

**Growing Up in a Digitized World:  
Understanding Childhood Social Media Usage  
and Impacts on Identity Formulation in Emerging Adults**

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## **Abstract**

Rates of teen and childhood mental health disorders have been on a steady incline along with this rise of Web 2.0. To better understand this, we must look at affordances on social media that may disrupt our organic processes of socialization and self-definition. Therefore, I engaged in an intensive ethnographic study with the goal of answering a key research question: How has social media affected the way in which emerging adults in college have formed perceptions of themselves? Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? This study involved 7, 30-60 minute observations. I conducted 6, 15-56 minute interviews with Sonoma State students with varying levels of past and present social media usage, all between the ages of 20-26. These interviews sought to extract reflections from participants on their lived experiences growing up on social media.

The data collected from this study suggest that when made available to children, social media does, in fact, play a role in disrupting our organic processes of formulating identity. Participants indicated that the same affordances which attracted them to social media (building a personal profile, traversing “friends” profiles) were the same affordances which impacted processes of self-definition. Furthermore, I gathered that an increase in dependency on social media for validation and authenticity often resulted in a decrease in the quality of mental health and self-perceptions. Finally, participants made it clear that children are far more susceptible to the aforementioned disruptions of identity formulation, and the importance they assign to living up to social media norms and standards decreases significantly upon transition into adulthood.

# Introduction

## Background

I am interested in the formulation and management of identity as it takes place on social media, specifically in emerging adults. To understand social media's impact on the process in which young people form conceptions of themselves, I undertook an intensive interview study of Sonoma State University students between the ages of 20 and 26. Interviews with past, present and even non-social media users emphasized how social media culture has shaped how we develop and project both personal and collective identities. Using the ethnographic method and qualitative data analysis to understand the attitudes college students have towards their childhood social media experiences, I was able to answer the question: How has social media affected the way in which emerging adults in college have formed perceptions of themselves? Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? This question is important because it will give us a richer understanding of the socio psychological impacts social media has on developing brains, so we may decide from there whether or not it is something we want our children exposed to.

In my thesis, I first describe my research interest and its significance. Next, I situate my research interest in the sociological literature on 1) Identity and Affordances, 2) Identity as a Performance, and 3) Identity and Consumption. Third, I describe my approach to interviews with 6 participants, as well as my process of analysis using the qualitative method of grounded theory. Fourth, I present the results of my investigation of childhood experiences on social media. Finally, I discuss these results in the context of the sociological literature on Identity and Social Media, as well as classical sociological theories on identity development. I then offer a conclusion as well as directions for further research.

# Literature Review

## **Introduction**

I am interested in the ways in which growing social media usage has contributed to the ways in which young people form and manage their identities. I want to gain a deeper understanding of how different platform features may afford users with the ability to convene, share ideas and form both individual and collective identities in ways that may not be possible offline. Therefore, my research question is as follows: How has social media affected the way in which emerging adults have formed perceptions of themselves? Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? This question is important because its answer will identify the aspects of social media that disrupt our children's organic process of identity formation through socialization. While reviewing relevant literature, it is important to consider three main concepts— 1) Identity and Affordances, 2) Identity as a Performance, and 3) Identity and Consumption.

## **Identity and Affordances**

Each social media platform is equipped with different affordances which set them apart from one another. According to Ellison and Boyd (2007), a social networking site consists of three main affordances— the ability to create a “profile”, the ability to create a list of “friends” or “followers”, and the ability to traverse the profiles and friends lists of others. These three affordances have allowed for the digitization of the process in which we may form conceptions of ourselves over time. This is an interesting dynamic to observe. While the goal is to convey one's most authentic self, you are given total control over what you choose to show people, and the individuals on your “friends” list aren't necessarily your friends in real life. This is another important affordance to note— the ability to have total control over the performance given, or

the way one speaks or behaves (Adhikari 2015). Unlike real social interaction, social media affords the user time to deliberately and strategically construct and project their sense of self through posts, status updates, and comments. You aren't as subject to blunders or other undesirable social mistakes when you have all the time in the world to formulate a thought or response. In a study done by Shaurav Raj Adhikari (2015), a positive correlation was identified between sharing behaviors and self-monitoring behaviors. This indicates that heavy use of social media may increase the rate at which the individual is filtering undesirable parts of themselves and purposefully omitting them from their online persona.

Another important affordance to note is the ability to create groups based on specific interests or hobbies. We are able to convene and share ideas with one another at unprecedented rates, and this has had a substantial effect on the ways we form self perceptions. Reddit has become well known for these affordances, and have become a platform for many individuals with marginalized or deviant identities to have dialogues outside of the dominant social discourse (Smith et al. 2015). In a study done on pro-anorexic and fat-accepting spaces online, it was found that both groups were offered a sense of support, validation, and belonging that may have been hard to find elsewhere. Many sentiments shared with researchers conveyed that dominant discourse regarding people with their shared identities caused them great pain and difficulties in managing their marginalized identities (Smith et al. 2015). These spaces have "allow[ed] the self to be affirmed and witnessed by other members, which may assist in stabilizing an identity; something that may not be achieved through self-definition alone" (Smith et al. 2015). Being a part of a large group of people who face the same struggles as you was never possible on this same global scale before, and it has seemingly provided a major source of support and validation for these individuals. Additionally, the ability to create communities on social media

plays a role in the creation and maintenance of social movements. Along with the ability to share photos and links to different resources, these affordances have made it possible to assemble a movement and form collective identities (Khazraee and Novak 2019). It is easier for someone to get a hold of the world's attention with the visibility that social media provides, and it takes far less time and resources to gather a group and organize in-person assemblies or protests. Videos that are uploaded to social media now have the power to create whole movements in and of themselves, and the more people that see, the more likely there will be people who take action in some way.

### **Identity as a Performance**

Far before the existence of social media or technology, the ways in which we form our identities has heavily relied on employing dramaturgical tactics. Theories birthed by Erving Goffman on the presentation of the self can help us draw parallels between organic and digital methods of identity management. He argues that each individual (or “actor”) is constantly engaging in a performance in order for those around them (the “audience”) to perceive them in a specific way (Goffman 1959). We may speak or behave differently depending on where we are as if we are playing different roles, and we seek out positive responses from our audiences. Much like a theatrical performance, the way we would behave in certain social situations (onstage) is much different than if we were alone (backstage). (Goffman 1959).

To give an example in the context of social media, one would not construct their Facebook profile in the same way they would conduct their professional LinkedIn profile (van Dijk 2013). These performative strategies have a lot to do with impression management, or ironically, trying to appear authentic. These are precisely the socio-psychological needs that are satisfied by social media platforms— the need to project the most authentic version of oneself,

and the need to belong somewhere based on those authentic projections (Hughes et al. 2021). When we consider that performance is at the center of most every social interaction and projection of self offline, it becomes more clear what these affordances are seeking to address—the human urge to not only connect with, but make an impression on others. To make an analogy, our everyday interactions provide us with a stage to present ourselves to others, but social media allows us to broadcast our presentation of self on national television. Even if no one is interacting with our content, the possibilities for who is perceiving us on the other end are endless, resulting in the constant need to impress others with our performance.

Theorist George Herbert Mead advocates for the formulation of identity through a looking glass self. Our process of formulating attitudes towards ourselves heavily relies on how we think others are perceiving us. In *Mind, Self and Society*, he touches on the idea of the generalized other, and how they greatly influence our formulation of identity and the general social decision making we take part in (Mead 1934). On social media, this phenomenon of the generalized other is inflated from just the people we physically see in our lives, to practically anybody who is sitting behind a screen. Our sense of self is always up for debate when you are possibly subject to the judgment of millions of random people.

Through analyzing both classical sociological theory and contemporary studies, we can see that life on social media mirrors the performance aspect of face-to-face social interaction. Each of these aforementioned phenomena seem to be exacerbated on social media because of the visibility and accessibility to one another that the platforms afford the user.

### **Identity and Consumption**

Consumeristic behavior has long defined many developed countries since their industrialization. With the emergence of social networking sites, the way in which things are sold to us have taken on a different and often more subtle form.

Giovanna Russo (2012) identifies a relationship between identity, consumption and new technology. She cites it as an important relationship to understand if we would like to understand modern social interaction. She delves into the new consumer tactics that have been employed with the progression of social media. The participatory nature of social media has allowed for new ways to market and create social networks, and she argues that it has given people the ability to “maintain coherent yet continuously revised biographical narrative” (Russo 2012). Social media has provided fertile grounds for consumerist behavior, many users expressing their identity through consumerism (Russo 2012). They do not only create real modes of social participation, but also allow us to build and experience our identities (authentic or not) on multiple platforms. She enmeshes her concept of online consumerism with Goffman-like theories on the performative self, and argues that identities formed on social media are rooted in performative consumerism (Russo 2012, Goffman 1959). This has much to do with passing entertainment and fashion trends that are promoted almost as a necessity instead of a luxury. If we see enough people partaking in the newest product trend, we may begin to get a sense of FOMO (Fear of missing out), or the urge to identify with the same status as the generalized other. We are partaking in consumer behavior anytime we use a social media platform, as most will bombard your feed with advertisements and paid partnerships. Social media usage is consumption, as you are constantly consuming ideologies, opinions, and various lifestyles that will alter the perception of self and the surrounding world.



In a study done by Tien Wang (2017), it was found that these consumer behaviors on social media ('use' or 'purchase' behaviors) are widely dictated by our social identity, and these behaviors in turn reshape and reform our self identity. It is a type of dialectic, where we make consumer decisions and those decisions in turn shapes our identities (Wang 2017). Our consumer decisions as well as the information and content we post also shapes how and what products and ideas are sold back to us in return. It is almost as if every trend is capitalized on, and algorithms make advertisements extremely targeted and tailored to each specific individual. This goes to show that we are partaking in consumer behavior anytime we use a social media platform, as most will bombard your feed with advertisements and paid partnerships. Social media usage is consumption, as you are constantly consuming ideologies, opinions, and various lifestyles that will alter the perception of self and the surrounding world.

Since the development of algorithmic media, there has shown to be huge shifts in the marketing tactics that big corporations employ, especially for targeting teens and young adults. Rather than focusing on their tactics for marketing to people's purchases, it is more effective for corporations to establish consumer cultures, which consequently causes participants to develop consumer identities (Carah and Brodmerkel 2020). Brands have advertised in such a way that consumers attach somewhat of a "mythical quality" to these brand symbols (Carah and Brodmerkel 2020). This process is not in the narrow box that it used to be, and the different ways in which corporate subliminal messaging can appear in unassuming entertainment media are endless and often go unnoticed (Carah and Brodmerkel 2020). This has a subconscious yet substantial effect on the way we form our identities, especially young people who spent their most formative years being convinced that one must consume both products and media in order to actively participate in youth culture, or in order to make connections with people.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although there is a lot of rich data on the socio psychological impacts of social media on people, I was unable to find any studies that focused on the first generation of childhood social media users, and their attitudes towards their childhood experiences. Additionally, there is scarce data on how children internalize the marketing strategies and consumer ideologies that are glorified in these spaces. There's little to do with how children interact with and perceive their experiences on social media, versus how a young adult would. Although just a few years separate a child from a young adult, immense cognitive changes take place during that time that may change attitudes or behaviors, both online and offline. It is imperative that more data is collected on this.

## **Ethnographic Methods and Data Collection**

### **Topic of interest, research question & significance**

In my research, I will attempt to address the role social media plays in the formulation of identity. More specially, how has childhood social media consumption affected the way in which emerging adults in college have formed perceptions of themselves? Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? As some of the last people who will ever remember a time before smartphones and Web 2.0, this age group is a particularly interesting one to observe. Social media platforms have completely transformed the way in which we communicate with and relate to strangers, loved ones, and ourselves. While it can provide convenient ways to stay in touch with people, social media has created yet another facet for children to learn consumerist behaviors from extremely early ages. It is also fertile grounds for the projection of false realities and personas, often creating a sense of

inadequacy and facilitating the abandonment of authenticity. This is likely the reason for the skyrocket in depression, anxiety and suicide among teens and young adults.

### **Settings for Observations**

My methods of data collection will be strictly ethnographic, utilizing data from both in-depth interviews and observational research. My observations will all take place in the student center at Sonoma State and other areas that are centralized around the Student Center. More specifically, the lounge, SIP Coffee, the quad and the cafeteria. Observing here has been beneficial because it guarantees that a relatively high percentage of people will lie within my desired population age range, rather than observing somewhere off campus. As a student, I have easy access to this setting. Unlike other settings of observation, this public space will be easily accessible, as all students are welcome. It is easy to blend in and not look out of place while observing, and the environment is rich with peer conversation and other student life. Here, I stand in the (more often than not) extremely long line at SIP or pretend to study in the lounge and observe any interactions or body language that can be put in the context of my research interests. I can observe quick conversations and interactions of people walking by as well as longer conversations held by those sitting nearby. I will be focusing on behaviors that associate oneself with social media culture.

### **Target Population and Participant Selection**

For this study I am conducting 6 in-depth interviews. I will be utilizing two different kinds of non-probability sampling strategies. I will conduct a purposive sample, where I will use my judgment to select students who, based on my observations, possess the elements and behaviors that I am seeking to observe. In this case, desirable behavior for interviewees consists of indications of social media usage through the actual use of social media, use of social media

lingo, and displays of affiliation with social media culture (clothes, accessories, stickers, etc.). Ideally, they will behave, speak, and present themselves as someone who is somewhat up to date with current social media trends. I will keep a lookout for conversation topics and language that have been popularized on social media, and approach the people I feel give me the clearest indication of these things.

There will also be elements of a quota sampling strategy in my data collection. As of last school year, SSU is made up of 64% female and 36% male students. Furthermore, 48% are white, 29% are Hispanic, 5% are Asian, and 2% are black (Sonoma State University Demographics and Diversity, 2021). I will try to choose a sample that is best representative of these demographics of my target population.

### **Approaching Participants for Interview**

When asking potential participants if they are interested in participating in an interview, I approach them politely, greet them and introduce myself. I ask them if they had a minute to talk in case they were busy or in a hurry. I would introduce my research on social media and identity, and ask them if they would be interested in participating in a 30-60 minute interview. If the conversation continues, I would share information regarding confidentiality with them, as well as discuss a setting for the interview. I must prepare to approach more than double the amount of potential participants than I need for my research, as I am counting on a decent amount of people rejecting my request.

### **Interview Process**

The ideal interview will last around 45-60 minutes and be no less than 30 minutes. Respondents will be informed about the goals of the study and their rights to confidentiality prior to the interview. I will also gain their consent to audio record the interview so I can better listen

to what they have to say and keep a conversational flow. My interview guide consists of 7 essential start, middle and ending questions that can be reviewed in Appendix A. The beginning questions aim to acquire a basic understanding of how the individual has situated themselves with social media, both currently and when they were younger. The answers they provide for my starting questions will largely shape the direction of the remainder of the interview. The middle and ending question will ask respondents to reflect on these experiences and how they have shaped their attitudes towards themselves and others. The primary guide and the bulk of my guiding questions will be pulled directly from the responses of the Demographic Questionnaire, that have been filled out and submitted to me by participants beforehand. The questionnaire can be located in Appendix B of this study.

These interviews and the integrity of my data will heavily rely on honest and thoughtful answers from the respondents. Therefore, the layout of my guiding questions will have to elicit natural, comfortable and flowing conversation. Many of my questions will revolve around topics that aren't often discussed in everyday conversation, so it is important to make sure the respondent not only feels comfortable to share the intimate details of their personal life with me, but also given ample time to think through some of the deeper questions.

Since I plan for all of my interviews to occur remotely, there are a few technical aspects that are important to consider. I will have to ensure that all of my devices are fully charged, as the interview and data collection relies on them. I will use my phone to contact the participants and my laptop to audio record each one. I am using Otter.ai to transcribe my in-depth interviews. All documents and transcripts pertaining to each participant are safely stored on my laptop, which is password protected.

### **Memoing and Revisions to Observational Scope Interview Guide**

After each observation, interview, and writing session pertaining to this research, I will utilize a memoing strategy in order to analyze my data and reflect on issues and possible solutions. This is a good structured way to reflect on my methods of research and constantly improve to extract richer data in my future observations or interviews. This process not only helps me examine my methods, but the quality of the data I extract. If I find that the focus of my observational scope is not providing very rich data, I may decide to tweak it a little bit and focus on different aspects or details of the interactions I witness. Comparing jottings to finalized field notes have really highlighted what I need to do better in observing and jotting in the moment. Similarly, I will have to re-examine my interview guide once I begin conducting the interviews. After the first couple interviews, I will be able to reflect on them and decide if there's any questions that didn't provide rich data, or if there's another question that needs to be added.

### **Ethical Dilemmas and the Rights of Participants**

As a Sonoma State student myself, I am a member of my target community and have easy access to all settings and persons of interest. As I am working with adult students who are in college and not with vulnerable populations, it will be far easier to conduct the research in a way that is ethical. Nevertheless, there are a few critical ethical considerations I must make before undergoing this ethnographic research. I must ensure no psychological harm is done to participants. I must respect their right to refuse answering a question and avoid questions that target people's traumas. Participants also have a right to understand the study they are a part of, and to not be deceived to think otherwise. I also must ensure that each participant understands their right to confidentiality of the data they provide. To ensure confidentiality, I will give each participant an identifying number that will link them to their data. This means I will be the only one able to link their data to them.

# Results

## **Coding and Data Analysis Methods**

Throughout the process of my data collection, I underwent multiple methods of memoing and coding in order to identify patterns and put the raw data into the context of my research question. When I first undertook interviews and observations, much of my memoing was troubleshooting to see what went well and what could be improved upon. This helped me solidify settings of observation and tactics for collecting richer data from interviewees. At the end of each observation and interview, I reflected on the data I collected and put it in the context of my research question, and reflected on any new or interesting themes that were brought up. I reflected on the implications of the sentiments shared with me, and through repeated memoing I was able to identify the most common themes in order to start developing codes for my data. I eventually solidified 3 main themes to use for coding: Affordances, Affiliation and Authenticity. I began engaging in a priori coding of each interview and field observation under the aforementioned themes. This allowed me to compartmentalize my data in order to present my findings and conclusion in an organized fashion. I also engaged in some open coding for my interviews, as I noted some additional important components that were being repeatedly brought up upon continued data analysis. Identifying these themes through qualitative analysis allowed me to arrive at a set of empirical generalizations about my population of interest.

## **Grounded Theory**

For this study, I am engaging in a grounded theory method that has allowed me to arrive at my empirical generalizations. As outlined by Kathy Charmaz (2006), it is imperative that grounded theorists analyze themselves, their biases and methods from a removed and unbiased standpoint. As it requires that we engage in qualitative coding methods rather than statistical

analysis, it is important that the lense being used to record and analyze data is as neutral as possible (Charmaz 2006). I engaged in this while formulating my interview guide and questionnaire, as I didn't want my means of data collection to be tainted by any biases I have, or for my questions to be driven by my own personal experiences. This was important to consider during my observations as well. It is easy to take normal parts of student life for granted, especially when you are also a student there. But I had to consciously work to ensure that no detail was being taken for granted.

### **Themes and Empirical Generalizations**

Through the use of grounded theory and ethnographic research methods, I was able to identify the overarching theme of my data, as well as arrive at three empirical generalizations. The overarching theme of my data is as follows: **Social media plays a role in forming people's self perceptions, particularly as a child.** The three guiding themes that I identified through data analysis helped me conceive of my three generalizations. The first is that people choose to participate in social media to maintain and display connections with others and express themselves. The second generalization is that as an individual's dependence on social media as a source of validation and authenticity increases, adverse effects on self esteem and self perception increase as well. Lastly, as individuals enter early adulthood, the importance they assign with the upkeep of their social media identity decreases significantly. I will explore each of these generalizations in further detail in the following paragraphs, where I review the findings from my ethnographic research.

### **Affordances**

When users make an account on social media, they are afforded with an array of different features that facilitate connections with one another. Each platform is equipped with different



sets of affordances which set them apart from one another, providing a somewhat unique user experience. Throughout my interviews and observations, I noted many affordances that are valued by users for their practical purpose. Some participants indicated that they value messaging applications that allow them to easily communicate with the ones in their circle. Others appreciate the ability to meet over video chat through Zoom, as well as LinkedIn for the ways it can facilitate potential career networking connections. While these affordances serve practical purposes, many other platforms utilize affordances that attempt to satisfy more existential desires about formulating one's "ideal" identity.

In every social interaction, everyone is trying to be perceived in a certain way, and this stays true for the social media world. In fact, some platforms incorporate affordances that help users have ultimate control over the way they are perceived. Troy Howard is a 22 year old black student at SSU, who is a casual scroller on social media and rarely posts content. He shared the feature that initially attracted him to social media:

"Honestly, being able to create a space that's all about me. My first one was MySpace when I was like six. And I remember having, like, I forgot what the song is... oh, 'Crank That' by Soulja Boy was my background sound on Myspace. I remember, everyone's like, "Oh, we have cool backgrounds and stuff! And we can make friends online and stuff! Oh, that's so cool!" (Interview 1- Troy Howard, 22, 040322)

The ability to create and broadcast your interests and persona seems to be a huge selling point for the use of social media. SNS's became an unprecedented way for people to assert control over the impressions they give off— something we are not afforded with in the real world. Participant Evie Richardson is a 26 year old white student who is pursuing her Associates degree at SSU. She often uses social media, but doesn't create any content. She shared some thoughts with me about this particular affordance:

“On social media, you kind of get to put your best foot forward, or at least you have the choice to. And I think, more times than not, somebody's going to want to put their best foot forward and not necessarily show all of the boring aspects of their everyday life. You probably want to be perceived as, like, more exciting, and there's more happening and that you're happy and maybe living this great life. And you want others to perceive you that way.” (Interview 2- Evie Richardson, 26, 042122)

This insightful comment gives a better understanding of how this affordance of time can lead to self-monitoring sharing behaviors. It sheds light on how one's self esteem may be affected as a result of the ability to show others what we want to be perceived as, in constant hopes that they will perceive us in that same way.

Another crucial affordance that defines a social networking site is the ability to traverse the profiles of other users. Many sites have the option to keep your profile private, or restricted to a group of “friends” or “followers”. The ability to see what others are up to facilitates social learning in a way we haven't been able to experience in the past. You no longer have to engage in actual social interaction in order to acquire knowledge on what is socially acceptable or popular, as now you can simply scroll through someone's profile and learn in a controlled environment.

During one of my observations, I noted a conversation between two young women who were studying in the student lounge. They were both leaning in to look at one of their phones, and they were scrolling through another girl's social media profile. Almost in disbelief, one of the girls ponders, “Look how thick she is! Like, how?!”. By calling her “thick”, she is complementing this individual on her curvy physique. Her tone was not bitter, but the way she asked “how” indicates a desire to look like that person in some capacity. This displays how the ability to view the accounts of others allows individuals to more easily compare and contrast

themselves with one another, and formulate perceptions of themselves and how they should be and what they should look like in the process (Observation 4, 042022)

Another affordance to note is the ability to remain anonymous while perusing certain online spaces. Evie shared her thoughts with me on her preference to remain anonymous most of the time while using social media:

“Um, there's a lot of, if you're familiar with Reddit, a lot of subreddits. So like, whatever you're interested in, there's guaranteed a page for it. And I just like to scroll and remain anonymous, I don't post and so I just like to read about things. And whatever my interests are, I can see what other people in those groups are doing. So I can stay informed with whatever my interests are.” (Interview 2- Evie Richardson, 26, 042122)

Evie's comments encapsulated the appeal of remaining anonymous online. Many choose to peruse platforms such as Reddit anonymously in order to acquire knowledge based on their specific interests without having to build an online persona. Many users do not intend on producing content during their time on social media, which is another reason one may decide to remain anonymous. Despite the absence of the projection of ideal identities, even those who are mostly anonymous on social media have still noted the effects that social media culture has had on them.

## **Affiliation**

### **Affiliation with Social Status**

Since the birth of Web 2.0, youth culture has been mostly driven by trends created and popularized on social media platforms. Being a social media user began to feel like something that was of intrinsic social value. To participate in social media is to participate in youth culture, and vice versa. Missing out on that as a young person is often not desirable, so in an attempt to fit in and find a sense of belonging, many tend to project their affiliations with different

components of social media usage. 20 year old Daisy Peterson is a white, second year student at SSU who is an active user on social media, but not as active as when she was younger. We discussed the importance she assigned to following various social media norms, and she had this to say:

“When I was like, younger, I thought it was more important to kind of go with the flow and like, do what other people were doing. Like on social media, and I guess, just also in real life, like I wanted to be, I wanted to feel like I was kind of like, in the mainstream and like, I always have feelings of like, wanting to be in like, the popular group when I was younger. And then that just like, didn't happen.” (Interview 6- Daisy Peterson, 20, 1043022)

Daisy was not the only participant to express these sentiments, and it shows how young social media users tend to hop on current trends in order to identify and connect with one another. This process in turn shapes our self perception and creates a sense of collective identity among the users.

During my observations, I also observed countless T-shirts, stickers and phone cases that attempted to display an affiliation with certain social media trends. I saw a T-shirt with the infamous “Salt Bae” meme, hairstyles popularized on TikTok, and countless trendy laptop and waterbottle stickers. Individuals do this to assert their social status as a social media user. It is a way of showing others that they do participate in youth culture and are updated on the latest trends in an attempt to be perceived in that specific way.

#### Affiliation with Consumer Identities

Another way individuals may assert their social identity on social media is through the pursuit of consumer identities. Consumerism is a crucial component to the maintenance of social media spaces. Passing trends often promote the newest clothes, makeup, cars, gadgets and technology. It is difficult to affiliate with components of social media and successfully assert your social

status without engaging in consumer behavior. Reflecting on the ways in which he has compared himself to others on social media in the past, Troy shared that:

“I remember when I was a kid, I would always compare who had the better video games on social media. People would post like, “Oh, I got the ps3.” “Oh, I got an Xbox 360”. I didn't get any of that stuff until I was 14 or 15. And it was weird to think about it, because it was just like, “dang, I wish I had that”. I would compare myself like, “Maybe I’m poor?”, but I wasn't a poor kid... It was one of those things where I would beg my mom like “Can we get a console? He has a console!” (Interview 1- Troy Howard, 22, 040322)

This quote is a perfect example of the way consumer behaviors are instilled in child social media users from an extremely early age. Troy's inability to acquire the newest console that all his friends were posting about led him to question his family's financial security. This may be because these consumer trends are promoted not as a luxury, but a *necessity*. These marketing tactics work on adults, but children are especially susceptible to them, as they are more easily influenced.

### Deciding to not Affiliate

Aside from affiliating with different groups, persons, or ideologies, it is important to note the way in which we form conceptions of ourselves through deciding to disassociate from people who do not align with our ideal identities. Throughout the course of my observations, I witnessed multiple occasions of a pair or group of friends coming together to assign another individual a certain identity, therefore setting themselves apart from that individual and reinforcing their own sense of self in the process.

I witnessed a conversation between two female friends studying in the student lounge. They began talking about a guy that they both seemed to mutually know. “No he’s so gross.” says one girl. Her friend then pulled out her phone, presumably to show her a text or post from

this guy. They both leaned over her phone to see what this guy had said or posted. She was using her hands a lot while talking about the subject, she seemed very passionate and a little angry. The other girl's jaw started to drop after her friend recited this seemingly controversial message. Each time she read out one of his messages, her friend's hand flew up to cover her mouth, her demeanor displaying more disbelief with each one. They said things like “That’s so out of pocket” and “The f\*\*\*ing audacity!”. This is a good example of how connections made on social media are negated based on what people choose to project, and how we use this to solidify our standings with the morals and ideologies we want to identify with (Observation 6, 042522).

Another conversation I observed in SIP coffee shop at SSU displayed the same process. Two females waiting for their coffee were huddled together over one of their phones. At one point during their hushed conversation, I heard one of them say, “I didn’t realize she was like *that* until I saw this...”. This leads me to believe that the individual in question has posted something controversial or scandalous on social media. As a result, these young women are assigning this individual a deviant identity, once again reassuring themselves of their own standing with their perceived identities (Observation 2, 032822).

Conversations such as these ones seem to serve a crucial purpose in the process of using social media to negate and formulate ideal identities. These observations highlighted the way in which we tend to compartmentalize people that do not align with our own morals or ideologies in order to set them apart from ourselves. Social media gives us a whole other dimension that is separate from physical reality to make judgements and define people based on what they do and say.

Affiliation with Social Media Language

Another important aspect to note is the use of language and social media lingo that is used to affiliate oneself with the social media culture. Throughout my seven observations, I noted a wide array of popular video and meme references used in casual conversation. All six interview participants indicated that themselves or the people around them use lingo, jokes, or references from social media platforms as a way to relate and connect with one another. Troy shared that:

“A lot of my friends and I, we always use a lot of lingo from TikTok. And reference it a lot more than I like to express, it’s weird. Like, we’ll be talking to each other. And we’ll be like, ‘Oh, that’s not P though’. Like what? I remember figuring that out, like what does that even mean?”  
(Interview 1- Troy Howard, 22, 040322)

In this quote, we can see the process in which Troy acquired social knowledge from the people in his circle in order to stay up to date with current social media trends and lingo. This is another way we affiliate ourselves with social media culture during our everyday interactions with our peers and loved ones. We make it known to others through verbal communication that we participate in youth culture, as it may make it easier to relate and connect with others.

### **Authenticity**

Throughout my interviews, many different sentiments were shared with me regarding authenticity as it relates to social media. Most participants acknowledged that most people tend to not display their authentic selves on social media, with varying levels of concern regarding this observation. Some of the more negative attitudes towards the way people tend to portray themselves and their lives were displayed by 3 participants. Rowan Kim, a 24 year old Asian male who transferred from SSU, used to be an active poster and scroller on social media, but has recently decided to delete all of his accounts and cease his usage almost completely. He believes that the trends and norms promoted on social media are a recipe for phoniness and the projection

of false realities, and that it greatly hinders our own pursuit of success and self. We discussed how phoniness manifests in people's behavior on social media, and he shared this thought with me:

“An indicator’s like, if you post something but you're posting because everyone likes it. And that's just being fake to yourself... I start seeing people post like Ferraris in all these music videos, like all this is fake. You're being fake with yourself, it kills like your whole spirit. You became part of those trends of like, oh, you had to do it because this person did it.” (Interview 4- Rowan Kim, 24, 1042222)

Rowan displayed one of the more cynical attitudes towards the way in which people tend to present themselves online. This reflection shows that the perceived “fakeness” of overwhelmingly popular social media trends has worn on this individual, and likely many others as well. This realization of pervasive phoniness in online spaces is what eventually led Rowan to cut social media out of his life completely.

There were a few less cynical, but still skeptical, sentiments that were shared with me by two other participants. When discussing how to portray one’s “true self” on social media, Evie explained:

“You don't want to necessarily make a page that isn't who you actually are. I know that I mean, people will post stuff about yourself or your life that might be happening, that maybe it's something positive. But if you only post the positive things, you're not necessarily reflecting who you truly are. Even though you want others to like, perceive you that way. It's kind of like a catch 22.” (Interview 2- Evie Richardson, 26, 042122)

Participant Alina Ross is a 21 year old female student at SSU who chose not to disclose her racial identity. She has never participated in social media. She shared similar sentiments as Evie, and expressed that:



“When I like, see my friends' social media profiles and stuff, I feel like there's a lot of filtering. And when I say filtering, I mean, like, people share, like, things that are going good. Which I think is nice. You know, like, if you're on your phone and you see your friend is like, graduating from school or something. Like, it's cool to get to see their accomplishments. I also wish that like people, showed, like, if they were comfortable, like, um, the harder parts of life too. And building a social media profile that like, reflects that completely.” (Interview 5- Alina Ross, 24, 043022).

While these two aren't as cynical about the overall authenticity of social media profiles, they still question how the projection of only the good things happening in one's life can be harmful to developing minds and the expectations they set for themselves. It can create a sense of an unrealistic and false reality that young people tend to compare themselves to.

### **Reflections on Childhood Social Media Usage and Mental Health**

Although not every interview participant used social media as a child, there were still notable influences, regardless of level of usage, on each individual as a result of growing up in a world overrun by social media. Throughout each interview, there was a common theme of expressed sadness and concern when discussing children using social media. Evie, who is the oldest participant and was able to experience more of her childhood without the existence of social media, shared her thoughts on current generations of children immersed in social media:

“It kind of feels like they're being cheated out of a childhood. And that, they'll just, they'll never know what it's like to not have social media and not be on social media, unless they like choose to not participate in it. But like, if you don't, you're kind of like a social outcast. And people are like, ‘Well, what's wrong with you?’” (Interview 2- Evie Richardson, 26, 042122)

As young adults, these participants have all seemed to have had some time to reflect on their experiences growing up in a world engulfed by social media, and the ways it has shaped them.

Most participants expressed that they once invested a great deal of time and energy into building a social media persona that would fit with social standards and invite real connections, but

learned during their transition into adulthood that it actually may have done more harm than good. Consider another sentiment shared with me by Evie:

“My overall experience, I would say, is probably negative. It definitely can take its toll on my self esteem, seeing what other people my age are up to, if they make posts where they seem like they are, like, happier than you. I tend to like compare. But I would say it was probably worse when I was younger. But as I've gotten older, you're kind of able to see through the facade.” (Interview 2- Evie Richardson, 26, 042122)

Considering that most participants have either slowed or completely stopped their social media activity as they got older, it becomes clear that children are highly susceptible to trends, norms, and expectations that are promoted in online spaces. Growing up in a time where it is the norm to participate in the virtual world, it seems these individuals have been impacted to some degree by standards set on social media, regardless of the levels of usage.

In the demographic questionnaire, participants were asked to rate the state of their mental health since participating in social media. Out of the 6 participants, three indicated that their mental health has been “not great”, one indicated that it has been “bad”, and the other two had neutral answers. While I did not ask them to elaborate in the intensive interview, many were kind enough to open up about the ways in which their mental health suffered as a result of trying to project or manage their identities on social platforms. Participant Ananya is a 23 year old Latinx SSU student who is a casual social media scroller and occasional poster. She shared her struggles with body image as a result of comparing herself to others on her feed:

“I always had really bad body image issues growing up. And I've just kind of like, really, like, these past years, I've been trying to come to terms with how my body is and like, how, and I feel like, more self love, you know? You see a lot of people on Instagram, who, like have, like, they looked like they had everything figured out. And it kind of made me feel small.” (Interview 3- Ananya Ortiz, 23, 042222)

Another similar comment was shared with me by Daisy when I asked her to reflect on the pressure she felt to conform to norms and trends on social media as a child:

“When I was in middle school, it definitely was something that I cared about a lot. Like, I was very concerned with, like, what other people thought of me and like how other people perceive me. And I think that led to a lot of anxiety. And like, I don't know, I always felt like people were like judging me. I wasn't like this enough or that enough. And I just really wanted to, like, feel like, everyone liked me kind of. And so that, like, stressed me out a lot.” (Interview 6- Daisy Peterson, 20, 1043022)

These two reflections speak volumes about the ways in which people are made to feel ostracized when they don't live up to beauty or lifestyle standards that are being plastered all over popular media. As children, these two individuals were subject to an environment that had little to no representation of people who look or act like them. Lack of representation has proven to be a major component in the feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and other mental disorders experienced by the misrepresented. It is also problematic because the celebrities that are glorified on social media have nothing in common with the vast majority of the population, giving young people a false sense of inadequacy. Children see these images of picture perfect, photoshopped models and rich celebrities with lavish lifestyles and think that's what they should look like, or what they should be doing. Instead of worrying about being a kid, a sense of hyper self-awareness is thrust upon them, consequently instilling body image and self-esteem issues at extremely young ages.

## **Discussion**

### **Situating Findings in Sociological Literature**

After engaging in 6, 15- 56 minute interviews and 7, 30-60 minute observations of people who use or affiliate with social media, I was able to answer my research question: How has social media affected the way in which emerging adults have formed perceptions of themselves?

Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? With affordances such as creating and traversing profiles, social media has introduced an unprecedented way in which we use each other in order to build perceptions of ourselves.

Most of the people I have interviewed have shown that they began their social media journey as a way to nurture and display authentic connections with people and express themselves. Participant responses on what attracted and kept them on social media largely aligned with Ellison and Boyd's (2007) definition for an SNS. Individuals built their own persona, displayed their lists of connections and traversed the profiles of others, with the expectation of a casual, authentic, interactive experience. These needs often went unsatisfied after prolonged usage throughout their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. According to my data, this may be because they may have actually had to abandon their authenticity at times in order to acquire a sense of belonging and to participate in a socially normal way on SNS's.

Every participant who was kind enough to share their mental health or self-esteem struggles with me cited phoniness or unrealistic standards on social media as a main reason. Each social media user indicated that they had to learn, with time, that trying to assimilate to different aspects of social media culture/ standards did not bring about happiness or fulfillment. Quite the contrary— they indicated that their perceptions of themselves and their lives suffered immensely. Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory on identity as a performance encapsulates this process of presenting ourselves for the benefit of others. When engaged in their respective communities, individuals tend to “engender in those among whom he finds himself” (Goffman 1959). My data shows the way in which people may undergo this process through the lens of

social media. Throughout the world's transition to Web 2.0, it is as if our performances grew from a small audience (the people we encounter daily) to a seemingly infinite audience (those sitting behind a screen). As the performance aspect of identity is intensified on social media, there is a sense of hyper self-awareness shown in my data, and it seems to cause immense emotional distress to children who participate. We perform our different identities and embody different roles depending on context, but we feel much more pressure and importance in putting on a good show when the possibilities for who could be watching are endless.

We tend to showcase and represent our affiliations with social media and consumer culture with the way we present ourselves, both on and offline (Carah and Brodmerkel 2020). It isn't about one or two products being sold to us, it is about consumer identities being a prerequisite for participation in social media culture, or youth culture. Consumer culture tells us how we must think and act in order to display our affiliations with social media in the way that we want. These affiliations are regarded as intrinsically positive ones to have—ones that appeared to help individuals fit in and avoid being a social pariah. To participate in deliberate displays of affiliation is to abandon authenticity, in a sense. However, Goffman (1959) argues that “realness” is intrinsically a facade. Regardless, data showed that with a lack of self and emotional fulfillment from social media often comes realizations and redefinitions of what true authenticity looks like, and redefinitions of what is truly important in life.

While every participant indicated a high level of importance in being true to oneself, many comments were made regarding different contexts in which it is passable/ normative to be inauthentic. This data is reinforced by the study done by Jose van Dijck (2013), in which he showed the ways sites like Facebook and Linked In both serve as facets to shape one's personal and professional identity. Both of these aspects of identity, as manifested on social media in these

conflicting contexts, become deeply performative. This dramaturgical process is often under the guise of someone's authentic self, causing harm to not only young viewers, but the individual as well. This is precisely what was shown to me in my data— different behaviors and presentations of self are expected on each varying social media site. It was indicated to me that the responsibility of the user to be authentic on social media completely depends on the platform or context for use. Participants reflected that most users on photo sharing sites often choose to post only the good things about their lives, and many showed concern for the implications of this. But when it came to discussing Linked In (a professional setting) and other sites like Reddit (where you are afforded anonymity), inauthenticity became not only tolerated, but the social norm.

It was interesting to see the way that each participant was able to articulate the way social media has warped their sense of self from extremely young ages. Many participants indicated that filtering behavior displayed by others often caused them to hold themselves to unrealistic standards. This coincides with George Herbert Mead's (1934) theories on impression management. Though we are subject to this in real social interaction, self monitoring behavior is amplified in these online spaces where it is socially normal for people to omit every struggle from their life and only post the good things. While this seems manageable for an adult to process, children seem to take what they see on social media at face value, which is devastating to their development of self.

Although many common themes were shared among these participants, they all expressed, in some capacity, that social media no longer holds the same weight or importance as it once did to them as a kid. Based on a culmination of responses, these young adults have had time to really reflect on their motivations for participating in social media, as well as the effects it may have had on their developing brains. The lack of existing data on these reflections that

were shared with me shows how much work we have to do with making sure our children grow up in an environment where they feel emotionally and mentally safe.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of my study is that it was limited to young adults who have had access to higher education through Sonoma State University. This leaves out a huge portion of emerging adults— my target population. Many young adults who were impacted by social media have chosen not to pursue or have not had access to higher education. Additionally, my status as a Sonoma State student as well as a past and present social media user required me to check my own implicit biases, something that proved to be quite difficult at times. Regardless of this limitation, I consciously worked to make sure I wasn't imposing any of my experiences or presumptions onto my data collection and analysis, and to separate myself from any pre-existing opinions or emotions I have on this subject. This was also important for me to consider while crafting my interview guide. I revised my guide after my first interview, as I realized through memoeing that I may have been unintentionally leading the participant to a specific response.

Additionally, time proved to be a limitation for this study. Since we had the semester to finish this study, we were constrained in our sampling and data collection methods. If more time had been allotted, a lot more rich data would have been collected to support the already existing evidence I presented in this study.

Furthermore, my research was limited as a result of all of my interviews taking place remotely, either over the phone or via Zoom audio. As a result, I was not able to take note of participant body language or other visual factors— elements that could really add to the richness of the interview data I collected.

Although this research had its limitations, I was still able to gather sufficient evidence that social media does play a crucial role in how young people develop their sense of self and identify the affordances that facilitated this phenomenon.

### **Potential Application**

My research clearly identifies a problem in the way young people, specifically children, interact with and internalize social media. It shows how the consumer culture created in these online spaces hinders our ability to form self-perceptions in a constructive way. One way we could apply this research to the real world is to reexamine the ethics of advertising to children on social media. I could make a case for the reevaluation of advertisements in general, but children are the most susceptible to them so we will keep our focus there. Advertising campaigns are getting hard to distinguish from regular posts, and campaigns like this create trends that people cling to in order to affiliate with that culture. It's time to come to terms with the reality that social media culture promotes consumption over anything else, and exposing children to this consequently conditions them to identify with consumer culture from extremely young ages.

I also think that my research shows an extreme naivety in children's expectations for their experiences on social media. I tried not to take this observation for granted, because while it may be obvious that naivety comes with being a child, we still give our children open access to the Internet without informing them on what they might encounter. If it continues to be the status quo for children to consume social media, I believe it is imperative that we educate them on the implications of the experiences they will inevitably have. It seemed like not a single one of my participants had someone there to guide them through their experience, or tell them they're doing okay regardless of what other people are posting. This may very well be because social media was new and no one really understood the impacts of it. Now, we have data to show exactly what



it does to young minds so we should take responsibility and not allow future generations of children to suffer from feelings of inadequacy as a result of social media consumption.

If nothing else, I hope that my research will give parents and guardians some valuable knowledge that they can use to make informed decisions about their children's access to social media. I also hope that young adults who are a part of this population of childhood social media users will see this study and feel validated in their unprecedented and underreported experiences as part of the first generation of children exposed to a digital world.

## **Conclusions**

The goal of this research was to answer a central research question: How has social media affected the way in which emerging adults have formed perceptions of themselves? Which mechanisms and affordances featured on popular social media platforms have facilitated this phenomenon? I engaged in ethnographic methods of data collection, incorporating data from 6 interviews and 7 field observations. I was able to better understand the lived experience of casual social media users, and get a sense of how it has shaped them throughout their development.

After analyzing the collected data using qualitative coding methods, it became clear that one does not have to be an influencer, post any content, or participate in social media at all in order for their processes of forming self perceptions and socialization to be impacted by it. Three dominant themes prevailed throughout my data, and from those themes I was able to arrive at three empirical generalizations. Affordances such as the ability to create profiles and friend lists attract young users who are trying to express themselves and display their pre-existing connections. After prolonged usage, individuals undergo many instances of social learning, whether it is from observing others or a mistake they made. From these lessons come the urge to

deliberately affiliate themselves with social media culture and norms. This alignment with what is socially desirable and abandonment of authenticity results in a decrease in positive self-perceptions and quality of mental health. Furthermore, individuals who undergo the aforementioned process as children will reassess the importance of associating with social media culture during their transition to young adulthood, and are generally less susceptible to the pressure to conform to online norms and standards once they are older. Finally, I provided some suggestions for potential application of the data I collected, which included reexamining the ethics of marketing to children on social media, as well as educating them on what they might encounter on social media.

### **Direction for Future Research**

It is imperative that more research is conducted on this topic. More interviews and observational data should be collected in a way that better encapsulates the whole population of young adults in America instead of just college students at SSU. I only touched on consumer identities as they pertain to developing brains on social media very briefly in my research, but there should be much more data collected on this. This is arguably one of the most crucial aspects of childhood social media usage to grasp if we want to understand how social media disrupts children's organic process of socialization and development of self. The data I collected from observations and interviews reflected ways in which consumerism plays into how we affiliate our identities with social media, and the importance that child SNS users associate with meeting these standards. There was an overwhelming sadness and negativity displayed by participants regarding their childhood experiences on social media, as well as fear and concern expressed for current and future generations of children. This should be viewed as a massive red

flag, and we would be wise to take these findings into account to protect the next generation from unnecessary mental and emotional harm.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Structured Interview Guide**

#### **Introduction:**

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me today. This interview will last between 30-60 minutes. I am studying identity, biography and society. More specifically, I am interested in the effects that social media has had on the identities of young adults who grew up around social media. The information you share with me will be kept confidential. I will change your name and the names of all the people and places you mention when I transcribe this interview. If you have any questions after this interview, please feel free to contact me via my email. Do you have any questions before we continue?

I may decide to jot some notes during this interview as you are talking. But to pay closest attention to what you have to say, do I have your permission to audio record this interview, so that I can listen to you as you respond to my questions? {allow for consent or further questions}

Let's get started!

#### **Questions**

To start off, tell me about the first time you remember engaging in social media platforms. Can you recall the main factor that inspired you to begin using social media, or what attracted you to it?

Your survey responses indicated that you [are/are not] still an active user on social media. For what reasons do you use it now? {or “why did you choose not to continue with your use?” if they do not}

Think of an app that you tend to use more than others? What is it and why do you use it more than others?

Tell me about your overall experience with social media. In what ways do you feel it has significantly impacted your life, and if so was it positively or negatively?

\*Here, I turn to the completed Demographic Questionnaire, referred to in Appendix B, submitted to me by the participant beforehand. I go through their responses and ask them to elaborate on each one, omitting questions that may have already been covered or ones the participant has chosen not to answer. This usually takes up the majority of each interview.\*

Think back to a post that you have seen on your feed that you didn't like or didn't agree with. What was the post, and what about it didn't you like?

What are your thoughts on children under the age of 12 participating in social media? Please tell me more about this.

Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding your experiences on social media?

# Appendix B

## Demographic Questionnaire

Please do not write your name or other identifying information on this questionnaire.  
Your answers will be confidential.

**1. With which gender identity do you identify?** [check one box]

- Female
  - Male
  - Transgender female
  - Transgender male
  - Gender variant/ Non-binary
  - Prefer not to disclose
  - Prefer to self-describe [please describe below]
- 

**2. What is your age?**

---

**3. What is your marital status?** [check one box]

- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Separated
- Never married

**4. What is the highest grade or year of school you completed?** [check one box]

- Never attended school or only attended kindergarten
- Grades 1 through 8 (elementary school)
- Grades 9 through 11 (some high school)
- Grade 12 or GED (high school graduate)
- Some college
- College 4 years (college graduate with a Bachelor's degree)
- Other [please describe below]



**5. Which group or groups below best represents your race?**

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - White (Including Hispanic and Non-Hispanic)
  - Prefer not to disclose
  - Prefer to self-describe [please describe below]
- 

**6. Do you consider yourself to be Hispanic or Latino?**

- Yes
- No

**7. With which social media platforms do you use? [check all that apply]**

- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- TikTok
- Tumblr
- Snapchat
- Reddit
- YouTube
- Pinterest
- LinkedIn
- I don't use social media, but I use my phone to send texts or calls to people I know.
- I don't have any form of social media or use a cell phone.

**8. If you selected 1 or more platforms, how long do you spend daily on these platforms? [check one box]**

- Less than 30 minutes
- 30 minutes 2 hours
- Over 2 hours to 4 hours
- Over 4 hours to 6 hours
- More than 6 hours

**9. Please indicate at what age you began actively using social media?**

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**10. What is the most applicable reason why you use social media?** [check one box]

- Because I genuinely enjoy it!
- It passes the time.
- I'm on social media for work.
- Because everyone I know uses social media.
- I don't know why, I just do.
- A different reason [please specify]

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**11. When you use social media, what are you most often partaking in?** [check one box]

- Posting selfies and pictures with friends and family.
- Conversing and exchanging ideas with other users.
- Viewing or posting funny memes and videos.
- Keeping in touch with loved ones.
- Keeping up with the latest celebrity gossip.
- Something else [please specify]

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*The remaining questions are about the role social media has played in your formulation of identity. Please answer honestly, once again this survey is completely confidential.*

**12. When you think about yourself, what 3 words first come to mind?** [please write below]

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**13. List any groups or titles that you identify with. (This could be a profession, marital or familial status, hobby, club, etc.)** [please write below]

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**14. Have you ever felt the need to monitor your behavior or activity on social media?**

[check one box]

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**15. Have you ever felt embarrassed if your social media post didn't get a sufficient amount of likes?** [check one box]

- Yes
- No
- Don't remember

**16. Has social media ever affected the way you view yourself?** [check one box]

- Yes
- No
- Don't remember

**17. How does it feel to receive likes and praise on a social media post?** [check one box]

- Excellent
- Good
- Neutral
- Not great
- Bad
- Not sure

**18. How does it feel to be up to date on current social media trends?** [check one box]

- Excellent
- Good
- Neutral
- Not great
- Bad
- Not sure

**19. Since partaking in social media, how would you generally describe the state of your mental health?** [check one box]

- o Excellent
- o Good
- o Neutral
- o Not great
- o Bad
- o Not sure

**20. Please rate your agreement with the following statements:**

1. I compare myself and my life to that of the people I see on my social media feed often.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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2. It affects my mood when I don't receive the likes or attention that I anticipated on my social media posts.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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3. Trends and memes on social media have effects on the way I speak or act with my friends.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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4. Things posted to social media are generally accurate depictions of reality.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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5. The way I dress or makeup I wear is inspired by trends popularized on social media.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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6. When I post or comment on social media, I am trying to be perceived by others in a specific way.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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7. I feel more connected with myself and others when I partake in social media.

5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Agree Somewhat	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree
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**21. Please indicate the level of importance each sentiment has to you:**

1. How important is it to build a social media profile that reflects the “real you”?

5 Extremely important	4 Important	3 Somewhat important	2 Not that important	1 Doesn't matter at all
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2. How important is it to be true to oneself?

5 Extremely important	4 Important	3 Somewhat Important	2 Not that important	1 Doesn't matter at all
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3. How important is it to receive a lot of “likes” on the things you post?

5 Extremely important	4 Important	3 Somewhat Important	2 Not that important	1 Doesn't matter at all
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4. How important is it to follow the social norms that are established on social media?

5 Extremely important	4 Important	3 Somewhat important	2 Not that important	1 Doesn't matter at all
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**Thank you!**

# Appendix C

## Data Collection Log

DATA COLLECTION LOG					
Field Observation Log					
Observation #	Place	Observation Date	Time of observation (start-end)	General Setting Description	NOTES:
1	SIP coffee, SSU quad	3-2-22	12:25-1:15pm 50 minutes	The hub of student life during school hours on Sonoma State campus. people come to study, eat, socialize and pass time. Popular and usually busy campus coffee shop.	Many individuals studying, this seems like a popular time to have breaks in between classes or to grab a coffee and study. Many frats and sororities tabling out in the quad.
2	SIP coffee	03-28-22	1:38-2:10pm 32 minutes	The coffee shop located in the student center that is a popular attraction around lunch time—people go by themselves, and use it as a place to catch up with friends	Semi- busy, SIP line is shorter than usual, still a good place to observe student life
3	SSU Student Center Lounge	03-29-22	2:22-3:01pm 39 minutes	Many people sit in the same big open room to study, socialize and pass time.	Probably the best place to observe, I can easily look in conspicuous taking note on my phone or in my notebook here

4	SSU Student Center lounge	04-20-22	3-3:51 pm 51 minutes	Many people sit in the same big open room to study, socialize and pass time.	Even more life today than there usually is, extremely loud, maybe a little too loud, can't hear conversations too well
5	SSU Cafeteria	04-20-22	4-4:41 pm 41 minutes	The cafeteria is attached to the student center, students go here to eat and socialize and sometimes study or pass time	This was a good place to retreat to after it was too difficult to gather data with any richness in the loud lounge. Quiet but still a light hum of chatter and lots of people scattered around to observe.
6	SSU Student Center Lounge	04-25-22	2:21-3:05 pm 44 minutes	Many people sit in the same big open room to study, socialize and pass time.	Another loud day, not as bad as last time, I can hear conversations way better
7	SSU Student Center Lounge	04-25-22	3:30-4:04 pm 34 minutes	Many people sit in the same big open room to study, socialize and pass time.	As time went on, the noise began to subside to a reasonable level in time for my second observation.
8					
<b>DATA SUMMARY</b>	<b>7 Observations</b>	<b>03-2-22 - 04-25-22</b>	<b>Average- 40:48</b>	<b>Summary notes on settings: This was the perfect area to observe college students and the way they socialize and present themselves. I had easy access here as I am a student, and it was easy for me to fit in and look inconspicuous.</b>	
<b>Interview Log</b>					
<b>Interview #</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>	<b>Time (Min:Sec)</b>	<b>Demographic Questions</b>	<b>NOTES:</b>
1	Troy Howard	04-03-22	3:03- 3:20 pm 17 minutes	22 y/o Black/Hispanic male, student, single, some college, current social media user since age 6	Gave great and thoughtful responses and gave examples of consumer identity forming from a young age
2	Evie Richardson	04-21-22	1:25-1:53pm 28 minutes	26 y/o white female, married, associates degree, veteran, social media user since age 12	Gave very thoughtful responses and was very open. Very reflective on her experiences



<b>3</b>	Ananya Ortiz	04-22-22	11:15am-12:03 pm 48 minutes	23 y/o Hispanic female, some college, social media user since age 17	Very thoughtful responses, easy conversation flow, very open about how social media affected her self perceptions when she was younger
<b>4</b>	Rowan Kim	04-22-22	12:32-1:28pm 56 minutes	24 y/o Asian male, never married, some college, past social media user but has recently decided to quit	Was eager to share his thoughts, very opinionated about his reasons for almost entirely ceasing his social media usage. Good discussion on authenticity and how it is lost on social media
<b>5</b>	Alina Ross	04-30-22	9:27-9:57am 30 minutes	24 y/o female, chose not to disclose race, some college, has never used any social media platforms	Actually had some really interesting things to say even though she has never used social media. Still had many experiences and opinions regarding social media and how growing up surrounded by it has made its impact on her
<b>6</b>	Daisy Peterson	04-30-22	10:11-10:43am 32 minutes	20 y/o white female, some college, has been a social media user since age 12	She was very open about how important keeping up appearances on social media used to be as a child, and how that impacted her mental health growing up.
<b>7</b>					
<b>8</b>					
<b>DATA SUMMARY</b>	<b>6 Interviews</b>	<b>---</b>	<b>Average 35:17</b>	<b>Summary notes on participants: All participants gave very rich, detailed responses and there really wasn't a dry conversation to be had. There is a generally negative attitude toward their experiences growing up with social media, and many have come to question the authenticity of the environment created in these online spaces.</b>	