when she was sad or when things bothered her. Victoria (16) would visit specific social media sites depending on her mood; certain accounts helped her cool off, laugh, or calm down. She intentionally sought out sites to help regulate her mood. Nicole (17) acknowledged that social media did affect her mood, noting that her “mood can change in an instant if I view something outrageous.” Sophia (16) said her mood shaped the way she experienced online sites, suggesting her interpretation had little to do with the site itself; if she went online in a good mood, everything was “pretty good,” but if she was in a negative mood, then she saw everything as “negative and horrible.” Callie (15) commented that her use of social media did not affect her mood like others who were “addicted to *Snapchat* or *Instagram*.”

The girls described social media as a form of entertainment, a way to relax and alleviate boredom. In short, Ruby (16) said, it’s “what we like to do.” Some turned to social media to relax



after a demanding day. Other teenagers indicated they wanted to relax, were bored at home, or had nothing else to do. For Desiree (14), social media provided opportunities to just “chill” and talk to her friends. Reece (17) and Zoe (18) were at opposite ends of the social media use spectrum, but both described it as relaxing. When Reece “gets a chance to lay down and rest I take it and the phone is right there.” Victoria (16) called social media “instant entertainment.” Delaney (16) had a debilitating elbow injury which limited her ability to engage in physical activity; she filled empty hours on social media.

Most girls spent a busy day at school, frequently had a sports commitment after school, and arrived home tired at 5:30 or 6:00 in the evening. Some girls have little opportunity for making their own decisions about what was valuable and meaningful in their day. Teens detail how their lives are busy with homework, sports, and jobs, with little unstructured time to spend with friends face-to-face (Damour, 2016). Social media offers girls the choice to slip entertainment moments into their day.

### **Spend Less Time on Social Media**

The girls expressed that they should spend less time on social media. Another personal meaning that emerged from girls’ interviews was the strong belief that they were spending too much time online. Despite the connections social media sustained, the opportunities it provided for learning and relaxing, and the belief that it primarily strengthened relationships, many believed they spent too many hours on social media as it had become overly dominant in their lives. Older girls, in fact, described some efforts to cut back. Amounts of time spent online varied widely, but almost all believed the time they spent on social media was extreme. The younger girls did not detail many reasons for this belief. Some viewed social media as a habit and a generational norm. Ruby (16) observed that, “we like to be on social media, keep contact with friends and stuff.”, Charley (16) lamented that “time gets away from you” while on social media. For Maggie (16), online communication “is a habit;” she had been on social media since

she was a twelve-year-old. Maggie noted that social media was the means of communication with which she grew up. Only the elimination of smart phones would change things, she stated. Kylie (15) said there was “nothing to be done about it.”

The tension between the amount of time spent on social media and what the girls believed should be spent online was evident when Tatum (16) abruptly stated “I’m guilty” of excessive social media use. Tatum mentioned that social media interfered with her face-to-face family connections. When her phone broke and she was off social media, she said she talked to family more. From Victoria’s (16) 12 hours to Sophia’s (16) 30 minutes, all but two of the teenagers believed they should engage less online. Only Callie (15) and Jenny (15), conveyed that the amount of time they spent on social media, 15 minutes and two to three hours respectively, was the right amount of time for online interaction.

Older girls valued spending less time online. Several of the oldest girls described changing the number of hours they spent online. Overall, the 17 and 18-year-olds were spending less time on social media (with one exception, Reece [17]) than the younger teenagers, and the two girls who described spending copious hours online in the past had cut their extreme hours back. Previously, Britt (17) spent 12 hours and Marley (17) seven hours per day online; at the time of the interviews Britt spent two hours per day on social media and Marley was virtually off. For Marley, this allowed her more time with her show pig and its attendant chores. Britt stated that she was neglecting her schoolwork and family and decided to spend less time online. She had allowed herself to get caught up in some online drama and she decided to “let it go.” Lexi (17) observed that it became “too easy to get wrapped up in it” which led her to procrastination. Nikki (18) suggested that teens would be better served getting out into nature and spending less time “on screen.” Nicole (17) decided she did not want her “whole life run by a little box,” as she described her phone.

The 17 and 18-year-olds noted that thirty minutes to two hours was the right amount of time for social media use. Reece was the exception: Reece spent four to five hours per day online and she stated that she “can’t do without it” and two to three hours would be her minimum. Whether a habit or a preference, frequent use of social media was normalized for girls in my study. Some felt guilty and most believed they should be online less, but social media was their expected method of communication.

### **Girls Navigated Privacy and Safety Concerns**

Girls navigated privacy and safety concern to remain online. Teens were agential and actively described their efforts to negotiate individual security and privacy issues with their media accounts. Online spaces are complex and girls valued their safety, actively pursuing control over it. Being online meant navigating the sharing of personal information and remaining watchful for dangers. There is significant risk discourse surrounding young women’s social media use, including concerns about teens’ self-regulation, risk-taking behaviors, and vulnerability to exploitation (Damour, 2016, Freitas, 2017). Girls discussed online risks such as privacy settings on their accounts, awareness of public crimes like stalking, and surveillance by their peers. They also discussed the strategies for managing their privacy and safety.

Girls’ attitudes toward their online privacy and security varied significantly from the youngest to the oldest girls. Thirteen and fourteen-year-old girls responded with confidence that their application settings gave them online security. A setting of “private” on *Snapchat* or *Instagram* requires a potential follower to invite the user to accept them. *FB* also necessitates a “friend” send a request for acceptance. Without the acceptance, a person requesting follower or friend status is rejected and cannot view the user’s posts. The privacy setting on *Snapchat* created a sense of safety for Chelsey (14) who stated, “I have everything on private. If a stalker tried to follow me, I could decline it.” Chelsey was disarmingly honest about her belief that her SNS settings would protect her privacy. Most girls conceived of managing their privacy and

safety in terms of setting and controlling their individual settings on their social media accounts, rather than broader issues tied to participating in technology culture in which their pictures, messages, and private information circulated on social media platforms that surveilled their daily interactions to analyze trends and sell products. Privacy also meant controlling the personal information they shared about themselves, their thoughts, feelings, and activities. They often described themselves as lurkers and observers rather than contributors to dialogue. Some felt a sense of control in deciding what circulated.

However, even in making these careful choices, several commented that they found SNS potentially unsafe because their postings could always circulate beyond what they intended and could potentially render them vulnerable. CJ (13) asserted that her accounts were private, but she recognized that “friends could screenshot it without her knowing it” and because of that she “keeps a lot of myself to myself.” In the youngest group, Desiree (14) recognized the potential for exposure or embarrassment when she said, “I feel like everyone can see it.” Desiree claimed that, “I take care of what I post” and she expressed the need to be careful in what she communicated online. CJ and Desiree displayed an awareness of online risks that most of the younger girls had not yet achieved.

The girls seemed to have some general awareness of possible safety threats in their daily social media activities. Some teenagers expressed dissatisfaction with their favorite social media because it revealed too much. Several girls mentioned *Snapchat*'s location feature as a safety concern. The idea that any user could track their location made several girls worried and uncomfortable. Abby (14), for example, noted that unless the setting was changed, the location of a *Snapchat* user showed online for everyone to know. Regardless of what they chose to reveal, Abby and Maggie (16) were frightened by the idea that anyone could find them through *Snapchat*. Some girls described stalking behaviors they learned about in the media and Lily (17) discussed a friend whose admirer had “blown up” into a menacing situation. Delaney (16) did

not like the idea that outside people could check her out despite her efforts to be private. She observed that it concerned her a little bit, but “I just don’t think about it.”

Even more serious risks were present for girls who used the free “hook-up” apps *Tinder*, *OkCupid*, or *Plenty of Fish* (Flynn, Cousins, & Picciani, 2019), though no girls in this study acknowledged using those apps. The parent company, *Match Group*, which also owns *Match.com*, only checks for registered sex offenders on its paid accounts, like *Match.com*. Girls who use the popular free app *Tinder* are exposed to the profiles of potential partners with a sexual criminal history. A spokesman for Match Groups acknowledged, “There are definitely registered sex offenders on our free products” (p. 5).

While most girls felt safe and secure with their social media accounts set on private, Maggie (16) stated, “Now you have me thinking about it” with a laugh in response to my questions about safety online. Maggie laughingly dismissed concerns about privacy settings in the first interview but expressed fears in the second interview about surveillance culture. She discussed her worries that the applications she used wanted an unnecessary amount of her information, her birthday, phone number, e-mail, and more recently, location. Maggie conveyed her belief that the people who created *Snapchat* could watch what the user was doing as they employed the app. She was the only girl to expressly indicate concerns about the surveillance mechanisms that are part of social media applications. Surveillance culture is a feature of digital modernity in which corporate and state modes of surveillance are mediated by increasingly fast and powerful new technologies (Lyon, 2017).

Some attributed safety issues to the girls’ own behavior. Emma (14), for example, conveyed unease that people “put too much on social media.” Sarah (16) viewed her use of social media as “as private as you make it.” She felt she had control over her social media privacy with the right settings and choices. Callie (15) noted the risks that some girls take when they updated their pictures every day and changed their ages, for example, from 13 to 15; they

“end up with older men sexting them.” Kylie (15) knew social media was not completely private, but she was not worried because she had nothing of which to be ashamed. Some girls had both private and public accounts. Victoria (16), for example, had her main *Instagram* account set on public. Her *Instagram* page was linked to her *FB* photography page, but her spam account was private.

In contrast to some of the younger girls, the 17 and 18-year-old girls had a sense that they lacked privacy online and were careful about their postings in the interests of safety. They seemed to understand that they could make choices with their account security, but effectively had little control over what users viewed their social media. Zoe (18) commented that her accounts were “not that private” and she tried not to share personal information. Nicole (17) believed that her accounts were “pretty much open for anyone” and it made her “cautious about what I put on there.” Lila (17) made a similar statement, “It’s going to get out there, so be careful of what you post.” Marley (17) thought that revealing posts or posts about parties were stupid because, “Somebody is going to screenshot that and in a week it’s going to be all over the internet.”

Kar (18) tried to keep her accounts “very private” by “snooping” before she accepted a friend or follower, and Lila (17) “lurked” on *FB*. A potential friend with “cuss words” or marijuana on their page was not accepted. JJ (17) had her settings on public for people to see her art, but she stated that she “keeps her stuff on a very dull pace” so that no one really knew her. Continuing, JJ said that, “I don’t want everyone online to know about me. Your life should be bigger than online.” Kaylee (17) seemed unconcerned about privacy issues, she claimed that, “I feel I don’t put enough out there for anybody to try to intrude.” JJ and Kaylee shared the belief that they could limit unwanted attention if they posted tepid information.

Another nuance tied to the theme of privacy is related to teens’ beliefs about what they and others should share about their personal lives. Teens navigate how much they reveal about

their authentic thoughts, feelings, and experiences online. In these personal meanings, safety was less the concern than widely held belief systems about the type of material and information that was appropriate to share. Freitas (2017) posits that women and girls must “walk an impossible line between being sweet and innocent yet also sexy” online (p. 101), and it’s important to appear happy, “blissfully” happy, even (p. 13). Teens want to appear interesting based on their posts (boyd, 2014). While personal information is at the heart of social media posting (boyd, 2014), most of the girls in this study stated that they did not “put all their business out there.” Generation Z uses social media more to “keep up with others than to share about themselves” and they keep intimate details about their lives to themselves (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 74). Social media encourages digital intimacy and teens are often conflicted about whether to reveal their personal information or keep it private (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Nikki (18) stated that she did not post personal information but added with a laugh, “I just look at everyone else’s.”

Girls’ responses demonstrated an age division regarding communication about their personal life on social media. While seven of the fifteen 17 and 18-year-olds said they posted their personal information online, that number was considerably greater than among the younger girls. Desiree (14) was one of the few younger girls who freely admitted that she posted about her personal life on social media. She posted every day on her *Snapchat* account and described her day and her mood. Desiree explained that she had experienced depression in the past and that people worried about how she was doing. Sarah (16) was more cautious; she tried not to talk about her personal life because it’s “kinda there forever.” Victoria (16) was careful not to name names when she discussed her personal life. She navigated online privacy issues by describing scenarios like the problem she was having, and she received advice from online friends. In contrast, Chelsey (14) stated that she “doesn’t really put personal information out there.” Brettley (13) agreed and noted that, “I don’t think that everybody should know that, and it’s really personal.” Their private information was reserved for face-to-face interaction.

What girls conceptualized as “personal” varied widely. Girls noticed that people posted various personal problems online. Boyfriends and break-ups were the subjects viewed by Abby (14) and Desiree (14), and CJ (13) saw posts about divorcing parents. CJ felt perplexed by their admissions and asked herself, “Why do you want to post that if it’s about your personal life?” However, several girls noted that most people did not post about their personal life, “It is more likely to be about their car breaking down” said Lily (17). Kar (18) saw people posting selfies but did not see these images as “personal.” But Lila (17), Lexi (17), and Chelsey (14) viewed teens talking about the highly personal topic of their mental health. Lexi saw it as an issue that people needed to discuss, and she followed several mental health pages. Through their interest in mental health pages, girls could connect to others with similar interests or problems. Yet, for Victoria (16), personal information had its limits; mental health posts were over the line for her. Victoria bluntly stated that, “I don’t like them” when people posted about depression and were happy-go-lucky in real life. She did not believe that social media was the place to post about depression.

Girls constantly made decisions about which aspects of themselves to share online. Nicole (17) explained that everyone had different facets of their personality to present online and she stated that, “We all act differently.” It did not bother her when people behaved differently on social media than in real life. Nicole believed that “You can be authentic and be two different types of people. I know I’m different from the way I am at school and the way I am at home.” Britt (17) said that it was good to talk about her personal life, though she did not post frequently. Nicole (17) posted about her personal life online and connected by describing events that bothered her at work to sympathetic friends, but she drew the line at her most personal information. She did not “put her business out there” and talk about a boyfriend. When Kaylee (17) “was little” she shared personal information, but now she understood “how big of a deal it really is.” Kar’s (18) view was that posting about personal information was “okay as long as it is



about accomplishments.” She noted that “Colleges look at your social media.” The rest of the older girls said emphatically that they did not post their personal information.

For many of the girls, connecting did not necessitate personal revelation. Daisey (17) laughingly noted that she had 200 people following her, but she would not normally tell all 200 she was mad at someone. Learning to navigate in the digital world, the girls displayed their agency in the choices they made regarding their online privacy and the type of information they shared. Girls negotiated how much “personal” information they were willing to share.

### **Freedom on Social Media**

The oldest girls found freedom on social media. Older girls experienced the freedom to access social media as they chose. Sarah (16) saw her time online as an opportunity: She stated that “I guess it’s a way to figure out who you want to be.” The girls primarily recognized the need for their parents’ oversight, but sometimes had to navigate their parents’ interest in and control over their social media use; dishonesty was sometimes the result. Social media was a place for traversing parental boundaries for some of the girls. Daisey (17) and Ella (16) intentionally misled their parents about their use of social media. Daisey admitted that her parents did not know she used social media at all. She questioned the privacy of her interview information as we began and asked, “Is this really private? Nobody will know what I say?” After reassurance that her responses were private, Daisey sheepishly admitted that her mother did not know that she used social media. Daisey was not sure if her mother would be upset, but Daisey did not want her to “worry about things she doesn’t necessarily need to worry about.” Daisey called her mother controlling and said that her mother would hear a story about a friend’s daughter who had a problem with a boy online and she would tell Daisey, “Oh, you shouldn’t do it at all.” Daisey said she had learned from the negative stories her mother repeated and she knew to keep her feelings private. She described her mother as “nervous and protective.” Ella (16) stated that her family knew “half of what I’m doing on social media.” Her family did not realize

that she met new people online, so she kept it confidential. Daisey and Ella's behavior calls to mind the actions of teens throughout time; some choose to sneak around in order to experience the freedom of activities their parents frown upon. The appeal of social media is strong enough to warrant the violation of parents' restrictions for some girls.

The older girls said their families had little interest in their use of social media (the one exception was Marley [17]), while the youngest girls described significant parental supervision. Nicole (17) observed that her parents "really don't care as long as I'm being safe," and Zoe (18) echoed those thoughts. Most girls said their parents knew about their use and trusted them to engage online safely. Lexi's (17) family encouraged her to open a *FB* account in order to take part in family posts. In Marley's case, after she went off social media entirely at her father's insistence, she and her siblings were allowed limited access on a strictly controlled basis. The family iPad, located in the living room, was the only device she was permitted to use.

Each of the younger girls detailed parents striving for awareness of their online activities. Some teenagers, Chelsey (14) for instance, had parents who were on the same social media application and knew what she posted. Older siblings on the same platform watched their younger sisters' actions online. Desiree (14) noted that her parents were very aware of her online activities and sometimes fought over her actions. The other girls described their parents as "aware" or "very aware." Callie's (15) older brother had accounts on the same sites, and he kept an eye on Callie and her twin. Most girls related that their families made an effort to know about their daughters' use of social media. Only one of the younger girls, Jenny (15), said that her parents, "just don't really care." Younger girls' parents exerted more control over their use of social media and the parents of the older girls were less observant. None of the girls indicated they were frustrated with their parents' oversight.

### **Claim Three: Social Media can Interfere with Girls' Connection and Belonging**

While social media provides connection and belonging for many girls, others describe negative components of social media content and interactions that could interfere with cultivating connections. The medium can be used for opening new opportunities or closing off from unwanted interaction. Other teens bear out the negative tropes of body image anxiety, drama-producing, and cyberbullying on social media, substantiating adult concerns.

#### **A Platform for Evaluating Appearance**

Girls experienced social media as a platform for evaluating appearance. Sometimes it prompted feelings of jealousy and insecurity and created a culture of judgment which intruded on belonging and connection. The availability of celebrity images online and the trend of posting selfies and photographs exposes girls to a visual culture preoccupied with body image. The “incredible pressure” on girls to be beautiful and sophisticated that Brown and Gilligan described in 1992 (p. 12) has not waned; today’s girls have the added pressure of the volume of images that circulate through social media against which to compare themselves. Girls’ self-image is affected by all those curated selfies (Freitas, 2017); everyone’s best photo, clothed or bikini-clad, is on display. Several girls detailed feeling bad and judging themselves in relation to online ideals. Social media “influencers” were effective in influencing the girls, hawking products for girls to purchase. Influencers are fitness gurus, beauty bloggers, models, fashionistas, and others who endorse products and share their opinions on social media (Top social media influencers of 2018, n.d.).

Girls recognized that many images were idealistic and yet sometimes felt concerned about their bodies and appearance in comparison, interaction which has implications for connecting offline. Models and celebrities glamorize a waif-thin appearance online; the subject of body image was discussed more by the older girls in this study than the younger girls. Lexi (17) was one of many older girls who expressed concern for the emphasis on appearance on

social media. She stated that social media created a “sense of what you are supposed to look like” and may “cause you to judge yourself or become jealous of somebody.” Daisey (17), a senior, expressed her concerns that, “people may be skinnier than you, or run more often than you do.” She continued by saying, “it’s easy to get into the habit of comparing yourself to other people and it can affect your self-esteem.” Daisey had a hard time in middle school when she felt self-conscious and she thought that everybody on social media had a perfect life. She went off social media for a year-and-a-half to avoid online influences and later looked at social media in a healthier way; it helped her to reconnect after the break. Reece (17) also observed that the first thing people talked about when someone posted a picture was their appearance. In a similar vein, Nicole (17) stated that “everyone tries to be picture perfect and only post what is good.” Nicole called *Snapchat* “kinda a fake version of ourselves, not really the real version.” Nicole’s assertion aligns with Wiederhold’s (2018) claim that social media functions as a person’s “highlight reel” and is not a true reflection of their life (p. 215).

Reece (17) disliked the way people on social media would find something wrong with a picture and “pick at it,” while Nikki (18) was bothered when people “use it to make fun of people, a video of someone messing up.” Brettley (13) said the popular people, both girls and boys, posted “weird stuff” about teenagers’ looks. Reece offered her belief that if she did not have social media, “I would be a lot more outgoing and confident about myself.” She saw people posting and she wanted to be like them. It influenced how she acted sometimes, and she said she might be judged if she was not like the person who posted the influential post. Victoria (16) sounded a similar poignant note on body image as she described the way it made her feel when she looked at celebrities on *Instagram*. She stated that she felt “super-insecure,” yet she continued to visit the celebrity sites.

This is an “other personal meanings” of social media use: The widespread circulation of idealized and constructed images could prompt comparisons and affect self-esteem. Although

Marley (17) said that some posts she saw attempted to send a positive message that “You shouldn’t feel bad about yourself,” others reflected the opposite. Reece (17) and Victoria’s insecurity about their body image is worrisome to adults who fear unhealthy effects of social media use on teenagers’ self-esteem. Women’s and girls’ body image concerns related to media have plagued them for decades and now social media increases opportunities for comparison to “thin ideals” (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 2). Some research notes that time spent on SNS is linked to poorer body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), thin body internalization, and weight dissatisfaction (Meier & Gray, 2014).

### **Avoiding Face-to-Face Interaction**

Some girls used social media to avoid face-to-face interaction. Those girls found the give and take of face-to-face interaction demanding at times and opted for the ease of online communication. While several girls referred to the practice derisively as “hiding behind the screen,” the girl who preferred online communication found it to be freeing from complicated social interactions. Employing *Snapchat* and *Instagram*, girls could send an image quickly and easily make their desired connection. Chelsey (14) expressed that she preferred to use social media rather than “have a conversation.” Like some teens, she would rather text than talk. Chelsey liked to contact people without “typing out a big conversation.” She believed that it was easier to talk online than in person because “it can get awkward in person.”

Jenny (15) thought it was easier to “say things over social media than in person.” Tatum (16) made a similar statement; she observed that she “spends more time on social media than actually talking to people.” Brettley (13) noted that her contact with friends was sending pictures back and forth on *Instagram* and *Snapchat* and “most of the time we don’t even talk.” Maggie (16) was quick to say that the effect of social media on her social life was “nothing bad,” but she admitted that at times she preferred to communicate through the phone rather than in person. Chelsey and Maggie’s admissions that they would sometimes rather communicate online than in

person confirms Turkle's (2015) belief that for teens, communication can be "too much, too little, or just right" (p. 21). Turkle refers to communication preferences as the "Goldilocks effect." Like the Goldilocks story, Turkle (2015) proposes that online, "We can have each other at a digital distance - not too close, not too far, just right (p. 21)."

**FoMo and FoBlo.** Social media creates new ways for teens to feel excluded. The feeling of being left out is one of the most "common experiences of being on social media" (Freitas, 2017, p. 41). Marley (17), who had taken some time off from social media at the time of the first interview and was participating in a limited way for our second interview, offered a plaintive note when she stated that "everybody has to see what you are doing all the time." She related that she would not be invited to parties and then "see it all on *Instagram*." Her friends were hanging out with other people and not with her; Marley experienced FoMo – Fear of Missing out and FoBlo – Fear of Being left out (Przybylski et al., 2013). She was not "in the know" or "present," qualities prized by the girls in this study, and she lacked the belongingness teens feel when they share experiences with friends and display them on social media.

**The performative nature of social media.** Social media invites a kind of inauthenticity that can interfere with relationships. Many of the girls had strong negative responses to social media posts or updates that did not look real. From pouty-faced selfies to changing fashion and hair styles, some teens present themselves in an artificial light online. According to Freitas (2017), much of a teen's time on social media is spent creating a "carefully cultivated façade" (p. 22). There is strong pressure to post images that make the user look amazingly happy, and, of course, attractive (Freitas, 2017). Some feminist scholars of media (e.g. Maguire, 2018) argue that girls experiment online as a form of cultural production or a form of "identity play" (Coulthard & Ogden, 2018, p. 1; Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4992) common to adolescence. Yet the girls in this study seemed to note boundaries between authenticity and performativity and felt

wary of connecting with a user who was disingenuous in their presentation. Some girls had unflattering words for someone they knew whose online persona differed from her in-person self.

The girls discussed varied reactions to aspects of inauthenticity they witnessed online. Annie (17) was jaded in her view of social media's purpose; she said that teens discussed "how happy their life is and how good they look" and questioned the authenticity of posts. Kar (18) agreed that people were not always genuine online. Emma (14) would not follow or talk to a person who did not "put themselves out there as their true self" and would not accept them as a follower. Emma evaluated the authenticity of a potential friend or someone she would follow. Sophia (16) called inauthentic people "very insecure." According to Ruby (16), a person who acted differently online than in real life was "not authentic" and Sarah (16) called it "immature." When someone posted on social media and they were different in real life, it made Jenny (15) "sad." Ella (16) stated that the person was "acting their cool self." Delaney (16) observed that it made her "mad" and Desiree (14) also said that sometimes it made her "mad" when people posted pictures or updates that did not look real; she knew it was not the real them. Sophia (16) believed that they "create an online façade because they have some problem with themselves that they don't want people to know." She described teenagers who appear religious online but in real life she said, "Honey, you need Jesus." CJ (13) asserted that posts which did not seem real made her feel "weirded out." The work of Duffy and Hund (2019) aligns with the views of the girls in this study; distancing themselves from anything "fake" was a common theme among the teens in their research (p. 4992). Echoing the safety concerns addressed in the previous section, Chelsey (14) stated that such posts were examples of "catfishing." The term catfishing refers to a person who uses a fake or stolen online identity created or used for the purpose of beginning a deceptive relationship (Catfishing, n.d.).

Whether inauthenticity looks like a metaphorical mask or photoshopped anatomy, the girls found it difficult to connect to someone with an artificial presentation. These evaluations

included both people they knew in-person and online contacts. The term “fake” was used by six girls to describe teens who posted information that seemed artificial. Nena (17) called it “child-like.” Lila (17) said that “they do it because they don’t like who they are, and they do it for attention.” In a similar vein, Reece (17) stated that “they put on a mask and want to be somebody they’re not.” Reece believed hiding behind the screen was common; she said, “everyone kinda does it.” Reece said that people posted something very different than real life to get *likes*. Nicole (17) admitted that she judged people whose posts were not authentic, and she described a girl who posted a picture photoshopped “to make her butt look bigger.” She explained how one can tell if a picture is photoshopped, “it becomes wavy in the background.” Nicole said that everyone was making fun of the girl at school and she felt bad for her but could not understand why she did it. Kylie (15) noted that some people “edit, edit, edit” their photos until it became obvious that they had tampered with the image. Marley (17) would screenshot a picture that did not look real and share it with family members for a laugh. The girls engaged in a phenomenon with a relatively new terminology: The female gaze (Murray, 2015), a potentially empowering notion.

Kaylee (17) did not believe in artificial posts and stated, “Don’t post it unless you truly believe in that about yourself.” Some girls made the effort to understand and connect with users who presented themselves in a novel way on social media. Britt (17) empathized with her peers, claiming, “If they do it online, on social media, then it is still them.” While Lila (17) called the behavior “weird,” she also thought that, “Maybe that is who they are, and they don’t act like that at school because they are afraid of judgments. You never know which one really is them.” Kylie (15) said, although she wondered which version of the self was real, she laughed and concluded, “I don’t really care.” Lexi (17) said she followed people who posted in certain color schemes and posted in one color for a month, but she claimed she did not have time to play with “aesthetics” in her feeds. Nikki (18) described a behavior where teens spoke more confidently on social media and would post friendly, enthusiastic responses, but they did not speak at school.



A few stated that they did not play around with their identity online. Their immediate claims that “I don’t” support the view that teens dislike a lack of authenticity online (boyd, 2014) and “being real” was prized (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4991). Kaylee (17) succinctly stated that, “If you’re going to be yourself, then you need to be yourself all around.” Daisey (17) similarly pointed out that, “I only post my best, the same as everybody else does, but I don’t try to paint myself in a different way.” JJ (17) noted that she played around with her identity online when she was younger, when she was ten and accessed her mother’s *FB*.

Online connections could be threatened by the hint of inauthenticity. Some of the preceding examples point to ongoing scrutiny of online posts for examples of inauthenticity. Nicole (17) found that she once unintentionally created the perception she had made an identity change online. She experienced an incident that aligned with Muhammad & McArthur’s (2015) belief that Black girls are judged by their hair. When Nicole changed her hair style from natural to braids, people responded to her as if she had altered her identity online. She was perplexed because, “I’m the same person, just different hair.” Nicole described her best guy friend who commented, “You’re like two completely different people from the last time I saw you.” Angry and confused, she replied, “That makes no sense!” Even a change in appearance or hair could suggest inauthenticity online.

Erikson (1963) promoted the view that adolescence is a time for experimenting with identity, but this research suggests some responses to changes in presentation may be highly critical. For those who discussed authenticity issues, many rejected the notion that they could “figure out who [we] want to be online;” however, the behavior fits securely with adolescent theory. Adolescence is the period in Eriksonian theory (1963) during which the girl navigates the crisis of identity versus role confusion. Forming an identity involves “trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions (Arnett, 2000, p. 473),” or “identity play” (Coulthard and Ogden, 2018, p. 1).

## **Conflict: Drama, Sexual Images, and Bullying**

Social network site interactions could lead to conflict, drama, sexual images, and bullying. The same medium that can be beneficial for pursuing belonging and connection needs can be a source of conflict for girls that interferes with those pursuits. Teens describe normative behavior that wounds or degrades their peers, or in some cases, themselves. Behaviors that would likely be considered bullying or just plain mean by adults are considered “hurtful acts of peer aggression,” in the teen world (boyd, 2014, p. 132).

**Drama.** Drama can interfere with relationships. *Drama* is a ubiquitous term recognized by both teens and adults as pejorative and often dismissive of girls’ emotional concerns. While online drama might draw together the people creating the drama, it can threaten feelings of connection and belonging for the girls involved. Girls in this study described close friendships that were destroyed by drama and long-running feuds that pitted girls against each other. According to Marwick and boyd (2011), drama connotes something “immature, petty, and ridiculous” (p. 4). Drama (n.d.) is defined by *Urban Dictionary* as “A way of relating to the world in which a person consistently overreacts to or greatly exaggerates the importance of benign events.” Marwick and boyd (2011) claim that drama is gendered and heavily skewed toward girls. Delaney (16), Desiree (14), and Abby (14) all agreed that drama was common at their school and more girls were involved than boys. Nicole (17) observed that girls fought over the internet and guys would fist-fight. In the SNS environment, Jenny (15) described drama as “saying things online that a person would never say in real life.”

According to boyd (2014), teens see drama as part of a normative social media process. Yet, the subject of drama received uniformly negative responses from the girls. A type of interpersonal conflict, drama could run the gamut from speculation about who might be pregnant to posting vicious lies (boyd, 2014). Boyd (2014) states that drama differs from bullying in that a “power differential” exists in bullying (p. 137). With bullying, the targeted teen was considered

weak (boyd, 2014). Not so in drama, where the targeted girl would launch her own attack on the source of the drama. Maintaining and nourishing friendships in a culture of drama can be difficult. As mentioned earlier by Kar (18), it is important to speak to a person face-to-face about conflict and understand the unspoken nuances of the online conversation.

Maggie (16) explained her understanding of drama as a series of conversations about another person on a private “spam” account. A *spam account* is a second *Instagram* account whose content differs from what is posted on a main account (Spam account, n.d.). Typically, only close friends are approved to follow a spam account. (Spam account, n.d.). The person who initiated the comments felt safe knowing that the person being attacked was not on the private account, but word leaked out. According to Maggie, the person who started the drama lied when the target made an enquiry. An important factor in the process was that the people involved in the drama went unnamed. Maggie stated that even with the names left out, everybody knew who was targeted.

Maintaining connections and belongingness was a challenge in an environment that could sow discord; the girls recognized the drama that often took place around them. The girls used a variety of unfavorable terms to describe drama. Chelsey (14) called drama “unnecessary”, Emma (14) thought drama was “stupid.” Other terms used to describe drama included “just dumb,” “ridiculous,” “sad,” “petty,” and “crazy.” Although Abby (14) referred to drama as “annoying,” she also described the process in fatalistic terms: She said that if a person was full of drama there would always be drama. Britt (17) related that drama was focused on relationships. CJ (13) noted that drama caused tension and Desiree (14) was in the middle of drama at the time of our interviews; a girl who did not like her was posting mean things about her. Desiree attested that she ignored the mean posts because “it gets bigger and bigger and bigger if I say something to her.” Desiree’s experience supports Turkle’s (2015) observation that social media can “make emotional life very hard” (p. 40).

Girls reported that they avoided drama as much as they could; however, Britt (17) conceded that when the drama focused on her she had to get involved. Victoria (16) had experienced drama for herself recently with her best friend. Her friend blocked Victoria on her accounts and would not discuss the problem with her. Rather than owning her behavior, Victoria's friend claimed there was something wrong with her phone. Victoria observed that at the present time she and the friend were "still kind of on edge."

Kylie (15) noted that drama was more common on *Instagram*. She provided an example of drama occurring when someone was "hiding behind a screen" and voiced something bad about her, and Nena (17) agreed. According to Rachel (16), people were dramatic about "everything, almost everything now days." Callie (15) described an incident she considered drama at school when a social media rumor spread that a girl had been "touched below..."

Daisey (17) believed that social media could escalate drama. She suggested that the online environment gave people time to stop and "think about a really good comeback." Teens did not have to "immediately deal with the effects" of what they said, like they did in a face-to-face situation. Reece (17) was amazed by the speed of drama transmission. Kaylee (17) said she believed that a junior or senior in high school was "practically an adult" and they should handle conflict like an adult. JJ (17) was sanguine about drama; she stated that, "You really can't stop everybody. There is always the OFF button." Interestingly, few of these girls said that they unfollowed people who created drama. Disparaging drama was normative among the young women in this study and in their peer relationships, even though they continued to follow the dramatic posts. Drama was recognized as an unfortunate side effect of social media use.

**Sexual images and inappropriate content.** Common social media content such as foul language, nude requests, and sexual images presented dilemmas for all ages and could interfere with connections online. Girls determined whether to view sexual images by following or unfollowing their peers and celebrities. Some girls chose to disconnect through unfollowing or

unfriending a social media friend when their posts became inappropriate. When a 13-year-old friend started dating, CJ (13) unfollowed her; she removed the person whom she viewed as influencing her negatively. CJ interacted with social media on her own terms; of the unfriended person she stated, “I don’t care what they say.” Abby (14) didn’t follow a person who was “not that good of a kid.” Teenagers had to determine who was trying to influence them and who was “not good.” Girls chose daily whether they should comment to a friend who exposed too much or just shrug it off. Unfollowing someone who posted offensively gave girls the agency to determine who they viewed and who could see their activities, but that agency could come at the cost of an online relationship.

Sexual images, partying, and drinking made some uncomfortable. Kylie saw videos of teens drinking alcohol and responded, “It doesn’t make you look cool it makes you look stupid.” Emma (14) noted that people posted pictures exposing too much, but she was “just used to it.” Chelsey (14) “shrugs it off” when a friend posted inappropriately. Several girls indicated that they received unwanted sexual images and discussions regularly. Brettley (13) noted the presence of inappropriate posts, “like, bad pictures” and Angel (14) saw cyberbullying and mean posts. Kylie (15) described teenagers posting selfies in their underwear. Some sexual interactions, such as touching or petting, sexting during and after a break-up are private behaviors that are broadcast for the internet world (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Jenny (15) was careful about who she followed so she could avoid the unwanted content.

Girls saw friends share explicit videos, teens who were not fully dressed, and kissing videos. Sexual images, whether provocative selfies, make-out videos, or ad content were concerns of the older girls. Kar (18) did not like the “foul things people can send,” including nudes and requests for nudes. She viewed sexual content in ads, slut-shaming, and name-calling on social media. Maggie (16) noticed “PDA of teens making out” and she observed, “I get it, you guys are in love or whatever, but don’t post it.” Nicole (17) observed that when it came to posts

about people's sex lives, "That's something that you need to limit to yourself and that person closest to you." A few girls chose to ignore the posts or shrug off the behavior. For example, whether friends were partying or hooking up, Delaney (16) expressed the normative element in her comment that she was "just used to it." Ella (16) agreed; she stated that nudes and partying did not bother her, she scrolled past. Kaylee (17) commented, "Of course they [my friends] post them, but I just kinda keep scrolling." The girls were more likely to continue navigating problematic media posts than implement JJ's (17) pragmatic solution: The OFF button.

**Bullying.** Bullying was a feature of social media that interfered with the quest for connections and belonging. Relationships and connections could be shattered by cruel words and unwanted images. Ruby (16) stated that drama on social media often became cyberbullying and "it's pretty rough sometimes." Ruby saw drama turn into cyberbullying at her school when a male posted nude pictures of an ex-girlfriend after they broke up. Several girls mentioned what they described as "revenge porn" that males posted after a break-up. Kylie (15) observed that "most people don't know about bullying or they can't really do anything about it."

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying where a victim is bullied over social media and differs from traditional bullying in the rate at which information is relayed, the permanent nature of the material, and the potential number of victims (cyberbullying, n.d.). Cyberbullying is unique compared to face-to-face bullying. The roles of victim and aggressor are blurred as the victim can more easily retaliate on social media (Hur and Gupta, 2013). In traditional bullying the bully is more powerful, or of higher status than the weaker victim (boyd, 2014). According to Pew Research Center's Anderson (2018a, p. 1), 59% of American teens have experienced cyberbullying, most commonly name-calling (42%). Thirty-two percent of teens report having rumors spread about them online (p. 1). Girls are more likely to be the targets of online rumors or explicit messages than boys (Anderson, 2018a).

Charley (16) noted her concern about cyberbullying and boys at school who “want one thing out of a relationship.” The boys requested nude photographs from girls. When asked about responses to the boys’ crude posts, Charley responded that “people don’t call them out because everyone has friends like that.” Kylie (15) experienced cyberbullying from a close friend. The girl created an *Instagram* page expressly to denigrate Kylie and the consequences were substantial; her former friend was expelled from school. Girls that bully may do so to create a sense of belonging in their group (Damour, 2016). Bullying acts as a “social glue” for girls too immature to come together around positive interests (p. 81).

Ella (16) described bullying with a thoughtful turn of phrase. She observed that bullying was “just like a brush of the shoulder.” To clarify, Ella continued that “it’s just like a brush of the shoulder comment that you can just not care about. You have a choice whether to really care about it.” None of the girls expressed a desire to tackle the subject online. The girls conveyed concern about cyberbullying but were resigned to its occurrence.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed the comments from girls whose individual experiences with social media provide the foundation for this study. I organized the girls into groups based on age and I discovered commonalities among the groups. I detailed findings from interviews with participants and incorporated the data across groups. Emphasizing analysis, I presented ten themes with evidentiary warrants (Erickson, 1986). Recapping the ten themes, girls in this study perceived their use of social media in the following ways:

Claim one: Social media fosters connection and belonging needs.

1. Connecting throughout the day on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* was integral to the young women’s social lives.
2. Connecting across common topics was important to girls’ social media lives.

Claim two: The other personal meanings associated with using social media.

3. Older girls valued following social issues online more than younger girls.
4. The adolescents believed that social media shaped their mood.
5. The girls expressed that they should spend less time on social media.
6. Girls navigated privacy and safety concerns to remain online.
7. The oldest girls found freedom on social media.

Claim three: Social media at times disrupts social connections through decreasing face-to-face interaction, drama, sexual images, and bullying girls' social connections.

8. Girls experienced social media as a platform for evaluating appearance.
9. Some teens used social media to avoid face-to-face interaction.
10. SNS interactions could lead to conflict, drama, sexual images, and bullying.

Lastly, in Chapter Five I will summarize this research study, discuss findings, and offer conclusions on girls' use of social network sites for pursuit of belonging and connection needs, and other meaning they find in their online experiences. Discussion will center on a feminist lens and I will connect the study findings to literature, theory, and practice. I will present the implications of understanding girls' use of SNS for educators, parents, and scholars and consider future research on the topic.



## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

*It's part of this generation.*

Chelsey, participant, aged 14

*I get it, you guys are in love or whatever, but don't post it.*

Maggie, participant, aged 16

*Don't post it unless you truly believe in that about yourself.*

Kaylee, participant, aged 17

*Your life should be bigger than online.*

JJ, participant, aged 17

These quotes provide a glimpse into a girl's navigation through their digital worlds. The passages express the girls' diverse attitudes and bold statements about their understanding of the promise and the limits of social media. Each quote tells something about the age and degree of digital nativity of its speaker. The youngest girl's quote reveals her belief that the digital experience is a given for her generation, while the oldest girls articulate their views about self-expression and the limitations of the SNS in which they are engrossed. Implicit in the girls' reflections is their full immersion in the culture of social media in their daily lives. Social media is foundational to contemporary American teen culture and for the Generation Z girls of this study, born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

In Chapter three I discussed methodology and in Chapter four I presented the content of the 70 interviews that I conducted with 35 middle school and high school girls in a Midwestern

state. In this final chapter I summarize findings, implications for educational and psychological practice, the theoretical framework that situates the conclusions, significance of the study, and additional research emerging from the findings and conclusions of this study. I examine patterns across the data corpus, and I explain how my findings answer the research questions. The purpose of this feminist qualitative study was to explore girls' use of SNS to pursue belonging and connectedness needs, and other meanings they find in SNS use. I aimed to: 1) contribute to an understanding of girls' use of SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs, as well as other personal meanings, 2) contribute a detailed account of girls' SNS activities, and 3) contribute knowledge of girls' daily use of SNS for educators, families, and scholars.

The findings of this feminist study both confirm some knowledge regarding girls' use of SNS for belonging and connection needs and extend knowledge about girl's use of SNS through detailing other meanings they found. Cumulatively the information adds to ongoing dialogue and research about, and implications of, young women's experiences online. Educators can gain a new understanding of the value girls place on their use of social media and consider how much in-school access is necessary for them. Parents and guardians can learn more about their daughters' need for online connection, the positive interactions they experience in their social media use, and concerns the girls have about some of their digital communication. Scholars can understand the needs of a diverse population of girls for online interaction, the agency the girls perceive in their online activities, and drawbacks of their social media use. This chapter includes a summary of the procedures and findings of this feminist qualitative study.

In this chapter I detail ten themes offered for an understanding of the phenomenon and answer the following research questions:

1. How do girls pursue their needs for belongingness and connectedness through their SNS activities?
2. How do girls describe other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities?

Themes one and two address research question one and themes three through seven apply to research question two. Themes eight, nine and ten relate to an unexpected topic that emerged, the disruption of connection caused by SNS. Girls' personal meanings for their use of SNS included fostering a sense of freedom, expanding their social circles, and learning about events in other parts of the world. Some girls used social media to regulate their moods, watching funny videos or reaching out to friends to share a funny meme. Others found social media engagement entertaining and relaxing. Girls navigated online privacy and safety risks as most expressed that they should spend less time on social media. Concerns about appearance, drama, sexual images, bullying, and inauthenticity were discussed, and some girls experienced FoMo (fear of missing out) and FoBlo (fear of being left out). There were some girls who acknowledged that they used social media to avoid face-to-face interaction. Typical of Generation Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), the girls in this study discussed observing online behaviors more than posting online.

In section one of this chapter I will summarize the study and in section two I will discuss the discoveries and implications. I link the themes and findings from chapter four to the research questions they answer. In section three I discuss the findings in terms of the theoretical lens of feminist analysis and their implications for educators, families, and scholars. I note subcategories of agency, connection with friends and family or too much online connection, and the permeation of surveillance culture in teen lives. The fourth section examines the significance of authenticity online. I end with implications and the need for future research.

### **Study Summary**

This qualitative interview study presents a glimpse into the networked lives of girls and their pursuit of belongingness and connectedness needs and other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities. My interest was inspired by my years as a high school teacher working with girls and coursework that allowed me to conduct interviews with girls using SNS. After interviewing eight high school girls about their use of social media in 2014, I was determined to

learn more. With the international narrative of gloom and doom that surrounds discussions of and predictions for digitally engaged teens, I felt compelled to push back and focus on the positive aspects of SNS use. Viewing the topic from a feminist standpoint, I considered the importance of foregrounding girls' voices about their lives and the gendered dynamics of the girls' experiences online. As scholars have noted (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015; Kearney, 2011), young women and girls are understudied and devalued groups because of their age and gender. The girls in this research are a legitimate focus of study (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) and their stories are complex. Their lives matter to them and they matter to me; they are complete versions of themselves (Thorne, 1993). Girls actively navigate and make meaning of their online interactions. Feminist scholars of media describe SNS and other digital platforms as key spaces for girls to contribute to cultural production (Maguire, 2018), such as Victoria (16) and her photography, and to expand their networks beyond the physical spaces they inhabit. I share the feminist view that gender informs the structure, dynamics, and relationships of the world, including online relationships. Girls and feminist research were interests of mine and they were a necessary combination for this study.

I chose constructionism to inform this study and investigate the meaning-making girls attach to their use of SNS. I investigated from the theoretical perspective of feminist critical theory which examines and explores the lives of young women. Feminist critical inquiry was my methodology for examining girls' use of SNS for pursuing belongingness and connectedness needs and other meanings. Semi-structured feminist interviews and online data sharing were my methods for research. Literature on belongingness and connectedness presents a clear view of the human need for a sense of belonging and connectedness in their interactions. This research focuses on the contemporary method of social media use for achieving belonging and connection among girls, as well as other meanings. As researchers (Anderson, 2018; Lenhart, 2015) have

noted, girls use SNS at a higher rate than males. A multitude of studies warn of the dangers of SNS use for teens, but little research explains the benefits girls perceive in their SNS activities.

Girls aged 13 to 18 were recruited from area schools and contacts known to the researcher and her colleagues in nearby cities; approximately 50 girls of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds were approached about participation. The ethnic and racial make-up of the girls included African American, Latina, and Native American. From those 50 solicited for participation, 36 girls accepted the invitation to participate and were interviewed for this study. One girl could not take part in the second interview and dropped out of the study. Of the remaining 35 girls, 14 were girls of color (40%). With the permission of school officials, and guardians when girls were under age 18, 33 girls were interviewed at their schools, and three in their homes. The first interview I conducted was a traditional semi-structured interview (Merriam, 2009). Our second interview incorporated a semi-structured interview with a session of online data sharing (Livingstone, 2008) as we viewed the teens' social media applications sitting side-by-side with our smartphones.

Some girls expressed distress and consternation to each other when I requested to view their social media, but none of the girls displayed those concerns to me, and the girls allowed me to view their *Instagram* pages. We scrolled through selfies, memes, videos, pictures of best friends, girlfriends and boyfriends, and advertisements. I found that the youngest girls were cautious in their responses. They seemed defensive and appeared to recognize the cultural trope of SNS use causing poor social interaction. Older girls were more forthcoming, relaxed, and natural in their responses. Most girls did not discuss ethnicity or race as it related to their social media use. Out of 14 girls of color, only one girl made a reference to her race or ethnicity or its significance in social media use.

Data analysis began as I transcribed the interviews (Merriam, 2009). As I analyzed the corpus of data inductively an early thematic layer that emerged was the belief that connecting

throughout the day was integral to the social lives of the girls in this study. Their “need to connect” and its effects on mood and relationships were prominent themes aligned with my first research question, how do girls pursue their need for belongingness and connectedness on SNS. Analysis indicated that girls enjoyed the freedom and entertainment they experienced on social media. The amount of time girls spent on social media became clear early in the analysis, which echoes other research. The next analytic layer surfaced in girls’ descriptions of their views about online privacy and safety, as well as concerns about body image and comparisons to others online. As analysis progressed, other themes revealed ways social media can interfere with connection and belonging. Additional analysis explored girls’ beliefs about avoiding face-to-face interaction through social media use as well as a desire for authenticity. Another layer emerged indicating girls’ displeasure with drama and sexual images on social media. Each of these analytic phases added another layer and contributed to a more detailed view, increasing understanding of the girls’ pursuit of belongingness and connectedness needs and other personal meanings they find through SNS use.

### **Discoveries Summary**

In beginning this research, I asked myself whether adults can contact teens in the “unsanctioned youth space” of their social media use (Gleason, 2016, p. 137). Can the gulf of age and life experience be bridged, and a connection be made? Social media is clearly a girls’ world. It is important to remember that my claims are partial and dependent on the girls I interviewed; I can only know as much as the girls chose to tell me. There are limits to girls’ willingness to share their social media use. They have thoughts and views about their use of SNS that they choose not to disclose to an adult. Predicated on that knowledge, the following themes offer understanding of girls’ use of SNS:

1. Connecting throughout the day on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* was integral to the young women’s social lives.

2. Connecting across common topics was important to teens' social media lives.
3. Older girls valued following social issues online more than younger girls.
4. The adolescents believed that social media shaped their mood.
5. The girls expressed that they should spend less time on social media.
6. Girls navigated privacy and safety concerns to remain online.
7. The oldest girls found freedom on social media.
8. Girls experienced social media as a platform for evaluating appearance.
9. Some girls used social media to avoid face-to-face interaction.
10. SNS interactions could lead to conflict, drama, sexual images, and bullying.

Research Question 1: How do girls pursue their needs for belongingness and connectedness through their SNS activities?

My first theme, connecting throughout the day on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* was integral to the young women's social lives, answers Research Question 1 focused on *how* girls pursued connections online. Girls found satisfaction in contacting friends on their favorite social media applications and they used these favorite applications to connect. Social media fosters connection by being online throughout the day. They connected through social media for the positive effects it had in their lives. *Snapchat* and *Instagram* were closely matched in their use and were the favorite applications for connection. This study supports the research of boyd (2014), Herring and Kapidzic (2015), and Seemiller and Grace (2016) who propose that girls use SNS to connect with friends and family and see it primarily as their world. Girls displayed agency in choosing to spend hours online sending streaks, *Snapchat* snaps, *Instagram* posts, and *tweets*. One girl explained her excitement when she checked her *Snapchat* account. Had her romantic interest sent her a "snap"? While some might be surprised that *FB* is not on the list of mentioned SNS, the girls in this study were part of the current teen trend away from *FB* (Anderson, 2018; Lenhart, 2015). Repeatedly girls described *FB* as an app for their parents and grandparents. These

Generation Z girls wanted a separate SNS from their parents, though most had a *FB* account for communicating with older family members. The girls in this study related that they made valuable contact on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* with young relatives, both local and out-of-town, with whom they were close and they relied upon for advice. As boyd (2014) suggested in her research, the thoughts and confidences shared online are significant to the girls. Girls in this study viewed friends as reliably online and they could count on communicating with a valued friend when troubled or upset.

Girls take their presence on SNS seriously and have strong feelings about the importance of communicating through their favorite applications. Kar (18) voiced a concern that resonates with teens and adults: “If you don’t post every couple of days, it’s like you’re not really present.” “Not really present” strikes a strong chord. It signifies that some girls’ engagements online are more than a past time, it is as if a girl’s very existence is dependent on participating in online culture. Online activity is necessary for a girl to be visible, to be heard, to be part of the contemporary action that happens in online spaces. The “contemporary action” of SNS worlds immerses girls in heteronormativity, patriarchy, and capitalism without their awareness.

“Being present” and “being in the know” in and through SNS were of critical importance to some of the girls. Those qualities drew girls into the social media life, daily, or multiple times a day, even for those girls who used social media less than others. Sophia, for example, spent only 30 minutes each day on SNS, but called that time “valuable.” Once a girl accepted the need for “being present” a responsibility grew for the girl to spend time on SNS.

The second theme, connecting across common topics was important to girls’ social media lives, contributes to answering Research Question 1. Girls connected through their common interests, such as friends’ activities, gossip, school activities, and social issues. This data suggested both a sense of connection and of belonging for the girls, which aligns with Pittman and Reich’s (2016) finding that SNS such as *Snapchat* and *Instagram* provided a sense of



belonging for girls. In addition to their need to be members in the overall culture of SNS, several girls discussed joining cyber-cliques where they shared their interest in a band or celebrities. Cyber-cliques made them feel they belonged to a community of like-minded individuals and helped meet belonging needs. Whereas teens would hang out together in malls in the past, today's teens need not leave their home to spend time with friends. Those friends may be known to the teen in-person, or they may have never met face-to-face. The girls met other teens with similar interests in the cyber-clique. The cyber-clique could be focused on bands, celebrities, or movies, and teens came together to express their likes and dislikes, and admiration or disdain for the subjects. Most celebrities project a heteronormative presence, emphasizing appearance at the expense of substance. Sites glamorize models, bands, and celebrity influencers, and girls are encouraged to buy the products they promote.

Girls like Ella (16) described meeting their need for belonging by their interaction with the cyber-clique teens who shared her interest in particular bands. While online groups might sound superficial and detached to adults, some girls found the digital groups rewarding as groups welcomed them into a gathering of their online peers. *Tumblr*, the SNS devoted to artistic expressions, was an example of an assembly of cyber-cliques. The girl engaged with *Tumblr* might find her cyber-niche by posting poetry, pictures of paintings, drawings, or other forms of self-expression. People with similar interests would offer their opinions and critiques of the project. Called a “community of awesome people who are kind of dorks” by Sophia (16), her experience with *Tumblr* adds a layer for understanding teen connection through an online community. Girls connected to several groups at a time, whether band followers, celebrity fans, artists, writers, or their high school chemistry club. Romance was a common subject of conversation, as well as heart-felt messages of support and friendship. The findings support the work of Maguire (2018) who describes the value of girls' cultural production and creative

expression through online communities, and the research of Anderson and Jiang (2018b) who claim that 81% of teens feel connected through their social media use (p. 1).

My discoveries are consistent with these findings, but I also have findings that add to this work. Notable age differences were found in the amount of time girls spent on social media. The need to connect and be online seems stronger in the thirteen and fourteen-year-olds than the older groups of 15 to 18-year-olds. Younger girls in this research reported spending two and one-half hours more per day on social media than their older peers. The older girls reported using social media more when they were younger, but they had recently reduced their SNS use because they relied less on connection through digital technology. Although they did not detail their reasons for reducing social media use, it could result from stress related to active SNS use (Beyens, Frison, & Eggermont, 2016). Other research (Odgers, 2016; Haselton, 2017) indicates that high usage of SNS is related to depression

This study raises questions about exactly what girls mean by “connection.” What type of relationship does “connection” imply? Given some of the other complexities with social media use that I discuss below, how deeply do girls connect? When girls in this study talked about connection it was related to connecting with friends and families. Friends and families were mentioned repeatedly, usually in that order. Psychologists describe “connection” in varied ways that help in understanding teens’ use of social media. Gilligan (1982) calls connection for females a “way of being with others that allows her also to be with herself” (p. 53). Lee and Robbins (1998) refer to connection as a “social lens for interacting with the world” requiring active involvement “with another object, group or environment” (p. 343).

Connecting online was valuable and a preferred method of contact for many girls. People were online “all the time” and support was available when a girl was upset or hurting. The number of supportive responses girls received were much larger than those they felt they received in-person. Girls found the wealth of responses rewarding and comforting in times of

tumult. And yet, being connected through SNS did not always foster the deep connection psychologists describe as a human need (Maslow, 1943). Echoing other research on Generation Z, girls described often watching and observing the action on SNS to foster connections, rather than posting much content themselves (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In fact, as I discuss next, girls had to navigate the social media environment to avoid troublesome content, drama, and artificiality that could interfere with connection.

Research Question 2: How do girls describe other personal meanings they find in their SNS activities?

Despite the guiding purpose of the study to seek understanding of how girls sought connections and belonging online, this study found more answers to Research Question 2 than Research Question 1. Five findings were relevant to this question. In response to Research Question 2, girls found a variety of other personal meanings in their SNS activities, most of which reflect their agential use of online spaces: (1) Older girls valued engaging with current social issues online more than younger girls; (2) girls believed that social media shaped their mood, and (3) girls believed they should spend less time on social media. (4) Girls navigated privacy and safety concerns online and (5) the oldest girls found freedom on social media.

Answering Research Question 2, theme three notes that older girls valued following social issues online more than younger teens. Older girls described accessing sites that focused on such issues as The Women's March, Black Lives Matter, and global warming. Seventeen-year-old Nena conveyed her interest in "social justice warriors" and listed several sites she followed, including LGBTQ rights and political issues. Older girls' use of social media transcended the interpersonal goals of connection to individual friends and family members and reflected their interest in social media as a vehicle of information and connection to current events.

Social media affords girls' access to information about social issues, the chance to become involved in empowering social movements, and become an activist at the local or higher level in

ways never available to young women before the internet. Girls of an earlier generation would watch television, read newspapers, write letters, and travel to the location of an event to take part. Today's girl can be educated about issues and take part in activist work through social media in her own home. Girls want to know what is happening online, whether actively posting or quietly observing. Feminist sites were available to young women living in a conservative state who had little experience with feminism. Overall, younger girls in this study did not share an interest in current issues and their attitudes were summed up by Charley (at 16 an exception among the older girls) who stated her belief that such issues are more interesting to older people.

Theme four, the girls believed that social media shaped their mood, provided another set of meanings in their social media use. Girls demonstrated their agency as they intentionally visited specific accounts depending on their mood. When angry and negative posts offended them, they chose upbeat and optimistic sites to improve their mood. Victoria discussed using SNS to regulate her mood, seeking out happy social media sites when she felt down or angry. Adolescents also detailed their use of social media for relaxation and entertainment.

The fifth theme, the girls expressed that they should spend less time on social media, was made by nearly all the girls. Only two of the 35 girls in this study did not believe they spent too much time on social media. Given the purpose of the study, and the early finding that girls seek SNS for connection, this finding suggests the extensive draw of social media to maintain contact with friends and remain engaged in the other many activities and entertainment online. Teens' desire to be in contact with their friends leads some to excessive activity on SNS. As a reminder, boyd (2014) tells us that teens are not addicted to their phones, they are addicted to each other. Today's family does not have to send a teen friend home who has been visiting too long, they can hang around indefinitely online. Some girls noted that they should spend more time with their families, but most were not specific about what they would be doing with their time if not on social media, they just indicated they should be doing something else. As many advantages

and opportunities as social media offers, the girls recognized that, in many cases, they could take control of their use and curtail it, redirect their time and energy and still find SNS rewarding. The topic of theme six, girls navigated privacy and safety concerns to remain online, differed to some degree based on age. The youngest girls seemed to have little understanding of their online privacy and felt that adjustments to their application settings on their accounts were enough to maintain privacy. Older girls were more agential and displayed a greater awareness of the inherent limits of privacy on SNS and took more care in their postings (Ziegele & Quiring, 2011). One 16-year-old expressed her concern about patriarchy in her belief that sites such as *Snapchat* employed men who surveilled users. Girls did not fully understand the security limitations of the applications they used. They sometimes worked to control their privacy settings as one measure of security from online dangers. They also described observing at times more than posting.

Yet, in contemporary networks all SNS interactions are “mediated by providers with commercial interests” (p. 175) who try to make the data as public as possible. With every click of a smartphone app, social media companies and advertisers collect and commodify a girl’s information. While social media can feel liberating and provide a sense of connection, feminist scholars argue that it may also turn everyone into consumers (Silva, 2015). Girls were selective in posting their personal information and some expressed concern that posts would circulate beyond their intended audience.

Theme seven, the oldest girls found freedom on social media, indicates that the girls primarily felt their parents trusted them to make good decisions in their use of SNS. Feminist themes of agency and empowerment were present in the seventeen and eighteen-year-olds as they found a meaningful sense of freedom in participating in online communities. Girls recognized the need for their parents’ oversight. All noted that their parents trusted them to make good decisions online, except Marley, whose father forbade her to use social media outside the

family iPad. The girls felt they could make positive choices of which sites to visit, who to contact, how to respond to unwanted sexual requests, and how to avoid drama and cyberbullying. The younger girls described close supervision by family members.

Other meanings were quite negative and interfered with girls' pursuit of belongingness and connectedness. Theme eight, girls experienced social media as a platform for evaluating appearance, presents an element of online interactions that elicits concern. Many of the girls indicated that their appearance and attractiveness were a primary focus of their peers on social media and they noted that teens examined and criticized appearance in a post with relish. Girls voiced uneasiness about their appearance and how they compared to others they saw online, especially celebrities and professional "influencers." The concept of influencers is an anathema to the feminist perspective which encourages independence, agency, and empowerment. The 24-hour, constant nature of social media creates an echo chamber for imitation and artificiality. A sense of constant examination and comparison bothered girls who felt the weight of the social media gaze; they found an unwanted sense of appraisal and comparison online.

Theme nine, some girls used social media to avoid face-to-face interaction, raises a concern that has received widespread attention in research (Turkle, 2011, 2015). Chelsey (14) readily admitted that she often did not want to speak to a friend face-to-face. Nor did she like to "go on and on" in a phone call. Going online on her terms suited Chelsey. Chelsey was not the only girl to express a preference for avoiding in-person communication, a few other girls claimed the same personal meaning, including outgoing, vivacious Maggie (16). Face-to-face connection, so important for humans, is troublesome for some girls; the energy and focus in-person interaction demands was avoided. Not all girls are using SNS for connection with others, some are using it to keep their family and friends at arms-length.

Theme ten, SNS interactions could lead to conflict, drama, sexual images, and bullying was a strong finding across the data. Girls navigated the many negative and frightening aspects

of being online, including fears of safety and negative posts by others even as they continued to believe that engagement matters. Being on social media could come at the expense of connection. Drama and sexual references or requests were viewed as the cost of social media engagement and girls had established methods for avoiding the unwanted content (e.g. Just keep scrolling). Girls expressed awareness of bullying online but believed that neither teens nor adults could control it. Choosing which national accounts to follow was agentic and girls decided which teens were less likely to send or request inappropriate pictures.

The sexual images that confront girls are part of a larger heteronormative patriarchal set of practices that girls traverse online. While SNS are a place for girls to speak up and take a stand, they are also saturated with patriarchy, consumerism, and capitalism. According to those I interviewed, some young males request and send nude pictures with regularity. Adolescents are active consumers of digital technology; girls are forced to navigate sexual images and requests for “nudes” to find connection in an online world that prioritizes teen sexuality and undervalues other aspects of girls’ intellectual and social lives. Ringrose and colleagues (2013) describe sexting body images as a kind of online currency that carries value and “constitutes a new norm of feminine desirability” (p. 319). In such examples, males collect as many sexts as possible and share the images. In familiar sexual double standards, girls who send sexts are considered sluts by both girls and boys, but the boys who amass them go unchallenged (p. 319). The act of unfriending a social media contact who requested a nude photograph was agentic for girls. Girls in this study described bullying in the form of malicious rumors or posting sexting images in retribution after a breakup. Teens reported making decisions daily in setting boundaries for what posts they would open or accept and what social media content should be avoided.

The many personal meanings that girls find in the use of SNS are intriguing and they reflect the complexity of their engagements online. Generation Z’s use of social media makes them part of a culture that shares a characteristic method of communication less familiar to older

generations, even Generation Y pre-millennials (Dimock, 2019; Generation X, Y, Z, n.d.; Prensky, 2001). Girls constantly navigate this multidimensional world that invites both serious problems and the constant opportunity for connection. And as stated earlier in the study, girls overall use SNS more than boys. This study layers the findings on girls; they are not just one big group (boyd, 2014) and different girls get different things out of their social media use. Social media informs girls who are looking for new experiences: Equestrian tips, cooking videos, or instructions for solving a calculus problem. Girls return to social media over and over for the positive responses they receive, the information they find only on their favorite sites, and the community they find among their peers online. They find it exciting and entertaining. And social media is not just for socializing; it is part of a new method of education as girls demonstrate when they search for information and visit a homework site for an interactive lesson. Social media offers new sources of educational information for the modern girl.

### **Through a Feminist Lens**

In this section I discuss the findings and their significance for educators, families, and scholars. I also examine their larger meaning and their connections to the literature. Viewing the data through a feminist critical lens allows me the opportunity to “examine and explore the lives of [young] women” through the words of the girls (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 55). I emphasize the agential ways girls interact with and navigate social media in this study.

Girls and their use of social media are a topic in tension. The girls seek connection, which they regularly find online, but in other ways SNS breaks connections. They spend a considerable amount of time on SNS, and yet, at the same time, the majority of girls said they were online too much. They feel like agents and make some agentic choices, but they are situated in a patriarchal culture that dismisses girls’ concerns and calls their online activities infantile and silly (boyd, 2014). Research by Muhammad and McArthur (2015) indicates that girls wanted to be represented differently from ways they believed the media and society portrayed them as



immaterial and foolish. In addition, girls are surveilled online as part of a capitalist culture that sweeps all of us up in advertising. They participate in a technology that is produced through mining practices that ravage the environment and take them away from academics. Girls see negative activities online, which they often navigate, but that still can affect them, such as bullying and body image issues.

Feminists proceed from the common view that gender informs the structure, dynamics, and relationships of the world, including the technological interactions of the girls in this study. Feminist scholars of girlhood studies argue that girls are an under-researched population (Johnson & Ginsberg, 2015). Muhammad and Haddix (2016) claim that Black girls are neglected and marginalized in research, and Dubrofsky and Wood (2014) posit that women of color are not “framed as agentic or empowered” on social media (p. 283). Pipher (1994) warns that psychology has historically ignored girls. Girls are a legitimate focus of study and these complex findings suggest that they are committed to social media as a space to sustain peer networks, to learn and entertain themselves, and to navigate privacy issues and negative interpersonal dynamics and drama in their work to become agents. Artists, photographers, bloggers, and cultural producers, girls make their way through girlhood within the parameters of a patriarchal, heteronormative culture.

### **Agency**

For this study, agency is defined as “the exercise of will and conscious action” (White & Wyn, 1998, p. 314). The feminist lens for this study considers girls to be agentic in the navigation, decision making, and meaning making of their social media use. Girls in this study displayed agency through their choice, use, and negotiation of social media as evidenced by their decisions to spend time online, and to choose, at times, to be online less. This section discusses the agency girls find through their SNS use. Feminist scholars of girlhood studies argue that girls are making meaning in their own ways (Maguire, 2018; Pipher, 1994; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

While feminist agency frequently requires resistance to patriarchal norms, McNay (2016) states that meaningful identities and agency can nevertheless be acquired working within, not against, the dominant norms. Research by Demirhan and Cakir-Demirhan (2015) identifies four basic categories of patriarchal discourse online: Domestic roles for women, professional roles for women, physical beauty for women, and moral values for women (p. 309). Social media is “embedded with opportunities for free and equal participation,” however it perpetuates “dominant discourses” on society (p. 308). The physical beauty ideal is a strong discourse that promotes dominant feminine heteronormativity among adolescents in this study. Teens can position themselves to resist the powerful societal forces of patriarchy and heteronormativity, and they may work to advance their agency within the larger cultural norms. Living a feminist life does not require involvement in the feminist movement (Zaslow, 2009). Several senior girls in this study noted that feminist sites were among their online interests. According to Jackson (2018), “when girls take up a feminist identity it is a resistant, political act” (p. 45).

The oldest girls exhibited multidimensional agency in their decisions to limit their time on social media. The youngest girls were also agentic in choosing to spend copious hours on social media. While some might consider their extensive use of social media “addiction,” the girls viewed themselves as capable actors making these decisions, both to stay online, and reduce their hours online. They made decisions about privacy settings, accepting and rejecting friend requests, and choosing to open or delete a snap. The youngest girls had less awareness of their true privacy limitations from the perspective of corporate control of social media; the older girls were more wary of online risks. Posts that circulated beyond their intended audience were a concern for older girls, but girls like Sarah (16) concluded that social media is “as private as you make it.” Agency and choice are fundamental in the feminist view of growth and empowerment (Crotty, 2003). Those decisions, whether for minimal engagement or maximum interaction, are part of their efforts to figure out the connections that work for them.

Girls of all ages expressed a desire to have power over their privacy online. Some participants detailed their privacy controls on *Snapchat* and *Instagram*, while others, (e.g. Kar [18] and Lila [17]) described “snooping” and “lurking” to maintain their standards for online friends. Each participant indicated that they had made an effort to secure their privacy through boundaries in at least one of their SNS, whether it was through a spam account or account settings. The youngest girls displayed a lack of knowledge of the best practices for obtaining privacy. They seemed to believe that they had privacy online and could “just say no” to a stalker.

For the older girls there was some serious work to be accomplished through social media. Traditionally young women occupy “marginalised and non-adult spaces” which offer limited opportunities for action (Jackson, 2018, p. 34). Jackson (2018) refers to the internet as a crucial key for connecting girls with feminism. Exploring social issues through feminist sites such as The Women’s March and #MeToo, girls can educate themselves about important issues. Those sites provide new locations for figuring out “who they are as females” and where they stand on women’s issues (Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. xii). Several girls in this study indicate their “identity play” includes their access to feminist sites on social media (Coulthard and Ogden, 2018, p. 1). Girls differentiate themselves from adults in their lives as they choose social issues that express their fledgling interest in the larger world. Social media sites may give girls the impetus to reject the mantle of normative femininity and seek new ways of becoming women.

The act of *not sharing* details with me during the second interview and the online data sharing was agentic for the girls. Confronted with an unknown adult requesting a glimpse of their private communication, teens depended on an adult’s ignorance of the workings of *Snapchat* to prevent disclosure. They could have chosen to open new snaps given that *Snapchat* stories lasted 24 hours, but they chose not to share, and I did not tread on their choice. Girls established boundaries for what information they were willing to share with an adult. That is an important part of the developmental process for teens differentiating themselves from adults in their lives.

A differentiated person must understand the Self and the different roles that they play in life (Gavazzi, Goettler, Soloman, & McKenry, 1994). A relationship is noted between adult acceptance of differentiation and their tolerance for individuality (Gavazzi et al., 1994). The more an adult allows a young person to differentiate themselves, the greater the teen's opportunity for individuality. The girls' agency, boundary-seeking, and differentiation make me optimistic about the "ability of digital technology to empower" (Wajcman, 2010, p. 147). The liberatory cyber world is available to girls who choose to engage in it and create a presence, according to technofeminist Wajcman (2010). Girls' choices online, from their use, to sharing, may reveal SNS as a key site for participating in the developmental process for girls of this generation. They may experience online spaces as uniquely belonging to them, their peers, and the youth culture in which they belong.

### **Too Much Connection?**

This section contains analysis of the type of "connections" girls make with friends and family through their agentic SNS use. Gilligan (1982) defined connection for females as, "a way of being with others that allows her also to be with herself" (p. 53). This definition can apply to the online environment. The girl is with others online while she learns and grows and finds herself. Lee and Robbins (1998) call connection a "social lens for interacting with the world."

In addition, this section compares responses of girls in this study with the results of national research on teen attitudes toward SNS use, commoditizing users, and effects on teen mental health. Some in this study indicate that they recognize adult criticism that they spend too much time online. Worried parents encourage teens to spend less time on social media; girls relate their own concerns. American teens express unease about the amount of time they spend on social media, especially girls, and so do the girls in this study. Feminists express concern about increased anxiety, depression and body image issues among heavy users of social media. According to Anderson (2018), 47% of girls say they spend too much time on social media,

compared to 35% of boys (p. 1). In contrast, 94% (33 of 35) of the girls in this study stated that they spent too much time on social media, and older girls described spending less time as a group than younger girls, indicating they had made choices to reduce their time online. Anderson found that 57% of teens nationally say they have “tried to limit their use of social media” (p. 1). Among the girls in this study, only Reece (17) claimed that she had tried unsuccessfully to reduce her time on social media. Anderson and Jiang (2018b) found that 45% of teens were online “almost constantly” (p. 1), while Rideout and Robb (2018) reported 16% of teens who made the same claim (p. 8). In this study, only Emma (14) described herself as online “all the time,” though other girls spent more hours on social media. Can a teen have too much connection? The question raises the issue of “addiction” again. Denying the addiction motif, boyd (2014) tells us that teens are addicted to *each other* and to the relationships they have with friends and family, not their phone or social media. Gilligan (1982) states that girls value connection and belonging in their own ways that differ from that of boys. Girls find a new world of girlhood online; they can be part of something, a member of an online culture where things are happening.

Some adults call teen use of social media agentic (Livingstone, 2008) and others refer to teen use of SNS as addictive (Twenge, 2017); boyd (2014) calls it “complicated” (p. 1). The cultural narrative that teens spend too much time on social media is strong and these girls seem to be internalizing it (Anderson, 2018). Even girls who spend less than two hours per day on social media readily indicate that they should spend less time online.

Perhaps the girls’ belief that they should be online less relates to a patriarchal trope, the belief that girls are online victims (Damour, 2017). This analysis offers an alternative feminist view to the prevailing discourse that teens, especially females, are unempowered victims of a hyper-digital world. Adult dialogue emphasizes teen addiction and lack of control in their SNS use, but only a few girls in this study use the term addiction. Teens continue to use SNS despite the perceived negative aspects covered earlier. The opportunities and benefits for connection and

entertainment, among others, seem to exceed the costs of the negative components of social media use. Girls find personal meaning in connecting with friends and exploring the online world. They share their accomplishments with friends, family, and contacts far and wide, and anticipate that colleges may peruse their sites. While critics abound, some feminists view the “huge rise of female voices” online as a positive development for women and girls (Murray, 2015, p. 497). Unlike many spaces in which girls’ concerns and activities are belittled (Maguire, 2018), girls can be active participators in cultural spaces online. On social media the teen actively “fashions the information about herself,” an agentic effort (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2014, p. 282). Despite the negative components online, that also can exist in face-to-face spaces, SNS offers girls the chance to express their creative side and create culture in a cyber-clique environment of supportive friends. The empowering and agentic nature of SNS provides girls with rewarding interactions as they grow into adults.

Most of the girls in this study felt capable of controlling their use of SNS to connect with friends and family of their choice. Only Reece (17) complained of a lack of control when she claimed that she “just can’t do without it.” However, participant girls believed that their use of SNS was disproportionate and one explicitly said it created a strain in her interactions with adults. Tatum’s (16) assertion that, “I’m guilty” regarding the subject of SNS overuse disclosed her internal conflict and the tensions teen navigate. Some girls felt that social media use came at the cost of family interaction. Her statement reminded me of a girl in my pilot study of 2014. In that previous study Elizabeth (16) deleted all of her social media and said she felt better spending time with her family (Turkle, 2015). Teens are navigating complexities and tensions as they make decisions about their use of time online.

Social media facilitates the maintenance of female relationships great and small. Girls may connect with their best friend, their lab partner from third period, or a friend they have not seen since fourth grade. Although discerning the depth of “connection” in relationships is

difficult from the data, girls describe continuing conversations with relatives physically separated by thousands of miles, including sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins, or aunts. Like the teens in Anderson and Jiang's (2018b) report, the adolescents in this study believe their social media activities strengthen friendships, both online and face-to-face, and expose them to greater diversity. Connected with friends and family on a "constant basis" (Fitton et al., 2013, p. 409), SNS relationships help teens cope with life's difficulties.

The girls discussed the sheer volume of support received online and the round-the-clock nature of the support. As Sophia (16) stated, "they'll be there for you, because people are always online." Sophia's comment is supported by Pew Research Center data which reveals that 68% of American teens "feel as if they have people who will support them through tough times" on social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018b, p. 2). The girls also reported predominantly positive effects from SNS use, acting with purpose as they relied on SNS for their social connections, calling it "critical" (Kar, 18) and a "refuge" (Turkle, 2011, p. 275). Some suggested SNS helped meet emotional needs (e.g. Daisey [17] and her homesickness). Girls found strength in comments of other girls and women. These responses were congruent with Pew Research Center's 2018 survey of American teens which reveals that thirty one percent view the effect of social media as "mostly positive," 45% believe that social media has "neither positive nor negative effect," and 24% state that social media has a "mostly negative effect" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018a, p. 5).

What "connection" meant differed across cases which suggests a need to explore the meaning of the term in more detail. Girls sometimes wanted to be "in the know" of others' activities and events, an articulation of "connection" focused on remaining informed and a fear of being left out of key events. Other types of connectivity seemed to offer more substantive interpersonal benefits, such as ameliorating homesickness and encouraging and receiving support from friends. Streaks symbolized such interpersonal connections, a small but meaningful method for meeting connection needs. On both sides of the streak, the sustained interaction suggested an

intentional commitment to the online and daily bonding event. Girls enjoyed the contact with their lists of valuable people each morning. Other examples of connection indicated only superficial levels of intimacy. For example, some girls found it gratifying to know that they were connected to hundreds or thousands of people online. Here, the inherent value seemed to be mass connection to numerous accounts and users, many unknown to the girls in their off-line worlds, without substantive sharing as in the case of school friends and family members. Online connection thus varies tremendously. How does a streak compare to a heart-felt *Tumblr* poem? Both fulfill definitions of connection, but the streak does not contain the broader implications of the poem or the expression of a lengthy *Snapchat* post. In some cases, it is about fostering deep relationships and other times it is simply about fun and quick check-ins. Girls expressed their beliefs about the value of online friend support, comparable to in-person support for many, and that sometimes they use SNS to avoid face-to-face communication. This points to some tensions between online and face-to-face efforts to “connect.”

On the other hand, girls like Chelsey (14) chose to use their smartphone to avoid interaction with others. Rotondi, Stanca, and Tomasuolo (2017) argue that the smartphone reduces the quality of in-person interaction. The reduction of quality face-to-face interaction also undermines the value of time spent with friends among individuals who use a smartphone. According to dominant discourse, smartphone use leads to distraction and reduces the benefits of face-to-face interaction (Dwyer, Kushlev, & Dunn, 2018). Cyr, Berman, and Smith (2014) note that online communication may exacerbate anxiety and distress, and Blease (2015) states that social media increases the risk for negative evaluations. However, Kim (2017) found that adolescents aged 13 to 18 were less likely to develop problematic smartphone behaviors than young adults aged 31 to 40. Even the most outgoing girls (e.g. Maggie [16]) said there were times when they chose online communication over in-person. Several of the girls in the study mentioned that the smartphone and its social media world offers the opportunity to “hide behind



a screen,” and the behavior of some girls confirms that belief. Social network sites can easily provide a buffer between a girl and unwanted face-to-face contact.

### **Complications**

The medium has its complications, to be sure. *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Twitter* thrive by creating the belief that the member expresses themselves and makes empowering choices with their use; however, social media commoditizes their users (Silva, 2015). At the personal level girls feel connected and have fun, but at the structural level their information is being used to earn more dollars for the technology company and the high-profile people teens follow. When they access a celebrity’s page on *Instagram*, the celebrity makes money. The football player Cristiano Ronaldo amassed 47.8 million from *Instagram* in 2018 (Malik, 2019, p. 2). Fan girls and guys of Kendall Jenner helped her earn 16 million a year in 2018 and her sister Kylie earned 3.8 million through *Instagram* in the same year (p. 2). These professional celebrities, such as Kendall and Kylie Jenner, contribute to the ideal of physical beauty that feminists have been addressing for decades (Demirhan & Cakir-Demirhan, 2015). Victoria (16), Daisey (17) and others expressed their insecurities when viewing online representation of the beauty ideal. Girls are influenced by glamorous posts to buy products influencers and celebrities promote and emulate their pursuit of physical attractiveness and consumerism.

Beyond commoditizing, social media use raises concerns for teens’ mental health (Haselton, 2017; Howard, 2019a; Howard, 2019b; O’Keefe, et al., 2011). Excessive social media exposure is linked to unhealthy experiences such as increasing loneliness (Kim, 2017) and depression (Odgers, 2018). Odgers (2018) suggests that online activities of teens may worsen “existing vulnerabilities” (p. 1). Jacqueline Howard (2019b) of CNN reports that “spending too much time scrolling through social media” has been linked to depression in young people (p. 1). In one study, a 50% increase in depression was shown among girls, and 35% among boys in

teens who use SNS more than five hours per day when compared to teens who used social media for one to three hours per day (Howard, 2019a, p. 1). The expression “*Facebook Depression*” has attracted attention since its inception in 2011 (O’Keefe, et al., 2011), and Haselton (2017) notes that using *FB* frequently makes users depressed, while “real social interactions have a positive effect on well-being” (p. 1). Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) and Fear of Being Left Out (FoBlo) are other concerns for SNS users. Beyens, Frison, and Eggermont (2016) relate that adolescents with high levels of FoMo used social media more intensely and experienced more stress when feeling unpopular on SNS. Compulsive media use contributes to FoMo which links to anxiety and depression according to Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur, and Chen (2018). There is some evidence of FoMo and FoBlo in my study. For example, Marley (17) expressed that she felt left out when her friends posted pictures online without her. Reece (17) shared that she felt she would be a different person without the influence of online figures. Victoria (16) described experiencing depression sometimes after hours of viewing online celebrities and influencers. Yet others shared how focusing on positive sites uplifted their moods.

### **Navigating Surveillance Culture**

As the prolific social media scholar danah boyd (2007) notes, creating boundaries around online spaces is difficult. While the girls perceived themselves as capable and agentic navigating social media, girls differed by age in understanding of the limited extent of their online privacy and security. The younger girls were less aware of the lack of online security for social media interactions and data than the older girls. Most girls did not understand broad issues of technology culture that surveilled their daily activities (Lyon, 2017), such as the fact that SNS companies have full access to their users’ data with little regulation. Yet, the girls took control of the personal information they shared with their peers online and their choices to reveal private feelings and thoughts. Like their Generation Z peers (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), many described a pattern of primarily observing and selective posting.

The corporate control of social media accounts, the confusion and uncertainty for many users about what information is within their control to conceal and what is not, raises a variety of concerns about the authenticity, agency, and privacy dominant in contemporary discussions of social media. Teens experience challenges determining online limits and how “authentic” they should be online. Further, photographs may be shared, posted, and tagged by friends, creating a much wider audience than the original post. The performative nature of social media may lead to “context collapse” (Hodkinson, 2017, p. 277), where posts are created for a particular audience but travel outside of those circles to become available for viewing by parents, teachers, college recruiting staff, and endless others. Those “others” may be voyeurs who surveil and objectify girls. The gendered nature of the surveillance reduces girls to no more than a physical object. The context under which the original information was posted could be lost and subsequent viewings outside the original group may have harmful consequences. Girls discussed agentic “disconnective strategies” (Light & Cassidy, 2014, p. 1169) available to users, such as declining invitations, defriending people, detagging from content, and deleting posts or images from their pages.

Girls employed spam accounts as one strategy, with their closely monitored follower list, as another privacy method. These practices of choice and agency are considered an everyday part of social media culture (Light & Cassidy, 2014). Marwick and boyd (2014) refer to these strategies as an “ongoing struggle” to achieve privacy (p. 1063). Girls controlled their SNS interactions by making new friends online, and access to online friends who might not be approved by parents otherwise gave a girl desired command over her digital life. Misleading a parent and hiding their use of social media allowed a girl to write the narrative of their SNS use. Perhaps Ella (16) related the story of the greatest control when she indicated that the world is safer online than in-person.

As Turkle (2011) reminds us, technology is seductive. *Facebook* and other SNS create a false sense of privacy and the girl who takes part in social media must negotiate her need for connectedness and belongingness in a world of friends and followers, some only known to her online. In this section, hegemonic surveillance culture is examined as it applies to girls' use of SNS and significance of surveillance culture is discussed in a feminist frame. As a girl manages her social media use, surveillance culture creates an avenue into her life. Lyon (2017) posits, "people actively participate in an attempt to regulate their own surveillance and the surveillance of others (p. 824)." According to Lyon (2017):

Surveillance culture is a product of contemporary late-modern conditions or, simply, of digital modernity. From the later 20th century especially, corporate and state modes of surveillance, mediated by increasingly fast and powerful new technologies, tilted toward the incorporation of everyday life through information infrastructures and our increasing dependence on the digital in mundane relationships. Just as all cultural shifts relate in significant ways to social, economic, and political conditions, today's surveillance culture is formed through organizational dependence, political-economic power, security linkages, and social media engagement (p. 826).

A world of people unknown to the teen have access to her digital life, in large part without her awareness. Despite society's view that teens are out of control online, the adolescents in this study felt competent and capable in their use of social media. The thirteen and fourteen-year-olds were not aware that their act of engaging and sharing on social media was surveilled, and they believed themselves to be using necessary privacy options. Like the teen users in Freitas' research (2017) some girls in this study noted that their online friends could save or share a *Snapchat* image, but they felt "pretty safe" if they were careful who they sent to that the snap would actually disappear (p. 132). Nicole (17) noted that she "took care" of her posts and she was mindful that someone could gain access to information she considered confidential. As expected, the naivety of the youngest was supplanted by greater understanding of privacy limitations among the older girls. The older girls in this study recognized that they had no real privacy on social media sites, but the younger girls seemed unaware of that concept.

Maggie (16) expressed concern about “a man” that oversaw all social media and surveilled her accounts. She seemed to accept the idea that male surveillance was a part of social media use and her belief did not curtail her use of SNS. Girls mentioned that information appeared in their SNS feeds that related to topics of interest to them. They did not recognize that their accounts were surveilled for their interests and companies would convey target information to their social media feeds. Social media users also produce data, which is commodified by social media companies (Fisher, 2014). The data is managed by marketers to gain insight into the interests and buying patterns of social media users (Warner, 2018). The girls had no concern about the commercial side of the advertisements on SNS and little sense that they were being exploited by the social media company when their information was sold to advertisers (Onwuanibe, 2015).

From her inner circle of closest friends who access her spam account to patriarchal “big data” of Silicon Valley that monitors a girl’s interests (Warner, 2018, p. 1), the networked world acts as a series of concentric rings. Each ring moving outward represents a layer of social media associates progressing from known friends and followers who are always online to anonymous users unknown to the girl. The outside ring represents hegemonic surveillance culture, with its ability to view a girl’s social media activity without her knowledge (See Figure 2) (Bailey, 2019).

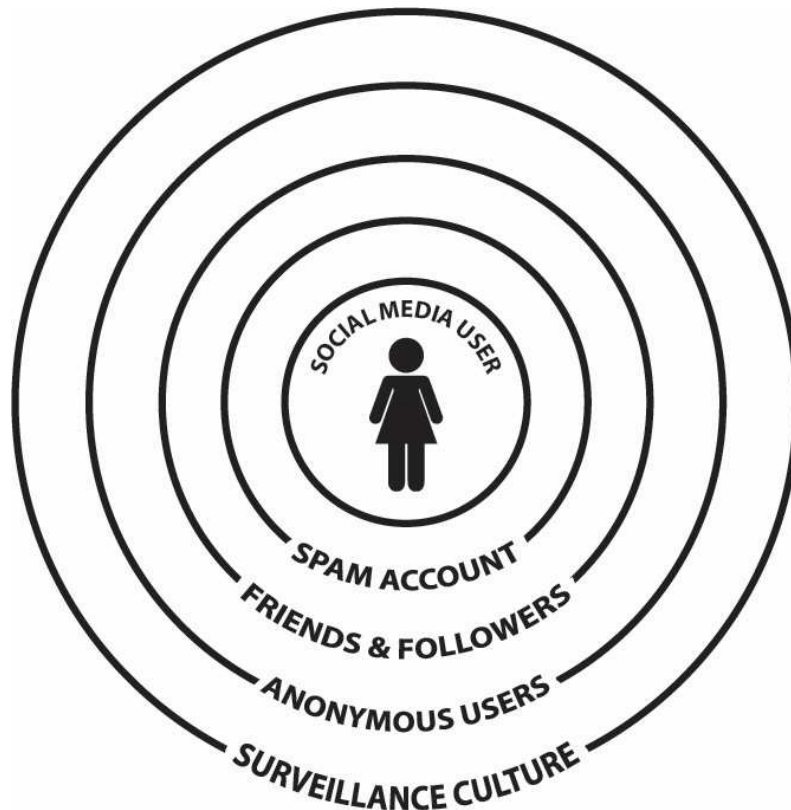


Figure 2 Social Media Culture (Bailey, 2019)

### **Authenticity Online**

Authenticity online remains a gendered ideal, according to Duffy and Hund (2019). Described by Dubrofsky and Wood (2014) as, “behaving in ways that are not pre-meditated,” authenticity is also called, “uncontrived and natural-seeming,” and “spontaneous” (p. 282). Dubrofsky and Wood posit that the more a user intentionally discloses on SNS the more “one is constructed as being supposedly real” (p. 284). Girls in this study expressed appreciation for the user who appeared real and disdain for an inauthentic presentation, however; authenticity is a subjective matter (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). Several girls admitted that they evaluate their peers online for authenticity and sometimes feel bad and judgmental for doing so. Girls more than boys navigate an “authenticity bind” when they walk the line between “real enough” and “too real” (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4989). The bind occurs when the teen crosses over into the

“too real” category by posting overly personal information about their personal, family, and sexual life. As “visible content creators,” girls on SNS seek the affirmation received from popular posts but avoid the “blowback” from oversharing their lives (p. 4989). Social media users demonstrate their agency by expressly and actively posting about their day-to-day lives within the boundaries of authenticity expressed by Nicole (17) in Chapter four. For her the girl who had clearly photoshopped her physique, seeking the cultural heteronormative beauty ideal, had crossed the line into inauthenticity.

Where does the pouty-lipped “duck face” selfie prominent in social media posts fall in the continuum of authenticity from “unnatural and inauthentic” to “normal and ritualized” behavior (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015, p. 1848)? In the digital environment of today’s teen, various practices vie for her attention. Adults may assume that selfies are every girl’s idea of entertainment, but the subject receives negative responses from some girls. Teens familiar with popular “picture editing practices, photo filters, and photo apps” were more likely to find a selfie inauthentic (p. 1856). Most girls admitted to posting selfies on apps typically used for sharing photos, *Instagram* and *Snapchat*, despite the criticism and stigma related to the selfie.

Some call the selfie a harmless representation of self (Coulthard & Ogden, 2018; Katz & Crocker, 2015) and others describe it as a sign of vanity and narcissism (Peraica, 2017). Several of the girls in this study participated in selfie culture and others eschewed it. Victoria (16) and several other girls sent random *Snapchat* selfies with filters to her boyfriend and friends, but Tatum (16) and Callie (15) were quick to point out that they do not take or post selfies. Callie made a point to say that her twin posted selfies “all the time” but she thought selfies were “stupid.” Kar (18) called selfies “vain.” Reece (17), on the other hand, cheerfully described sending frequent selfies.

An example of the social media gaze, the selfie is a perpetual reminder of a patriarchal society’s emphasis on a girl’s appearance. The images, often slightly sexualized, portray pouting

lips or inviting smiles. While SNS are a location for a girl to speak her mind in the modern world, the selfie reminds us that on some level appearance continues to be a premium.

However, Feltman and Szymanski (2018) note that “feminism offers women alternative ways to view the messages our culture sends about beauty” (p. 322).

### **Implications**

I undertook the study because of my interest in girls’ use of SNS and the need for the study in the current literature on female adolescent development. This study contributes a more comprehensive view of girls and their use of SNS for pursuing belonging and connection needs, other meanings girls find through SNS, and the disruption of connection that can occur on SNS. Ultimately, this study sought to provide information for educators, families, and scholars about girls’ use of SNS. The study adds the qualitative component of personal experiences and has the benefit of including girls of color. In an environment where teen use of SNS was derided as unhealthy and devoid of value, I became invested in knowing about girls’ use of social media in their own words. This study has broader relevance for theory research, and practice.

### **Theory**

As a result of understanding girls’ use of SNS for belonging and connection through the theoretical lens of feminism, this study offers examples of what agency and empowerment feel like to girls engaging in social media. This study offers another view of girls’ experiences, supporting feminist principles that encourage girls to find their voice as they create knowledge and make decisions for their life. Despite the claims of critics who denounce girls as insubstantial and silly, girls are agentic and seek empowerment and relationships that connect with others who are important in their lives. As stated by Gilligan (1982), young women have different connection needs than males. Females develop in a context of connecting with others (Baker, 1976), and relationships inform a women’s sense of self (Gilligan (1982). Girls



experiences are notable and important to them; they are learning to coexist in a world fraught with competition, attention-seeking, and strong emotions on display.

This study indicates that girls are connecting in new spaces. They need connections as much as their foremothers and are finding them on social media. Online interactions have powerful meaning for girls and their impact should be recognized. Girls face an age-old prescription for dissatisfaction when companies display the tanned and thin bodies of models and influencers for their comparison (and consumerism). Several girls in this study expressed real distress when relating their feelings about women and girls online who exercised more, weighed less, were glamorous in comparison to themselves. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) make the feminist claim that spending time on social media is linked to poorer body image and the internalization of a thin body preference. One implication for theorizing, then, is that girls are influenced by the perfect bodies of fashion models and influencers they view online.

Girls experience tension as they negotiate the considerable challenges of SNS. Online spaces should not be dismissed as trivial or celebrated as having all the answers for girls. Social network sites are more than addictive and less than perfect; they are multidimensional and offer new views of the world for girls. Problems with inauthenticity, body image, bullying, and unwanted sexual content face girls online raise conceptual questions and extends the work already being done.

The study of girls and their social media use may influence how we think about developmental theories related to online activities. Social media activity may offer new opportunities to engage in agential experimentation and adulthood play as girls try on different roles (Arnett, 2000). According to Piagetian theory, as girls mature, they move from a more simplistic, concrete reasoning to an abstract understanding of the world by the age of 11 to 15 (Santrock, 2011, p. 25). Girls in this study demonstrated such maturation in the differences between the younger and the older girls in relation to social issues. Viewing girls' social media

use as an informal place of learning, development, and growth, we might consider its potential for revisiting the stages of developmental theory that emerged primarily from face-to-face interactions. The older girls' interest in issues that were not directly related to their lives (e.g. climate change, politics) exemplifies a more mature view of life's events than the younger girls' focus on girlfriends, boyfriends, and the latest scandal among their peers.

While social media exposes girls to discourses that may impede their healthy development, it also offers a multitude of opportunities for girls to move past stultifying prescribed norms and explore new ideas and ways of growing as a young woman. This study contributes to theorizing SNS as multidimensional learning spaces, including a space for girls to learn about their interests, their goals, their aspirations, and their algebra. The girls in this study are coming of age in a social media-saturated culture. Brown and Gilligan (1992) believe that the "crossroads between girls and women is marked by a series of disconnections" leaving girls psychologically at risk (p. 6). Girls are searching for authentic and resonant relationships in which they can freely express themselves and be heard (Pipher, 1994). The connections girls make online contribute to the crucial relationships they need.

## **Practice**

Educators can benefit from understanding the needs of adolescent girls for connection and belonging and their pursuit of those needs through social media. More than mere entertainment, SNS allow a young woman to navigate peer relationships and maintain contact with valued family members. Given the universal nature of digital technology for teens, many educators will encounter the adolescent engrossed in SNS during class time. Knowing the importance girls place on their social media access and reasons for their use is advantageous for educators. A possible benefit for the girls in this study could be the potential for social action resulting from the subject's reflection on their experience in the study (Taylor, 1998). This study raises questions for educators and parents: If developmental learning processes are taking place

online, how do we engage in their world without interfering with their agency? In order to understand what girls experience online we might have to meet with them online.

This study reveals that girls are using SNS to regulate their emotions, going to happy sites when feeling down and calming sites when angry or upset. Girls' practice of regulating emotions through use of SNS sites coincides with the social monitoring system proposed by Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer (2000). The emotional terrain of social media requires that girls navigate their relationships with care.

Girls need to learn about online security and how to navigate the demanding territory of social media in order to be fully agential. Girls can inform adults about their idea of what connection means and the kinds of connections they actually experience. Learning to control the amount of time spent on social media could reduce stress related to active SNS use.

## **Research**

Social network sites provide a space where girls can potentially grow, develop as young women, and find community. Research on adolescent girls, particularly girls of color, is underdeveloped in scholarship, and this study expands that body of work. The intersectionality of age, gender, and race/ethnicity in this study provide a unique perspective for understanding the interests and needs of a diverse group of girls. Notably, I did not find any differences in social media use and experiences across my participants on the basis of racial positioning, only age; racial implications should be analyzed for distinction in use and meaning. Additional research is needed focused exclusively on the ways in which girls of color, White girls, girls of different regions and socio-economic groups engage and make meaning online

Additional research is needed viewing girls' use of SNS sites for pursuing belonging and connectedness needs, and the range of other meanings girls produced and navigated in their online interactions as evidenced in this study. The ubiquity of teen social media use requires adults to better understand the teens' activities. Further research examining these constructs

should focus on eight issues. First, future research should study a larger number of participants to give a broader overview of girls' attitudes. Second, more interviews could be conducted over time, three or four, perhaps, capturing valuable information and allowing more opportunity for probing questions, and perhaps, more established relationships that would allow girls to be increasingly forthcoming with revealing postings to their online sites. Third, research is needed on girls' understandings of security and privacy. Fourth, more research is needed to understand how girls conceptualize the notion of "connection" with their friends and the different online relationships reflecting that. My research demonstrates that most do strive for connection, but the depth of those connections varies tremendously, and we need more information directly from girls to explore those nuances. Social network analysis could contribute that type of information.

Fifth, more information about girls in urban and larger suburban settings would add to the body of scholarship. Sixth, more attention could be given to the age distinctions in use of social media and interest in social issues. Seventh, research is needed on boys and transgender teens. My research focused exclusively on cisgender girls. Eighth, teens' use of social media could be studied over time as they mature from focus on the individual, as seen in some of the younger girls, to the other. This Piagetian concept, of developing from an egocentric focus on the self to a broader, abstract understanding of the world, may explain the difference between responses of younger girls in comparison to older girls (Santrock, 2011).

### **Concluding Comments**

As I bring this document to a close, I am encouraged by what I have learned about girls and their use of SNS. They are learning to make and keep friends online, they are adjusting their ideas of how much time to spend online, they use it to entertain and relax, they have learned how to avoid or ignore unwanted posts and "just keep scrolling." Girls use social media to connect with friends, family, and potential colleges and coaches. Girls use their *different voice* (Gilligan, 1982) in online interactions. They spend more time on SNS than boys (Anderson & Jiang,

2018b), and use their SNS time to connect through conversational posts, while boys play online video games (Lenhart, 2015; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Girls are using SNS to push back against media sexualization in programs like SPARK that empower girls to advocate for healthy bodies (Brown, 2011). Online sites have provided the impetus for valuable social programs such as the #MeToo movement and the Women's March (The Women's March, n.d.). As Jackson (2018) observes, media is the key to connect girls with feminism and with other feminists. Social network sites offer every girl the opportunity to view empowerment in local and global contexts (Jackson, 2018). However, Turley and Fisher (2018) remind us that social media is not a "utopia for feminist campaigning" (p. 2.) Females who discuss feminism online run the risk of threats and may be "trolled" for expressing their views (p. 2).

Social media provides girls a location for the joy of learning and discovering themselves as they find online sites for social issues that broaden their conception of the world. Seeking cyber-communities of like-minded people, girls can grow in their understanding of women's issues and other opportunities. Girls can make agentic choices, set boundaries for their online interactions, and differentiate from adults in their lives as they do identity work in the online environment. I am also mindful of what I have learned from my interaction with the girls in this study. I continue to find girls a provocative subject of study. They shared as they were able and provided insight for my understanding of girls' use of social media. Their expressions, vocabulary, aspirations, and vision were engaging and inspiring for this researcher.

Social network sites are here to stay, and our girls are making the most of it. We should strive to understand their uses and celebrate their agency and success as well as assist them with the rewards and challenges of digital teen life.

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## CHARTS

Chart 1. Social media user preference, all groups

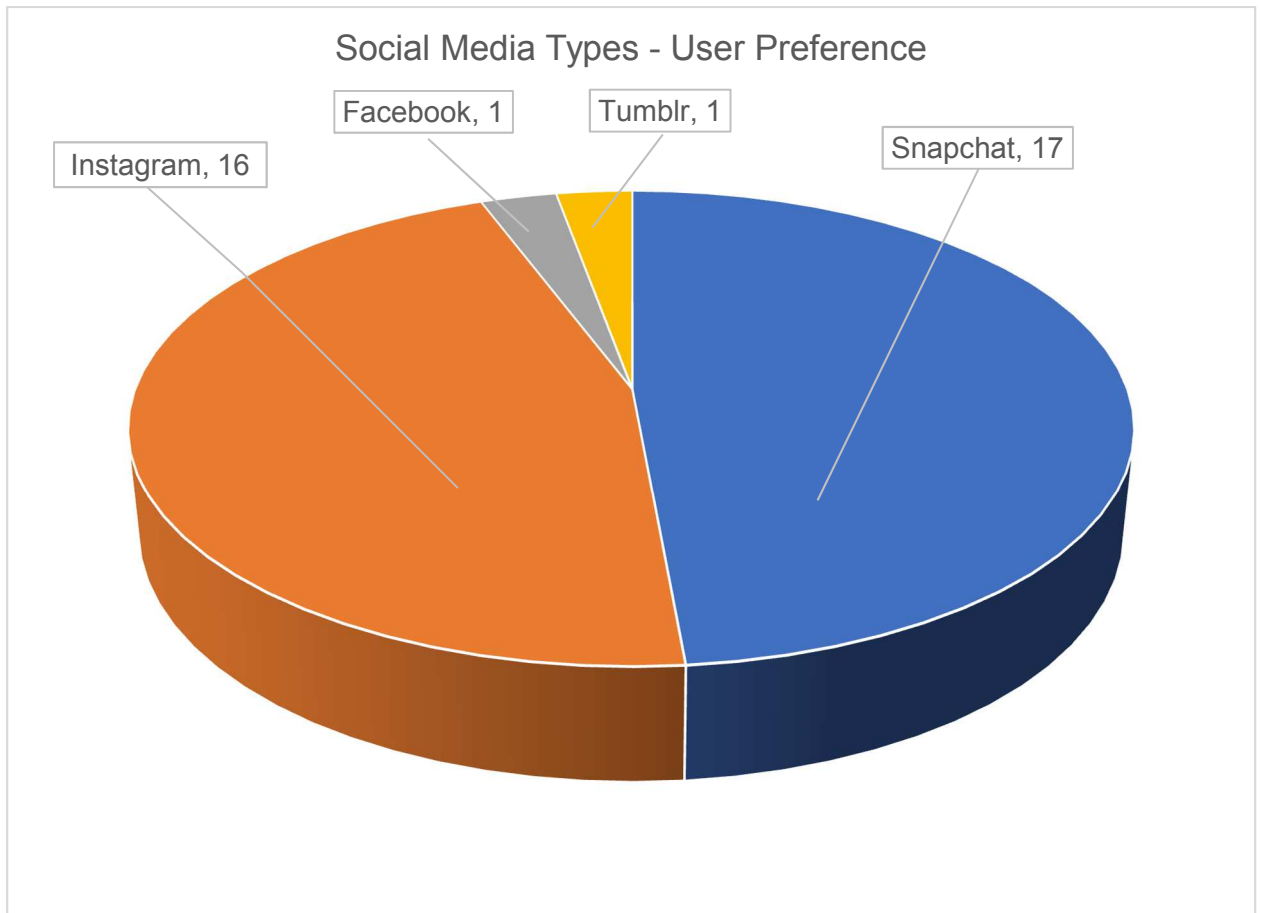


Chart 2. Social Media Preference, 13 & 14-year-olds

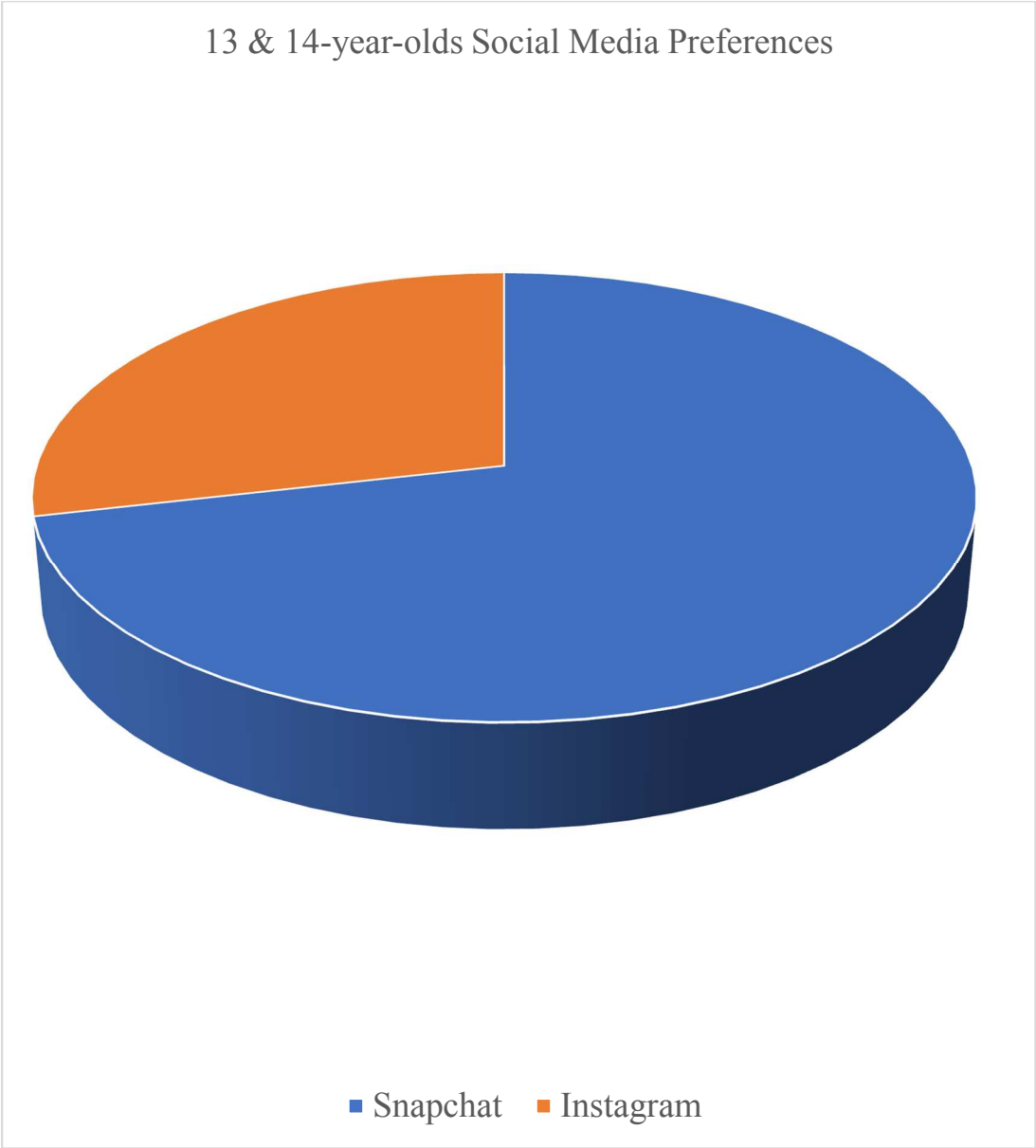




Chart 3. Social Media Preference, 15 & 16-year-olds

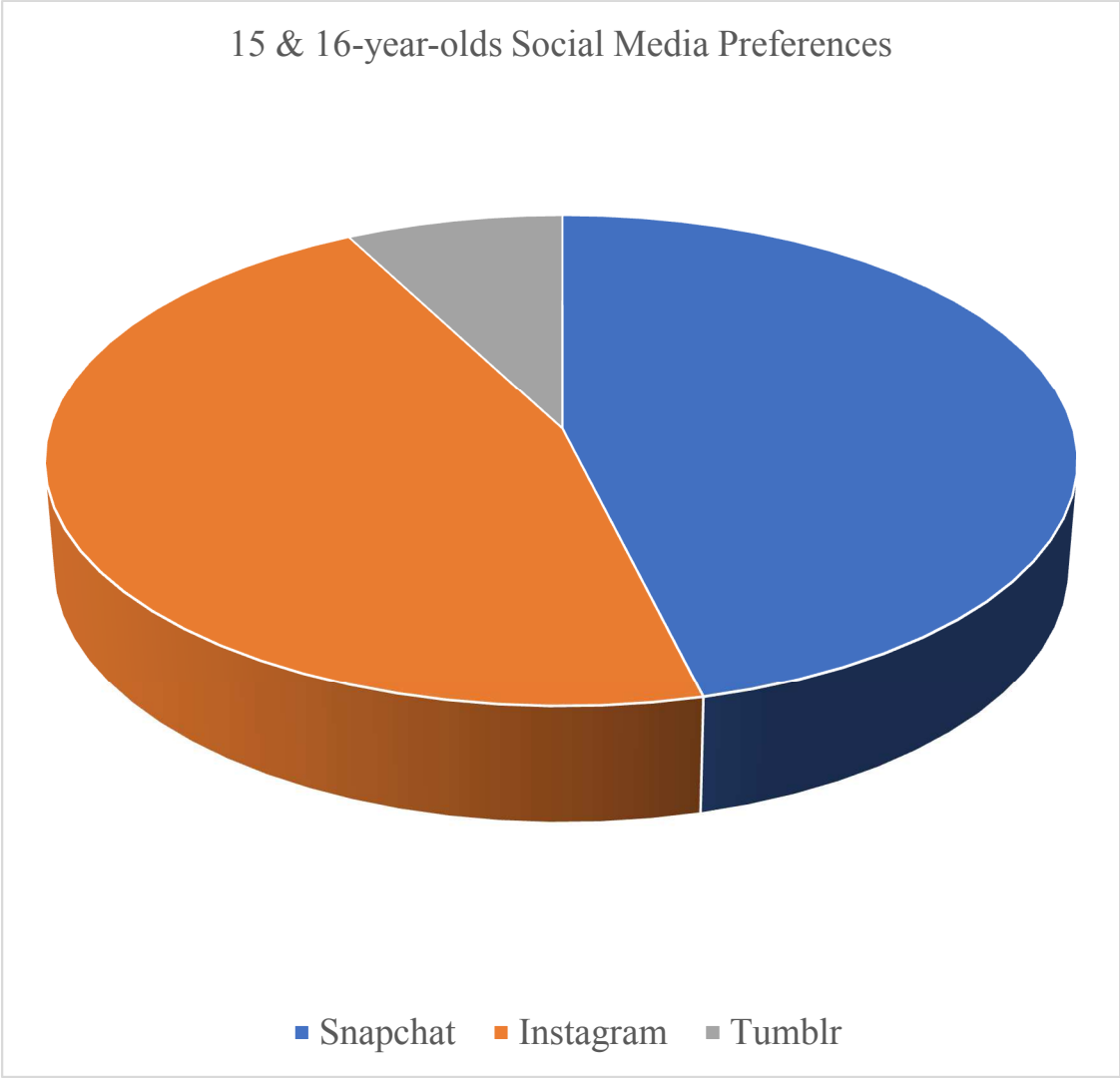


Chart 4. Social Media Preference, 17 & 18-year-olds

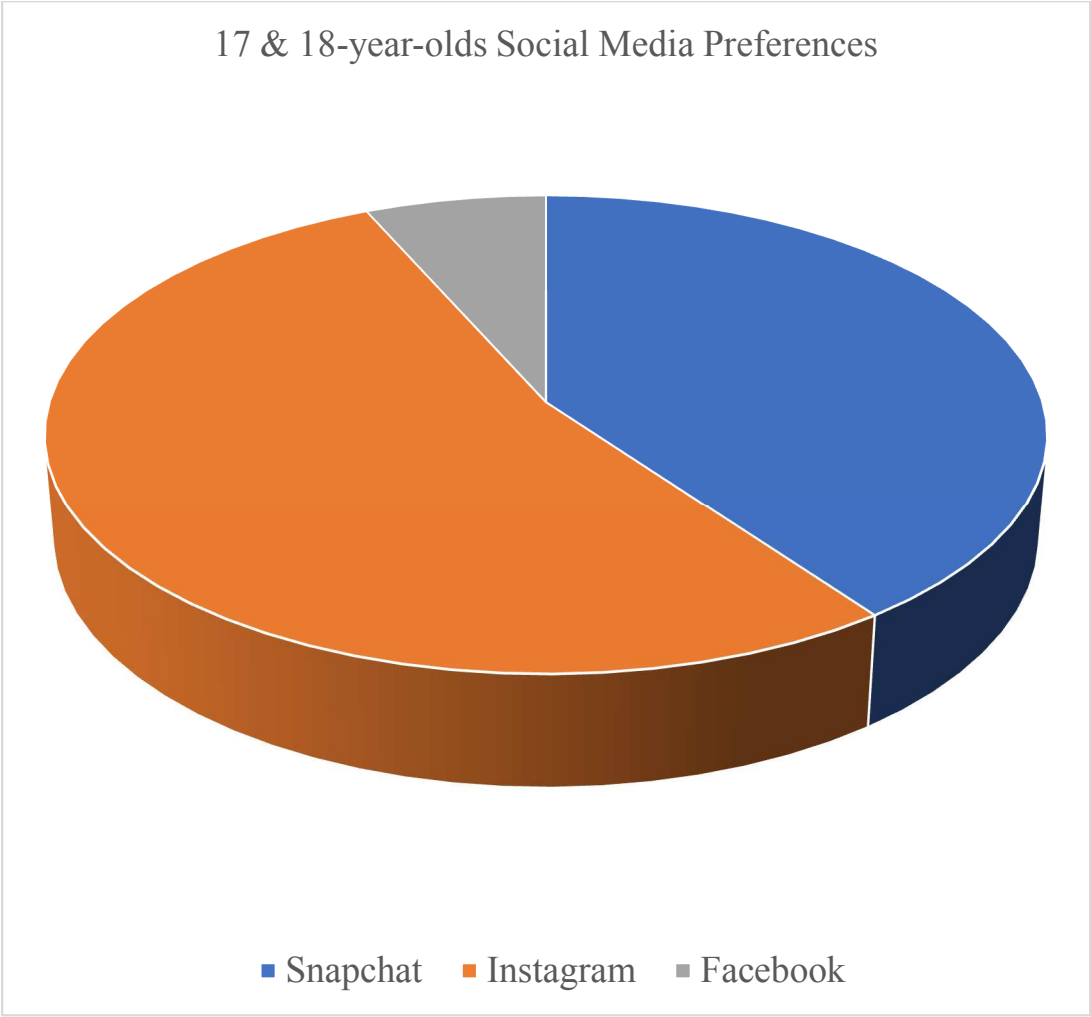


Table 1 Participants

WAITING TO CONNECT PARTICIPANTS

| Number | Pseudonym | School | Age | Ethnicity/Race |
|--------|-----------|--------|-----|----------------|
| 1      | Chelsey   | AHS    | 14  | W              |
| 2      | Charley   | AHS    | 16  | W              |
| 3      | Emma      | AHS    | 14  | W              |
| 4      | Lila      | AHS    | 17  | W/NA           |
| 5      | Lexi      | AHS    | 17  | W/NA           |
| 6      | Lily      | AHS    | 17  | W/NA           |
| 7      | Brettley  | AHS    | 13  | W/NA           |
| 8      | Abby      | AHS    | 14  | W/NA           |
| 9      | CJ        | AHS    | 13  | NA             |
| 10     | Reece     | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 11     | Kar       | JTS    | 18  | W/NA           |
| 12     | Annie     | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 13     | Nikki     | JTS    | 18  | W              |
| 14     | Britt     | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 15     | Zoe       | JTS    | 18  | W              |
| 16     | Daisy     | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 17     | Nena      | JTS    | 17  | H              |
| 18     | JJ        | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 19     | Nicole    | JTS    | 17  | AA             |
| 20     | Marley    | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 21     | Kaylee    | JTS    | 17  | W              |
| 22     | *Sonny    | JTS    | 18  | W              |
| 23     | Jenny     | JTS    | 15  | W              |
| 24     | Kylie     | JTS    | 15  | W              |
| 25     | Victoria  | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 26     | Sophia    | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 27     | Delaney   | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 28     | Sarah     | JTS    | 16  | W/NA           |
| 29     | Rachel    | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 30     | Maggie    | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 31     | Ella      | JTS    | 16  | W              |
| 32     | Desiree   | GHS    | 14  | H/W            |
| 33     | Tatum     | GHS    | 16  | H              |
| 34     | Ruby      | GHS    | 16  | H              |
| 35     | Angel     | AHS    | 14  | AA             |
| 36     | Callie    | AHS    | 15  | AA             |

\*Sonny was removed from the study when a second interview was not possible.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

**irb@okstate.edu**

to coplon, lucy.bailey

Tue, Sep 25, 2018, 1:20 PM

Dear Donna Sharp,

The Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved the following protocol modification:

Protocol Number: ED-18-80

PI: Donna Sharp

Title: Waiting to Connect: In Pursuit of Belongingness and Connectedness Needs for Girls through Social Network Sites

Review Type: Expedited

You will find a copy of your Approval Letter in the generated documents section on IRBManager. Click [IRB - Modification](#) to go directly to the event page. Please click attachments in the upper left of the screen to access the approval letter. Stamped recruitment and consent documents can also be found in this location. Only the approved versions of these documents may be used during the conduct of your research.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.

Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period.

Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of the research; and

Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB office at 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

Best of luck with your research,

Sincerely,

Dawnett Watkins, CIP  
Whitney McAllister, MS

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Oklahoma State University  
Institutional Review Board  
Office of University Research Compliance  
223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078

Website: <https://irb.okstate.edu/>

Ph: 405-744-3377 | Fax: 405-744-4335 | [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

#### OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

**Title:** Waiting to Connect: Pursuit of Belongingness and Connectedness Needs for Teenage Girls through Social Network Sites

**Investigators:** Donna Coplon Sharp, M.S., Lucy E. Bailey, Ph.D., Oklahoma State University

**What to Expect:** Do you use social media sites? Do you use them with friends? Would you like to participate in an interview about your experiences using social media sites like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook? If so, I'd like to talk with you! I'm a former teacher and researcher who is interested in this subject. If you want to learn more about talking to me, talk with me after class! This study will take place at your school after classes or at another site and time that works for you.

Participation in this research will involve taking part in two interview sessions which will last approximately one hour each. The two interviews are in response to a list of questions; in the second interview I would like to look over social media sites together.

**Risks:** Risks are no greater than those encountered in daily life.

**Benefits:** You may gain an appreciation and understanding of how research is conducted.

**Your Rights and Confidentiality:** All information about you will be kept confidential and will not be released. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. Data will be destroyed three years after the study has been completed. Audio tapes will be transcribed and destroyed within one year of the interview.

**Contacts:** You may contact the researcher at the following address and phone numbers should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study: Donna Coplon Sharp, M.S. School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 918-724-6444 or Dr. Lucy E. Bailey, Social Foundations and Qualitative Inquiry, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-9194. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the IRB Coordinator, 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu).

**If you choose to participate:** Arrangements will be made to participate in the study after school in your school building or another convenient site. You can change your mind about participating in the study at any time and relate your decision to your school teacher or parent. The teacher or parent will relay the information to the me; your participation is completely voluntary. Your school standing will not be affected by your participation or lack of participation in this study.

## APPENDIX C

### SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVIEW 1 QUESTIONS

#### Likes/dislikes:

1. What is your favorite social media?
2. What do you really like about that social media? Do you have an example?
3. What are some of the things you dislike about that social media? Example?

#### Time Spent on Social Media:

4. How much time do you spend on social media each day? Could you describe a typical day's use of social media?
5. How do you feel about the amount of time you spend on social media?
6. Why do you choose to spend time on social media over other activities?
7. What do you think is the right amount of time spent on social media per day?

#### Who/How Many Social Media Contacts:

8. How many followers/contacts/friends do you have on social media? How do you feel about that number?
9. What percentage of your online followers/friends do you know in real life?

#### How does Social Media Affect/Gains from Social Media:

10. How does social media affect your social life? Do you have an example?
11. What is the most important thing you gain from your use of social media? Can you give me an example?
12. How does your use of social media allow self-expression? Do you have an example?
13. How do you feel after talking about your personal life on social media?
14. How do your followers/friends online give you support? What example can you give me?
15. How would you compare online friend support to in-person friend support?

#### Social Media Topics/Activities:



16. What is your most common subject for discussion on social media? What example can you give me?
17. What is the most common subject for posting/discussion on social media among your friends? Can you give me examples?
18. If I followed you through a typical day on social media, what would I see you doing?
19. If I were interacting with you on social media, what would I see you doing?

## APPENDIX D

### SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVIEW 2 QUESTIONS

In this interview we will talk about some topics related to your use of social media, and if you feel comfortable, we will look at some of your social media sites together.

#### Philosophical Questions:

1. What do you think of people who behave differently on social media than in life? Can you describe examples of that?
2. Some people have been concerned that teens spend too much time online. What do you think about that?
3. What are some of the good things that can happen online?
4. What do you think about drama created on social media?

#### Topics Questions:

1. What subjects do see discussed most on social media (e.g. friends, school)? What examples can you show me of friend discussions, or school?
2. What kind of social issues do you see discussed on social media. What example can you show me?
3. What important personal problems do you see discussed on social media?
4. What personal issues do you talk about on social media? How do friends respond? How do social media responses to personal issues make you feel?
5. Do you ever post about something that makes you feel proud? What was that like?
6. Do you see social media posts that make you uncomfortable? What example can you give me?

#### People with Whom You Interact:

1. Who are the primary people you interact with online (e.g. friends, family). Tell me about a few of those people.

2. Do you interact more with girls or guys online?
3. When you interact with friends online, how does it affect your relationship?
4. What type of interaction do you see most on social media? Tell me about some of those interactions.
5. What type of interaction do you join in the most? Tell me about joining in. What are some examples?
6. What sense of privacy do you have when you are on social media?

Friends/Relationships:

1. What kind of relationships do you see formed on social media?
2. What are your friends most likely to be doing on Snapchat (or Instagram or Facebook)?
3. What social media do you use when you want to reach out to a friend who is having a problem?
4. How do you respond to a friend whose social media post says they are very down?
5. How do you feel when a friend randomly sends you a silly face picture on social media?
6. What do others in your family know about your social media experiences?
7. Let's look at an example of a friend dressing up.
8. What do you think about the picture?
9. How does it make you feel when you look at a friend's picture on Instagram where she or he is all dressed up?
10. How realistic is the picture of your friend?
11. What is the overall tone or feeling of your Instagram (or Snapchat, Facebook, or Twitter) feed today?
12. How does going online to social media affect your mood?
13. Which social media are you most likely to use when you want to talk about problems?
14. Why do you choose Instagram over Snapchat (for instance), or Snapchat over Facebook?

Use/Visiting SNS Together:

1. Let's take a look at your \_\_\_\_\_ site. What is your user profile like? How do you describe yourself in your profile?
2. How does that profile match who you are? How does it differ? In other words, how "true" is your profile?
3. How do you play around with your identity online? How do your friends play around with their identities? Do you have an example?
4. How do you feel when you see someone's profile update or a post that doesn't seem "true" or "real"?
5. What is the importance of having "friends" or "followers" on social media? How do you feel about your number of followers?
6. What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

APPENDIX E

CODE NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Survey**

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  
2. Please the item that best describes your race/ethnicity. Check all that apply.  

|                        |                                       |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| _____ African American | _____ Asian American                  |
| _____ Hispanic/Latina  | _____ Native American                 |
| _____ White            | _____ Other, please specify:<br>_____ |
  
3. What grade are you in? (check one)  

|                             |                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| _____ 7 <sup>th</sup> Grade | _____ 10 <sup>th</sup> Grade |
| _____ 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade | _____ 11 <sup>th</sup> Grade |
| _____ 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade | _____ 12 <sup>th</sup> Grade |
  
4. What kinds of jobs do your parents/guardians have? Fill in the space next to PARENT with mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather, whatever is appropriate. Check all that apply.  

| PARENT 1 _____                           | PARENT 2 _____                           |
|--|--|
| _____ Professional (doctor, lawyer)      | _____ Professional (doctor, lawyer)      |
| _____ Educator                           | _____ Educator                           |
| _____ Engineer                           | _____ Engineer                           |
| _____ Sales                              | _____ Sales                              |
| _____ Technology                         | _____ Technology                         |
| _____ Welder/fabricator                  | _____ Welder/fabricator                  |
| _____ Medical (nursing, tech, assistant) | _____ Medical (nursing, tech, assistant) |
| _____ Accounting                         | _____ Accounting                         |
| _____ Homemaker                          | _____ Homemaker                          |
| _____ Unemployed                         | _____ Unemployed                         |
| _____ Other (specify) _____              | _____ Other (specify) _____              |

VITA

Donna Coplon Sharp

Candidate for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: Waiting to Connect: In Pursuit of Belongingness and Connectedness Needs for Girls through Social Network Sites

Major Field: Educational Psychology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctoral Program, Educational Psychology, May 2020, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science, Educational Psychology, specialization in Gifted Education, December 2009  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science, Sociology, December 1981, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK

Experience:

Assistant Professor, Bacone College, 2017 to present, Psychology, Sociology

Adjunct Instructor First Year Seminar, Bacone College, August 2015 – August 2017

International literacy education, St. John's Anglican School (Oklahoma State University literacy program), March 2016

Social Studies, Claremore High School, August 2005 – June 2015, Advanced Placement Psychology, Psychology, Sociology

Social Studies, Union High School, August 1993 – May 2005, Advanced Placement Psychology, Psychology

Social Studies, Union High School, August 1984- May 1988, U.S. History, World History, Political Science, Sociology