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“PHONE BAD”: A MIXED-METHODS EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY ANALYSIS
OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND OSTRACISM

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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ABSTRACT

Foundational theories of social psychology were written before the existence of social media. As evolving technology has created an environment where users maintain constant social contact, there exists a need for research concerning how human social needs manifest in an online environment, and even moreso for how constant interconnectedness affects people.

Previous research indicates a positive correlation between experienced ostracism and social media addiction. However, social media usage tends to be high among users who feel connected, as well as users who feel disconnected, thus indicating that the link between social media and social disconnection may be a ‘chicken-and-the-egg’ situation. This mixed-methods quantitative and qualitative study seeks to identify correlation between ostracism and disordered social media usage, and to illuminate new trends for further exploration. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique circumstance wherein people have been restricted from public spaces and gatherings for over a year, therefore relying on social media more than ever for interpersonal fulfillment. Quantitative deductive data were collected with a survey utilizing the Social Media Usage Disorder Scale (SMDS) in terms of both before and during the pandemic, and the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A). The survey sought to identify whether there was a correlation between experienced ostracism and disordered social media usage among undergraduate students, and whether participants had experienced a change in disordered social media usage before versus during the pandemic.

Qualitative, inductive interviews were conducted with ten volunteers from the survey, and analyzed in terms of an exploratory case study examining each individual’s

relationship with social media, reasons for usage, and their perception of its effects. Common occurrences between interviews are sorted in the qualitative discussion. The interviews aimed to illuminate new links between lifestyle factors or other predispositions that might affect an individual's social media usage in a number of ways including: type of platform used, effects of certain platforms, and the individual's feelings toward their own usage. This study provides implications for further research on the usage of social media and its effects.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Methodology.....	16
Quantitative Findings.....	18
Quantitative Discussion.....	22
Qualitative Findings.....	24
Social Media and Loneliness.....	24
Social Media and Gender.....	31
Social Media and Age.....	35
Social Media and Boredom.....	38
Social Media and Guilt.....	42
Social Media and Information Overload.....	48
Social Media and Social Comparison.....	53
The Perfect Social Media Platform.....	61
Qualitative Discussion and Implications for Future Research.....	64
Conclusion.....	74
Bibliography.....	78
Appendix A.....	84
Appendix B.....	88
Appendix C.....	90
Author's Biography.....	92

PREFACE

At the heart of every coming-of-age story is a misfit teen with a quirk of character or appearance that distinguishes them from the masses. In every musical there will be a bombastic “need to belong” number cried from the depths of the ostracized protagonist’s soul. The villain number in *High School Musical* is literally called, “Stick to the Status Quo.” The 1964 stop-motion TV special *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* is the most transparent example of such a theme (Cox, 2001). The audience can empathize with Rudolph because they can relate to the near-universal experience of ostracism. The reason people watch *Rudolph* every holiday season is not only nostalgia, but also for the secondhand relief that is experienced in watching the loner character find a group and finally be appreciated for his distinctiveness. To be celebrated for one’s differences and be distinct from the crowd while simultaneously *belonging to that crowd*: this is the ultimate endgame for human sociability.

Life imitates art. but art must necessarily be modeled after life. The fixation on belonging and the fear of being alone were not borne of popular culture. Media has the thematic tendency to double down on contemporary sentiments of its time, and thus perpetuate decades-long cycles. This explains the fluctuating periods of popularity in genres such as dystopian science fiction, which expresses a growing public discomfort with the Orwellian data-tracking of corporations and governments; or in in westerns, which emphasize the Boomeristic (and historically inaccurate) ideal of white masculinity; and in multi-million dollar remakes which feed off audience nostalgia and achieve nothing but unmemorable trips to the Uncanny Valley for the sake of copyright renewal.

The need to belong is the primal driving force behind the evolution of civilization as we know it. From the beginning of human existence, people have banded together in tribes as a survival mechanism. In the modern world, this need has been translated into the technological biome in which we live, work, and socialize. The fittest “survive” because they have graphic design experience and a four-year degree, or because they stick to their New Year resolutions. Even in the individualistic society of the United States, we place a high emphasis on our membership to certain groups, such as political, religious, and academic organizations. We are slaves to biological necessities: first comes water, food, and shelter; next comes safety; and then, according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), come interpersonal relationships.

Petty social needs do not arise a primal hunger for gossip and drinking buddies. As chickens have evolved from raptors over millions of years, or so the STEM majors tell me, we can posit that Instagram likes are the natural evolution of the human herding instinct which ensured safety in numbers in the Dark Ages. The in-group versus out-group mentality that has always dictated our social habits personally, locally, and globally is how this deep-set instinct manifests itself in the civilized world. Labels and in-group communications cannot only be translated to online spaces, but they can also be strengthened by them. One need look no farther than the microcosm of thesis students within the University of Maine Honors College, with whom I created a Discord chat at the beginning of the school year, unintentionally but inadvertently proving my point: that is, people can unite under any banner, and there is no easier way to do so than on a social media site (SMS).

Social media networks continue to spawn like rabbits and evolve faster than even the most threatening AI in a dystopian teen adventure film. Every day, nearly two-billion people log into Facebook – and that number is only going up (Tankovska, 2021). More information is available, accessible, and visible; more misinformation is spread; political and social divides are louder than ever; and social media isn't going away anytime soon.

As the Internet has permeated every aspect of American society, and its cultures, habits, and needs have been transformed to suit the online environment, it is vital to consider both how digital communication has supplanted traditional forms, and how this has affected and *will* affect the human species. Online socialization gives rise to new ways to experience social motivators and negative side effects, such as ostracism. This thesis seeks to explore why people use social media, how it affects them, and whether or not their attitudes toward it have changed during the global pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), interpersonal relationships are halfway up the ladder to self-actualization, or what is arguably the psychological realization of Nirvana. In 1995, Baumeister and Leary went one step further by proposing that the desire for interpersonal relationships is a categorical imperative at least as fundamentally integral to one's wellbeing as Maslow's consideration of safety. Since the need to belong originates from a desire for the safety guaranteed by being part of a tribe, the argument may even be made that the two needs are one and the same.

Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) asserts that self-esteem and motivation can be boiled down to an individual's fulfillment across three meters: autonomy, relatedness or belonging, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 1985; 2008). Autonomy represents a person's perception of their own free will (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is theoretically similar to self-efficacy, i.e. a person's faith in their own ability to complete a given task, assessed on the basis of the relative success of previous experiences (Sitzmann & Yeo, 2013; Harter, 1978). Finally, belonging is the need to maintain meaningful connections with known others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Exclusion decreases fulfillment across all three needs, while inclusion increases fulfillment of all three needs (Ricard, 2011). Consider exclusion as the explicit yin to the yang of belongingness; thus, exclusion threatens an individual's self-esteem on a multitude of levels.

Self-esteem itself is a misleading term. It has a tendency to be overused in the way that any buzzword is when it enters the virtual lexicon and becomes a blanket term

for anything remotely similar to it. According to the Sociometer Hypothesis, self-esteem functions as a direct measure of how included or excluded a person feels by serving as a monitor of one's relational value (i.e., the amount of value that one's friends place on that relationship). Since exclusion reduces relational value, so it too threatens self-esteem (Leary and Downs, 1995). Therefore, before considering the nature of not belonging, one must first consider belonging.

Belongingness exists on two axes: distinctiveness and inclusiveness. The point of equilibrium between these two values is defined as Optimal Distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). Brewer posits that "social identity derives from a fundamental tension between human needs for validation and similarity to others (on the one hand) and a countervailing need for uniqueness and individuation (on the other)" (p. 477). The function of belonging to a group fulfills both the need to associate with an in-group, and to be distinct from the out-group. Indeed, when people make decisions they tend to focus on maximizing the difference in benefit received by their own group versus the out-group (Tajfel, 1970). However, depending on the size and genericism of the group in question, homogeneity can present its own threat to one's identity. Brewer argues that over-generalization can threaten the sense of self in a similar way to an experience of ostracism (pp. 480–180). In this instance, people strive for uniqueness. An argument can even be made that the pursuit of distinctiveness is an act of asserting one's autonomy. Thus, a paradox exists wherein people strive to be included *and* distinct from the other members of their group, in order to justify their own existence.

The actual state of belonging is so closely tied to the *appearance* of belonging that it may be impossible to isolate the circumstances. In a study which analyzed

Instagram users' photos, it was found that most people had a favorite photo which featured themselves with a known other (i.e. a person with whom they had a meaningful relationship). The salience of one's connections may be equally as important as the actual state of belonging (Tobin & Chulpaiboon, 2016). The same study found that the number of likes received on a photo had no correlation to the poster's satisfaction, and that "participants who used Instagram to meet new people received more comments on their photographs" (p. 307). In regard to how a person's posts may predict their motivation for using social media, the study concluded: "Social interaction motivation predicts satisfaction partly through sharing photographs of known others, but there is still an effect that is not explained by the fact that people with more social interaction motivation post more photographs of known others" (p. 308). This is consistent with Ryan and Deci's assertion that fulfillment of the three aforementioned fundamental human needs is separate from physical drives such as hunger and thirst, since motivation for forming meaningful relationships does not decrease depending on an individual's perceived feelings of belonging (2000).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim "...many social institutions and behavior patterns seem to serve a need to preserve at least the appearance of social attachment in the absence of actual, continued interaction (p. 502)." Notably, in the two and a half decades since their proposal, social media has evolved to allow people to maintain constant, continued interaction around the world regardless of physical location or time zones. For example, "Reunions constitute an occasion for people to see former acquaintances. The massive exchange of greeting cards during the Christmas holiday season includes many cases in which the card is the sole contact that two people have had

during the entire year, but people still resist dropping each other's name from the mailing list because to do so signifies a final dissolution of the social bond” (pp. 502–503).

Kunz and Woolcott’s 1976 study (cited in Baumeister & Leary, 1995) found that most people will send Christmas cards back to complete strangers if they receive a card from them, indicating that people will take extra steps not to damage even a nonexistent relationship.

So what happens when someone stops receiving holiday greeting cards?

Exclusion occurs when an individual is too distinct from the in-group, and can take many forms. For instance, exclusion may be confrontational. Consider the primal utterance of “I don’t want to play with you anymore” on an elementary school playground, or the circumstance of being *uninvited* to a friend’s wedding. Exclusion can also appear in the form of ostracism, in which a target is similarly discluded but without direct action on the part of the source.

Ostracism is “a form of social exclusion that occurs when the source ignores and excludes the target and does not provide any indication that the target will receive an answer” (Freeman, Williams & Beer, 2016, p. 7). Types of exclusion are identified on an active-passive continuum in regard to the amount of involvement on the part of the actor, i.e. actively avoiding someone versus passively ignoring them (Freedman, Williams & Beer, 2016). While a person who is explicitly rejected will suffer negative feelings, an ostracized person is denied the ability to respond, thus placing all control in the hands of the source. Furthermore, the target of ostracism loses even the validation of their own existence, in that they are treated as though they were nonexistent, or even dead (Case et al., 2006).

Ostracism is even painful when an individual stands to gain a reward for being ostracized, and a lack of attention makes people feel worse than negative attention (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). Ostracism also will leave the target to draw their own conclusions due to the ambiguity of the situation. As a result of the lack of information or explanation concerning the rejection, the target is doomed to self-identify the potential factors that lead to their disclusion. Targets will then develop lay-theories about the exclusion event, and they may conclude that their own perceived negative attributes are more conspicuous than they are in reality (Williams, 2009).

A target of exclusion will always seek out connectivity with others in order to cope. As one turns to the fridge when hungry, one pursues human connection when lonely. An excluded person's actions can include the pursuit of new friendships, as well as the act of ingratiating themselves to others in order to increase the value of relationships (Freedman, Williams & Beer, 2016). Social media creates complex new interlinking spheres of communication between groups and individuals (Jost et al., 2016). Freedman et al.'s proposition (2016) that excluded individuals ingratiate themselves to others when alone may be translated to the realm of social media by supposing that it manifests in the act of liking or commenting on photos of acquaintances. When an individual is excluded from a group, the need to survive dictates that they will seek another group. Therefore, it is worth considering that social media could be viewed by users, correctly or otherwise, as a tool to restore lost self-esteem, i.e. a coping mechanism for the ostracized.

Notably, the act of exclusion also negatively affects the actor and any involved bystanders. Compliance with the ostracism of others was shown to worsen an

individual's mood in a 2013 study (Legate et al.), suggesting that the need to belong is not only threatened by being excluded, but also by excluding others.

There is evidence that the threat presented by ostracism can be negated by one's belonging to a majority group. A series of 2015 studies found that for individuals who were high in the need to belong, the immediate impact of ostracism was reduced by membership to a majority group (Eck et al., 2015). The same effect was not found for membership in a minority group. In regard to the strength of group identities, Brewer notes, "What is painful at the individual level becomes a source of pride at the group level—a badge of distinction rather than a mark of shame. Collective identities buffer the individual from many threats to self-worth" (p. 481). Clearly, belonging to a group serves a physiological purpose from a survival standpoint; today, it shields the individual against threats to their self-esteem and emotional security.

In an exploratory study on reasons for Facebook (FB) usage, Sheldon and Abad discovered that "when the relatedness scale was separated into its positively and negatively worded subscales (connection and disconnection), the motivation to make new friends and relationships was predicted only by the presence of disconnection, and not by the absence of connection" (p. 767). This suggests that a lack of connection may not be equated with disconnection, and that people may experience and evaluate the circumstances differently. In the same study, it was found that participants who set a goal of reducing their social media usage were less likely to be successful if they experienced an increase in feelings of disconnection. According to Sheldon and Abad, "It appears that the strength of the disconnection-based motive to use Facebook works to minimize the ambitiousness of a new motive to reduce usage" (p. 772). Disconnection may induce a

coping motive that encourages a user to continue to return to social media, which would suggest that social media usage may be a conditioned response to ostracism.

In Deci and Ryan's original work on Self-Determination Theory (1985), aside from proposing the three aforementioned fundamental human needs, they also posit the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (what is done for one's own enjoyment versus what is done for any other outcome), and that self-control is an important factor in intrinsic motivation to complete a task. Self-control is defined as a process by which "one (1) sets one's own reinforcement contingencies (e.g., "I will buy myself a present and aggrandize myself if I work for six hours tomorrow"); (2) monitors one's own behavior (e.g., timing my working); and then (3) reinforces oneself (e.g., buying myself the present and telling myself what a good person I am)" (p. 105). In regard to social media, people who check apps habitually and perceive strong disturbances from notifications are less likely to be able to control their usage (Du et al., 2019).

Motivation can be broken down into several ranked categories. *Amotivation* results from an individual's lack of intention to act. *External regulation* is a type of motivation in which the actor feels imposed upon or controlled, i.e. lacking autonomy. *Introjected regulation* occurs due to external factors, but the individual acts in order to avoid negative feelings such as guilt or to feel pride. *Identification* is a type of extrinsic motivation that occurs when an individual accepts an externally prompted behavior into their self-identity. The final form of extrinsic motivation is *integrated regulation*, in which an individual has fully identified with and internalized a behavior and proceeds to act autonomously. Integrated regulation is separate from true intrinsic motivation, the

most autonomous motivation, because it must still depend upon an outcome separate from the behavior. Thus, intrinsic motivation inspires the actor to behave purely for their own enjoyment of the behavior (Ryan and Deci, 2000, pp. 61–62). Of note is that a person’s perceived competence in a task seems to play an important role in their internalization of the motivation (p. 63). Motivation to act is relevant to analysis of social media, in that people must have motivation to pick up their phone, and equally must have motivation to put it down.

The motivation to check social media cannot be universally construed. Firstly, different individuals can observe the same stimuli, but each will interpret them in the way that aligns with their views and experience. A meme that one friend considers “based” may be called “cringe” by another (Urban Dictionary, 2021). A person “...selectively attends to stimuli, interprets stimuli more on the basis of his or her personality than on the subtleties of the stimuli, and projects characteristics onto the stimuli. In a sense the person actively constructs stimuli rather than passively receives them. The organism selects, or projects stimuli and then interprets and responds to them” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 151).

Individual differences such as age, gender, and career types are important to consider when evaluating motivations for logging onto a social network. With the amount of time the average U.S. adult spends per day on their phone (Zalani, 2021), it is no surprise that there are a number of motivations for spending hours on social media every day. Younger users of social media are more likely to use it for political interests, while older users will use traditional media such as television and radio to gather political information (Holt et al., 2013). Research indicates that people primarily use social media

to maintain relationships with friends, and that this is the motivation for sharing personal information online (Ghaisani et al., 2017).

Existing work concerning Facebook (FB) use suggests that a high level of extraversion, neuroticism, and narcissism, and low levels of self-esteem and self worth, are associated with high FB use. “Frequent FB use is also associated with lower academic performance but possibly higher self-esteem and sense of belonging.” (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012, p. 5) “Although the reason for FB use had little association with loneliness, Facebook use intensity reduced students’ perceived level of loneliness. FB use intensity was further positively associated with offline friendship, but offline friendship did not have any association with psychosocial self-esteem (Lou, 2010). Therefore, this study suggested that FB's improvement of a user's social life did not improve the user's self-esteem. The authors inferred from this that because FB enables visualization of social connections it also validates and enhances users’ self-esteem” (p. 7).

Furthermore, because the need to belong and the need of self-presentation reflect general personality traits, we assume that similar behavioral patterns are evident in a person's behavior offline, which mirror the behavior online. For example, we might assume that individuals who are frequent FB users with many FB friends have frequent social contact offline. FB users who show a clear mismatch between offline and online behaviors might attempt to compensate for any perceived or actual deficiencies in social contact and peer-relations (p. 9). Social media users who spend more time on Facebook as opposed to other platforms may also be seeking relaxation, or motivated to keep in trend (Pornsakulvanich & Dumrongsiri, 2013).

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are platforms that allow users to: 1) create a public/semi-public profile; 2) view a list of other users with whom they are connected; and 3) track their own connections as well as the connections of others (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). A 2013 study performed in Thailand found that people's internal motivations for using SNSs included passing time, friendship, relationship maintenance, entertainment, in trend (i.e. using popular social media platforms because one's friends are using them), and relaxation. External motivators found in the same study included: media, significant others, and political, social, and economic situations. Of note was that external motivators were significantly more influential than internal in predicting the amount of time a participant spent online (Pornsakulvanich & Dumrongsiri, 2013). A study conducted on high school students in China explored students' intrinsic motivations for Internet usage and found that feelings of confidence and greater connectedness to friends were associated with stronger intrinsic motivation to go online (Zhao et al., 2011).

Additionally, SMSs may play a role outside of entertainment and relationship purposes. Government employees who use social media for work purposes may experience greater intrinsic work motivation and higher need satisfaction than those who don't. On the flipside, doing so excessively is correlated with lower levels of intrinsic work motivation (Demircioglu & Chen, 2019). However, online knowledge sharing is not limited to the workplace. Ma and Chan (2014) found that perceived online attachment motivation and perceived online relationship commitment have significant positive effects on online knowledge sharing. The ease of exchanging information online is also vital to the coordination of political protests and the visibility (and success) of political efforts (Jost et al., 2018). New members of organizations may have more success with

performance proficiency and interpersonal relationships within the organization with higher intensity of social media usage (SMU), and this effect is stronger when employees perceive social media as a useful tool for building workplace connections (Cai et al., 2020).

Excessive SMU may be one of the most common and unmitigated addictions in the world. A study conducted on college students in Bangalore found that more than one-third of participants qualified as having a social media addiction, and the majority of participants had mild addiction. Social media addicts used Facebook more often than non-addicts, who preferred Whatsapp; junk food consumption and use of tobacco and alcohol were also identified as having a statistically significant correlation to social media addiction (Masthi et al., 2018). A 2019 study found that engaging in negative social media behaviors such as: comparing oneself to someone who is better off; being bothered by being tagged in unflattering photos; and being unlikely to post a photo of oneself with others were all traits of individuals more likely to meet the criteria for having Major Depressive Disorder (Robinson, 2019). Social media addiction is negatively associated with work-family balance; social media reactions, or “the emotions that employees experience in response to information posted on social media” are positively related to job burnout (Zivunska et al., 2019).

In 2005, 6% of U.S. adults had at least one social media account. That percentage has increased to 72% as of February 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). A longitudinal 2021 study on adolescents found that problems with SMU were associated with decreased mental health and increased upward social comparisons and cybervictimization one year later (Boer et al., 2021). Problematic SMU in minors is related to stronger

procrastination, increased perceived stress, and struggles with impulse control and goal-oriented behavior (Wartberg et al., 2021). Social media addiction becomes a concern when it interferes with individual's goals and day-to-day lives. In terms of the pandemic, problematic SMU especially presents a threat to students' education, and, by extension, their futures. The question is whether people who are addicted to social media become recluse due to the addiction, or whether ostracized individuals turn to social media to cope with their unfulfilled need to belong.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed-methods research approach to evaluate the reasons people use social media and the effects of ostracism on social media usage. The research consists of a deductive quantitative survey and inductive interviews analyzed according to Yin's recommendations for an exploratory case study (1984).

The quantitative survey was tightly framed around the question of whether or not there is a correlation between an individual's self-reported ostracism experience, and their potential for disordered social media usage; the other question was whether there would be a difference in social media usage among college students before versus during the pandemic (due to the isolating nature of lockdown). The quantitative design was deductive, and therefore tightly framed around these questions.

The interviews, being part of an exploratory case study, were inductive and conducted with the goal of locating new information regarding social media dependency and the various ways it serves people in their day to day lives.

The self-reported survey (see Appendix A) included three demographic questions, the 9-item Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS; Eijnden, 2016), and the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A; Gilman, 2012). The SMDS is based on the DSM-5, and the scale was developed from the scale for internet gaming addiction. If a participant meets five of the nine criteria in the 9-point scale, they qualify as having an addiction to social media. The SMDS was administered twice; participants were asked to answer it in terms of before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The scales were chosen for their succinctness and pre-validation, and because they accurately encompassed and

informed the areas of study within this thesis (see Appendix C). Participants were recruited from the University of Maine undergraduate student body (N=101) from the Honors college and Department of Communication and Journalism.

Following the survey, participants were given the option to volunteer for a 30-45 minute Zoom interview (see Appendix A). The interviews were semi-structured, and the analysis follows Yin's recommendations for an exploratory case study.

“Research is about questions, but not necessarily about answers.” Yin writes in *Case Study Research: Designs and Methods*, the bible of case study research (1984, p. 57). “Very few case studies will end up exactly as planned (p. 55).” Given the veritable ocean of psychological and sociological questions that must be asked of social media effects, the purpose of the current study is to identify questions to ask. The following exploratory case study cross-examines common occurrences (outside of the original intended scope of ostracism and SMS usage) between ten separate interviews in order to provide insight for future research. The individual cases are the relationships of each interviewee with social media, how they view it, and the effects that it has on their mood, habits, and social life.

The research plan was submitted to the University of Maine Institutional Review Board and received final approval (see Appendix C). Analyses of quantitative data were performed on Google Sheets and in the open-source program Jamovi.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

A Pearson's test between the total pre-pandemic and post-pandemic SMDS ($r(101) = 0.7, p = <0.00001$) suggested that users testing higher before the pandemic were significantly more likely to test high during the pandemic. Between the number of hours spent on hobbies ($M = 2.54$ i.e. between 1–4 and 5–9 hours, $SD = 0.9$; TABLE 2) and number of social media accounts ($M = 3.6, SD=1.2$; TABLE 3) there was no significant relationship. Correlation between pre-pandemic SMDS scores and total OES-A scores there was insignificant, as with between post-pandemic SMDS scores and total OES-A scores. The results from a repeated measures t-test (TABLE 5) show that the pre-pandemic total SMDS score ($M = 0.91, SD = 1.18$) and post-pandemic total SMDS score ($M = 1, SD = 1.2$) failed to reject the null hypothesis ($h_0 = \mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$; i.e. that the difference in means would be equal to zero) with a one-tailed test ($t(100) = 0.29, p = 0.61$), indicating no significant change between individuals' SMU before versus during the pandemic.

When compared for gender differences, it was found that men on average spent 5–9 hours per week on hobbies ($SD = 0.86$) and women an average of 1–4 hours ($SD=0.91$), and nonbinary individuals spent an average of 5--9 hours ($SD = 1.13$). Men on average had three social media accounts ($SD=1.17$) while women on average had four ($SD=1.13$) and nonbinary people on average had four ($SD = 1.5$). Between men and women, a different samples two-tailed t-test found that there was no significant difference for pre-pandemic SMDS scores ($t(100) = 0.57, p = 0.71$) or post-pandemic SMDS scores ($t(100) = 0.23, p = 0.57$).

Due to an error in initial design on the part of the primary researcher, the Likert scale employed in the SMDS was collapsed into a dichotomous 0 (“no”) and 1 (“yes”) scale, as was used in previous implementations of the study (Boer et al., 2021). The value of 3 as a neutral data point was labeled as missing data. Values of 1 and 2 were translated into a ‘no’ and 4 and 5 became ‘yes.’ “Collapsing from five to two response categories more fully corrects other methodological issues related to the occurrence of disordered difficulty in levels of response categories within items” (Grimbeek et al.).

The OES-A was tested for internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha for both the ignored and excluded subscales (Ignored: $\alpha = 0.834$ (ignored); Excluded: $\alpha = 0.864$). When broken into subscales, there was significant correlation between ignored and excluded individuals ($r(101) = -0.51, p = <0.00001$), suggesting that participants who experienced ostracism also experienced exclusion. A slight difference was found between total OES-A scores for nonbinary people against both women ($t(67) = 0.16, p = 0.56$) and men ($t(41) = 0.15, p = 0.56$).

TABLE 1

Demographic results:	n (%)
Total	N = 101
Female	56 (55%)
Male	32 (32%)
Female, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid	2 (2%)
Male, Transgender male / trans man (or Female-to-Male (FTM) transgender, transsexual, or on the trans male spectrum	1 (<1%)

Non-binary, genderqueer, or genderfluid	9 (9%)
Transgender female / trans woman (or Male-to-Female (MTF) transgender, transsexual, or on the trans female spectrum	1 (<1%)

TABLE 2

Hours/week spent on hobbies:	n (%)
Less than 1	14
1 - 4	35
5 - 9	34
10 or more	17

TABLE 3

Number of social media accounts:	n (%)
1	3
2	18
3	27
4	20
5 or more	33

TABLE 4

	SMDS (pre-pandemic)	SMDS (post-pandemic)	OES-A
Total <i>M</i>	0.91 (SD = 1.18)	1 (SD = 1.2)	29 (SD = 4.06)

Female <i>M</i>	0.9 (SD = 1.09)	1.1 (SD = 1.35)	29 (SD = 3.94)
Male <i>M</i>	0.88 (SD = 1.34)	0.79 (SD = 1.2)	29 (SD = 4.64)
Nonbinary/genderfluid <i>M</i>	1.11 (SD = 1.67)	1.11 (SD = 1.62)	27 (SD = 3.6)

TABLE 5

	Pre-Pandemic vs. Post-Pandemic SMDS scores
Total <i>M</i>	$t(100) = 0.29, p = 0.61$
Female <i>M</i>	$t(57) = 0.07, p = 0.94$
Male <i>M</i>	$t(32) = 0.79, p = 0.44$
Nonbinary <i>M</i>	$t(8) = 1, p = 0.35$

TABLE 6

	Ignored	Excluded
Total <i>M</i>	11 (SD = 3.1)	18 (SD = 4.79)
Female <i>M</i>	11 (SD = 3)	18 (SD = 4)
Male <i>M</i>	11 (SD = 3.45)	19 (SD = 5.22)
Nonbinary <i>M</i>	14 (SD = 2.6)	13 (SD = 3.6)

QUANTITATIVE DISCUSSION

The present findings that nonbinary and genderfluid people scored lower on ostracism than the other groups are consistent with recent research on the socialization of individuals in same-sex and different-sex couple. People in a sexual minority group have fewer family-of-origins ties and more friendships than people in sexual majority groups, supporting the family-of-choice hypothesis (Fischer, 2021). While there is a distinction between gender and sexuality, the family-of-choice hypothesis can be applied to people in the LGBTQ+ community at large (Green, 2000).

Women on average had more social media platforms than men, which is consistent with data showing that women are more likely than men to use at least one social media site (Pew Research Center, 2021).

On the SMDS scale, only two participants in both the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic conditions met the criteria for social media addiction (Eijden et al., 2016). Interestingly, one participant tested for social media addiction in both the pre and post-pandemic instances, while the other occurrence was a different participant in each instance. Due to the small sample size, this does not have significant implications.

Nearly all groups felt more excluded than ignored, with the exception of nonbinary or genderfluid people, for whom the inverse was true. Nonbinary or genderfluid people felt significantly more ignored than men or women. Due to the small sample size ($n = 9$), the findings for self-identified non-binary individuals in this study may be biased individually, and no statistically verified conclusions may be drawn. At best, findings from this sample are suggestive of directions for future research with a

larger sample size. Interestingly, men felt slightly more excluded than women, while both felt more excluded than nonbinary people.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Social media and all online platforms are a means to an end, but not an end in and of themselves. The medium may be the message, but in this instance, online social mediums serve to convey unlimited information and the motivation to use them varies across professions, individuals, and even within an individual's own usage. The present research suggests that there is a compulsive need on the part of users to respond to SMS stimuli such as notifications is a conditioned response motivated by prior experiences that are not necessarily positive, but must necessarily serve to fulfill some need. While the initial goal for this research was to explore the linkage between ostracism and its manifestations online, the resulting interview data encompassed a wider range of themes. The following descriptive analysis seeks to identify what needs social media is filling, if any. The identifiers for participants who shared specific experiences that risked their possible identification were recorded in those instances in order to protect the subjects' anonymity.

“EMOTIONAL CONTINUITY”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND LONELINESS

“It's a comfort thing. Always going back. One of the biggest times I use social media is when I'm uncomfortable in a public setting. If I don't know what to do with myself I go on Instagram so no one sees me loitering,” said Participant H.

“If I'm feeling lonely I try to refrain from social media...you know, ‘Time to pick up the old external organ!’” said Participant J. “If I'm feeling lonely I try to exercise or meditate. [When I'm online] I feel numb. The longer I look at it the more numb I become.”

“I would go online and watch shows or listen to podcasts,” said Participant G, of spending time alone at the start of the pandemic. “I suppose I checked social media more often. I don't know if I was seeking to alleviate loneliness, I think it was an absence of things to do.”

Participant D said they were never without their phone, always kept it on their person, and would experience anxiety if they were out and their phone was about to die. Then they reconsidered, saying, “It kind of depends on who I'm with. When I'm with [my boyfriend] I feel like I don't check my phone as often. Usually if I'm online it's to talk to him or send stuff to him.”

Participant B observed that they had been experiencing loneliness as of late, but didn't see it as having a link to social media. B felt that they were lonely because they were a sociable individual and their interactions had been limited due to pandemic safety precautions. “It's a way I connect with people,” said B regarding their usage of social media. “I have friends from all across the country and all across the world. I have at least two friends in every state in America at a minimum—I mapped it out. It's just a way to be able to connect with people, because I live in rural Maine... I just use it to connect with people who I can't connect with in person.”

In contrast, Participant D drew a direct link between loneliness and heavy social media usage, saying that while they had always been an avid user, since the pandemic they had become more reliant on it: “I used to go on it because I wanted to. Now I go on it because I want to and it's the only thing I feel like I can do. At the beginning of the pandemic I felt like I didn't have that many interests outside of social interaction...I relied so heavily on social media because I didn't know how to be alone yet.”

Nearly every participant mentioned using at least one platform ‘to keep track of people,’ in order to know what was going on in the lives of their acquaintances, although most felt that this was harmless behavior. Some participants said they had used social media in order to meet new people, although this was more related to romantic interests or work-related purposes than forming friendships. Participant E had used Instagram to reach out to potential romantic partners. Participant I mentioned meeting new people on Tinder, and discussed the dating app’s status as social media:

“I mean, I met up with somebody, I revealed my location, and they know who I am and they interacted with me.”

Participant J brought up socialization on multiplayer video games. “Is that social media? I’ve met people. I’ve never seen their face, but I’ve grown a connection with people who will send messages to me. It’s completely different... mostly what we’ll talk about is in relation to the video game. A person who I have an in-person relationship with, we talk about all parts of our lives, versus someone I’ve made a connection with over pixels on a screen.”

“When I’m eating I’m always on social media,” said Participant D. Some participants used Youtube for every meal of the day; every participant watched YouTube for at least one meal out of their day, depending on their living situation and whether they had family or roommates to eat with.

“It’s partially entertainment,” said Participant J. Obviously my roommates are doing their own things. Back at home I’d eat dinner with my family, more as a bonding thing. I often get something valuable out of it [Youtube]. Entertainment slash education. I feel like I usually learn something.”

“[It’s] kind of for entertainment. I’ll watch a few Youtube channels that I follow about history and such, podcasts, comedy or related to fields I’m interested in. Current events. A lot of shows on Youtube do basically news coverage,” said Participant G.

Participant F used Youtube to listen to music while eating. However, two participants felt that YouTube might have served as a proxy for eating meals in a group setting as they were accustomed to doing prior to the pandemic.

Participant B said that because of the pandemic and their partner and roommate’s schedules, they usually ate alone and used Youtube to keep them company at meals. “I definitely use it as a way to feel like I’m interacting with people at all.”

On the flipside, social media can present unique opportunities to maintain or create new and impactful connections. Participant Z suffered from a condition called oligodendroglioma, a type of brain tumor. “I use Facebook mainly to communicate with people who also have it,” said Z. “It’s a way of spreading awareness for the side effects of medication we take, overall experiences in different countries with surgery, different methods that their doctors and surgeons use and have used. It’s not a fabulous place to be because there’s a lot of negativity as well but I think it’s good for awareness as someone who’s younger than a lot of people to understand why this is going to take me in a few years.”

Z continued and elaborated on their reasons for using the Facebook group and why, in spite of negativity in the group, they considered it a positive experience. “I think the more open I am about it, the easier it will be for other people to come forward with things that they’re dealing with. I’m not the only person who has a medical history of anything. I know so many people in my personal circle who have, I mean not specifically

brain tumors, but other issues that I don't hear about often. I'm trying to spread my story and spread information about it so that other people feel comfortable being like, 'Yeah this sucks, but what are we going to do about it? We'll just be aware and we'll make it a public awareness so that our friends know and then we can move on to other things.' I think the reason the negativity shows is that this is so not super well-known and everyone's experiences can vary widely. A lot of it comes from people in certain countries or under certain doctors whose bodies have had bad reactions to medications or whose doctors weren't good with their surgery, and it's just a wide range.” Ultimately, Z felt their experiences were heard and understood by the online support group and that they were able to do the same for others.

SMSs allow people to stay in touch with those who, if they had been born thirty years earlier, they might never have seen again. “It sort of makes me feel like I'm still connected to those parts of my life,” said Participant B. “I went to three different high schools, so social media has allowed me to...feel like I'm connected to them in some way, which allows me some sort of emotional continuity. That part of my life isn't completely over. It's not like I left and they all cut me out.”

“It's helped me keep in contact with people who I otherwise would not have had any contact with. I can't think of any instance where it's facilitated getting to a deeper level of understanding of a person. It facilitates keeping in contact at a baseline level. I feel less lonely if I interact with someone [online],” said Participant F. “If I just look at [social media], I don't feel less lonely. If I swipe up on someone's story and we have a little conversation, then I do feel better. It gives me a little boost of serotonin to give someone a compliment and get on with my day.”

Several participants brought up their social media usage in relation to traveling abroad, although this was never prompted by the researcher. Snapchat was commonly mentioned among participants who had international friends, since many messaging services do not support international communications.

“When I was abroad I was seven hours ahead of everyone else,” said Participant D. “When I found that I was not awake at the same time as everyone else, my social media usage just skyrocketed. Because I felt like I was missing out, I felt like there were things going on and I had no idea. People would text me like, 'Guess what!' and I would have to wait six hours for a response. I was constantly checking to make sure I wasn't missing something.” When prompted to consider if being abroad had changed the time of day that they went online, D said, “I think I was definitely more online when I knew other people were on. If I knew I was seven hours ahead, they would be getting on and it would be late afternoon for me, so late afternoon I'd be online.”

Participant I mentioned that they used Snapchat to keep in contact with two friends from high school, one of whom had been an exchange student. Participant E had spent a year abroad, and when describing how they used YouTube during meals, they felt it had served as a proxy for sit-down meals with friends at the time: “When I was living alone in Sweden, then it was more for interaction.”

Due to social media, Participant E had been able to maintain contact with people they had met abroad. “Yeah, a lot of those people in Europe. I have a friend, this girl I met in Sweden. At one point we had a snap streak that was like 1,200 days. I talked to her every day for three or four years and I don't think I'll ever see her again. We met in-person very briefly and had like a five minute conversation. We've just had these back

and forths over the years. She'll text me something, I'll text her something, now maybe four or five times a year. I would consider her a friend, but I've literally met her once. It's weird.” Participant E considered it a meaningful relationship, at odds with their earlier statement that social media had never deepened a relationship with another person. “I feel more comfortable talking to her about certain things, because she lives on the other side of the world and she doesn't know anybody that I know here. She could tell everybody in her neighborhood and nobody here would ever know. So I can go to her and be totally honest about a situation and not have to worry about her knowing somebody or judging somebody. The flipside, if my car broke down, she can't do anything about that.”

“I started using [social media] more when my family lived abroad for a couple of years,” Participant A said. “It was the easiest way to contact people because we didn't have US Cellular connections, so Snapchat was really the only way to communicate.” Participant A also touched on their experience abroad when asked if many of their online contacts were people they would consider acquaintances. “Instagram is now really the only connection I have because they're [people A met abroad] off doing their own university experiences so really the only way to see what they've been doing is Instagram. So I guess I can't hate on Instagram too much.”

Most participants responded, when prompted, that since the pandemic they have spent more time going back through their old posts or even their camera rolls to look at old group photos.

“I'm more likely to look at that photo on my social media than if I keep it in my camera roll,” said Participant I. “I get to go, 'Oh hey, I did that!’”

“I don't expect anything out of it,” Participant J said of posting. “I don't know why I post because I don't expect anything out of it. It's a means of storing a story. You get to look back at it and go, ‘Oh yeah, we did those things.’”

“I have a lot of pictures in international countries, just like going to clubs and being in large, touristy areas where you're walking through the Sistine Chapel and everyone is sardined in there,” said Participant D. “I'm definitely a nostalgic person. I feel like I go through my camera roll more than the average person. I'll look for a meme to send to a friend and as I'm scrolling through to find that one picture, I'll see pictures I took in the past. It's like cleaning your room, and then you see your old journal and you sit there reading it for hours instead of cleaning your room. During the pandemic I would look through my camera roll more often, because what else is there to do, and see these pictures of the before times, and like...that's weird, now. Thinking that that was the norm and not even questioning that level of social interaction. It's crazy to think how much that has changed.”

“It makes me remember the good times,” said Participant B. “It gets me through the pandemic when I see stuff like that, because I'm like, 'One day, one day we'll be back to that.'”

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER

Male interview subjects were more likely to use Twitter, while female subjects were more likely to use Instagram. Participants were asked about their perceived experience of social media in regards to their gender.

“I’ve heard that Instagram damages teenage girls because they’ll look at women with really nice bodies. I don’t get that, I just scroll through and see what people are posting,” said Participant G.

“ I would say [social media is] overall negative for girls, but I also want to question guys as to what pressure they feel because it's not really questioned at all. Not that they have it better, because we live in a misogynistic world, but I've always questioned what kind of pressures they feel, because as open as I think the female community is about it, I don't think the male community is as much...I haven't heard it from any male perspective. They're either too pressured or not interested. From the female perspective, lots and lots of pressure,” said Participant A.

“In high school...I would only post pictures if I looked skinnier than I actually was. But since the pandemic and being in a new relationship...that's really changed it as well. I'm less looking for male attention. But I've gained a lot of weight and that brought out a whole new level of insecurity in photos because people will look at my photos and think, 'Oh my god, she's gained so much weight,' so I was not even posting any photos until kind of recently, then I was kind of like, 'F*** it, here's this really cute picture of me and my boyfriend. Yeah, you can see my backrolls in it...' Now I'm getting anxious even thinking that I posted it.”

“I like to go on there, they feel like safe spaces and I don't have to worry about people who know me in real life finding out. I was homeless for a good portion of break... I've found it's nice to go into a space where I know that's not a risk because nobody knows me in real life,” said a participant who was a member of the LGBTQ+

community. They said that the visibility of other people in similar situations to themselves was helpful when they were discovering their own identity.

When asked about whether they've seen people display self-consciousness in regard to social media, A responded, "I've noticed it in sorority groups. My twin goes to a certain sorority in her college and I noticed the self-consciousness and the necessity for followers in their sorority, it's the only way to make friends in that sorority, and that's how I correlate Instagram followers with people I've met in college, and with younger people I do correlate it with self-consciousness in high school."

"I'm in a sorority and we have to sign a social media contract at the beginning of every semester," said Participant B. "There are rules about what we can and can't post on our social media, because we're representing our sorority. I would say some are more aware, we're sort of forced to be because we're in a sorority." When asked about their personal feelings toward sorority social media rules, B said, "I support that because everyone in my sorority has the sorority letters in their Instagram bio, and posts photos and stories of them being in a sorority, and when you're in a sorority because of the public perception of it you have to be hyper aware of how you're presenting yourself. There are a lot of people out there, not even in UMaine but just in general, who'll take one sorority girl doing something bad, and be like, 'See, Greek Life is garbage, abolish sororities.'"

When asked whether they perceived a difference between online sorority presence versus online fraternity presence, B responded, "Frats can do whatever they want. Sororities aren't allowed to have any in-person events. Frats are just throwing parties at their house. They post photos of themselves drinking and smoking. The frat accounts will

even like it.” In regards to the different experience of different genders online, B said, “It's definitely different. Not that guys don't feel pressured to post good photos, but I think women especially feel the need to be like, 'it has to be perfect, I have to edit it,' whereas men are like, 'here's a picture of me with my dog.' I think women put more effort into it.”

Participant C was disappointed by the response they received on an artistic photo, noting that the comments had been about their appearance rather than the editing work they had done. “I feel like if a guy posted it [the photo] of them and did the same thing, there wouldn't be comments about his appearance,” C said, and elaborated that they preferred VSCO to Instagram for creative posts. “VSCO is much more female-based. There's only girls I know on it. You can either like something or repost it, and you can't see the caption, and you can't see other people's likes. It's just having an image that you repost, or you post it. When I would post the more creative stuff on VSCO a lot of people would repost it. Like, that made me happy. And the things that other people posted, I would be like, 'That's cool.’”

“If I bring up things that have to do with being a girl and have to do with social media, my boyfriend is like, he never thought about it that way or something like that,” said Participant C. “He has expressed to me that it makes him insecure when he sees male ideals online. But I'm not sure the extent of which it impacts him. I think it's different, and also harsher on girls.”

“The first time I posted my girlfriend, I got a ton of comments, mostly from her end. You look on a guy's post, you'll see like ten comments. A girl's post, there's like 30 to sometimes a hundred comments on an average post,” said Participant E. “Sometimes

I'll ask them, like, 'Who is that?,' and they'll be like, 'Oh, I hate them.' So I try not to compare myself to girls too much, but I do think they tend to be more successful because of how they evaluate themselves. Social media is more mental than physical, so it lends itself more to how women interact with one another, how they bully each other. Obviously some guys benefit from it. But they also tend to have more traditionally feminine qualities.”

“The male experience is you go on and see lots of beautiful women, lots of sports highlights. It's everything you assume a stereotypical male would be into. You're scrolling through and you're like: here's Tiger Woods in an accident, here's the woman he hooked up with. I want to see Tiger Woods, I want to see a putt he made in '05 that still blows my mind, I want to see the woman he was with. A girl, I don't think that pops up on their timeline. From what I've seen of girl's feeds, it's a lot more people they know. I almost never get a post from, like, a friend. If a guy posts too much I block him or just mute him.” When asked if this was also true with female friends, the participant said, “No... I might have exposed myself here.”

“MIDDLE SCHOOL WAS ROUGH”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND AGE

“I got it trying to be cool,” said Participant H. “And as a way to kill time.”

Participant H mentioned downloading several platforms in seventh grade at a friend's house.

“When I first started using it I was less level-headed about it [FOMO],” said H. “I think I started using it at a bad age to start getting into social media. In seventh grade I definitely tried to project myself as doing all these interesting things. I tried to post somewhat regularly. I would look at stuff I was tagged in and be like, 'Yeah, I look good

in that,' or whatever. I definitely haven't grown out of that, but I think I'm less concerned about the social media aspect.... I don't know if I've become more outgoing. I think I probably have. But I've also become more comfortable with my level of sociability. Middle school was rough.”

Participant H mentioned trying to present an idealized image online, but was not necessarily inspired by celebrities or influencers. “Most of the influencers I was into in middle school were weird Youtube ‘Let's Play’ people, and I knew enough to be like, ‘It's not cool to emulate them.’ I think I would emulate people in my school. My middle school and high school were very cynical. Like, ‘This school's stupid,’ that b*****. I don't think I super internalized that, but I tried to project that.” At the end of the day, however, H felt that their time in middle and high school was a good experience.

“I see all of the girls in my high school who are two years below me at the same age that I started using Instagram,” said Participant A, who began using social media in 2013 and mentioned concern for younger people who started the same year. “It's such a different world, every day they straighten and curl their hair and wear makeup...It makes me sad because they're only two years younger than me.”

Participant C joined social media in 2013, and mentioned being preoccupied with Instagram and Snapchat at the time, in middle school, when they felt they were at their “most vulnerable.” Because of social media they were able to be in constant contact with everyone they went to school with. When asked what might have been different had they not been online at the time, Participant C responded: “ I wouldn't have had such closeness with people in my grade, because I wouldn't have been able to text them, which is easier than hanging out with them. I think I would have probably been happier without it. But at

the same time it did help me communicate with people. I don't know if that is really a good enough thing to overpower how bad it made me feel.”

Participant D acquired social media in late middle school without their parents’ knowledge, and tried to download Instagram and delete it if their parents took their phone away; they were willing to go to such measures in order to avoid missing out. “I think it’s the reason I’m like, ‘Are people embarrassed to have me around?’,” the participant said. “If I were to see parties with these girls who I thought were my friends but I wasn’t invited, that definitely had an impact on my self-image.”

Participant D also talked about FOMO and feeling jealous over pictures of others having fun without them. “Whether they're actually having fun or not, my assumption is that they are.” The participant said it was now important to them to be visibly associated with others online. “I like being like, 'Look at what I'm doing, I'm having fun.' I kind of crave that. I have a problem with feeling like people are embarrassed to hang out with me. That comes from like deep rooted insecurities from middle school, high school. So any time someone posts with me or something I'm included in and tags me in the photo, that makes my day. People aren't embarrassed I'm there. They're showing off hanging out with me.”

“Social media has helped me because I've been able to moderate it,” said Participant F. “And because I didn't get it super young. I was a junior in high school when I got any form of social media. So I didn't really form a dependency on it when I was younger and I haven't now.” When asked whether they thought age was the deciding factor in their healthy relationship to phone usage, they added, “I think it's my lifestyle. I

do a lot of stuff where I don't have access to the internet and my phone. I don't take a phone when I'm backpacking. I think that that helped me not get dependent.”

Participant F, of all the participants, seemed to have had the most positive overall experience with social media. Indeed, they did not even reference using it to procrastinate, but said they primarily only went on at night after finishing all of their homework.

Participant G, who mainly used Twitter for information-seeking purposes, had only begun using social media their senior year of high school, saying they had been restricted to a track phone before then.

“I think there's an age component,” said Participant B in regards to how people’s perceptions toward social media had changed due to the pandemic. “Old people, like middle-aged to old people, they see it as a bad thing. Whereas I think Gen X and millennials and us--young people have always viewed it as a way to communicate and keep in touch and I think that since the pandemic the older generations have started realizing that as well.”

“I FEEL LIKE I’M ADDICTED TO COCAINE”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND BOREDOM

The usage of social media to alleviate boredom or otherwise ‘kill time’ was a frequent occurrence across all case study interviews. One participant had deleted Instagram about a year prior to the time of the interview. The time they had once spent scrolling through the app had been replaced with a similar amount of screen time on a different medium: phone games.

“I feel like I’m addicted to cocaine and I'm in a meeting about it,” said Participant I in regards to their unhappiness with their Instagram usage. “I deleted instagram for a

while! I deactivated and deleted the app.” Participant I had since redownloaded Instagram and was again using it, but prior to the interview had deliberately downloaded a game with the intention of using to ween themself off of Instagram. “Even though it’s just a game,” they remarked, “it’s better than scrolling.” They admitted to spending the same amount of time on their phone since downloading the game, but with less time spent on social media. “I’m trying to work my way off of social media. I want to do more activities [hobbies]. I’m mainly trying to stop being addicted to Instagram; it’s impulsive.”

Several other participants mentioned their screen time being distributed between direct messaging services, social media, and phone games. Participant H mentioned spending a portion of their screen time on a phone game, but said they only did so at home. They did not think much would change if they replaced more of the time they spent on Facebook with a phone game, but said, “It would be like a healthier choice, maybe.”

Participant D said that their usage of social media both for entertainment and communication has gone up since the start of the pandemic. “I downloaded this one app in particular...at the beginning of the pandemic and now I'm on like level 3533. I have done *hours* on that app. For what? I can't tell you. But it's entertaining and it's mindless. I think I have put more hours into that one app than I have communicating with friends.”

Participant C, a previous user of Instagram and TikTok, deleted the apps from their phone a year prior to the time of the interview. “I knew that whenever I would go on it wasn’t for any particular reason. It was just mindlessly scrolling, and stuff on it kind of bothered me.” C felt they were comparing themselves to others. “I was like, ‘I don’t even

really use this app to have fun or anything.’ So I just deleted it, and I haven’t redownloaded it because I just don’t care.” When asked what they did to fill the time that had previously been dedicated to social media, C responded that the time had probably been filled with phone games. However, they felt this was more due to procrastination than boredom.

“I instinctually go to it sometimes,” Participant H said concerning their Instagram habits. “I don’t have like a good conscious reason for why I can’t delete it, which is kind of freaky. If I go to delete it there’s like a little gut reaction that’s like, ‘Oh no! Stop!’”

“I do it throughout the day,” said Participant B. “If I have nothing to do, I just pop open Instagram. I know people say you shouldn’t do that, but it doesn’t affect me negatively. Sometimes it even affects me positively. I’ll see a cute photo, and that’s how I start off my day.”

“It’s nice to get a laugh first thing in the morning,” said Participant J.

Participant G had observed themselves going on social media more often since the beginning of the pandemic, but said, “I don’t know if I was seeking to alleviate loneliness. I think it was an absence of things to do.” They said it was an automatic response to open the Twitter app whenever they had downtime, or if they were feeling left out in a group. “It’s an involuntary habit for sure. I’d open it without even thinking. Even on my computer, I’d type it in and be like, ‘What am I doing? I’m trying to work right now!’”

All interviewees cited using social media during downtime, as a cure for boredom, and for entertainment purposes. For some, scrolling through Instagram provides the stimulus needed to wake up in the morning; for others, it kills time

throughout the day. People mentioned using social media in the bathroom, or during online classes when their cameras were off, and before going to bed at night.

“It's used in the morning when I wake up, which I think is pretty normal for our age. And then whenever I'm bored in class—please don't tell my professors—and definitely at night as well. And I know every person who lives in my apartment does the same thing,” said Participant A. “They turn their lights off and turn their phones on. We all stay up for another hour scrolling mindlessly through. And I know it's not just us.”

The question that must be asked of this phenomenological response to boredom is whether this is a translation of preexisting behavior, and whether there is a preferable alternative. In order to establish whether this response to boredom is *new*, the circumstances of boredom must first be examined. Maslow's hierarchy of needs indicates that an emotional or intellectual stalemate like boredom cannot be present in an individual if that individual's needs have not been fulfilled. It is unlikely that our ancestors had much time to experience boredom.

TikTok in particular was referenced as being a platform used for literally endless entertainment. “The For You page is constantly updating,” said Participant C. “With Instagram, people I follow aren't constantly posting.”

Participant B mentioned using Instagram Reels, a similar platform to TikTok, and scrolling through videos there. In regards to Instagram content and whether they enjoyed it, Participant I said, “I mean I enjoy the content because it's f***** tailored to me. They watch everything you do and keep track of it.”

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GUILT

“It's hard to gauge, I don't know what they do when I'm not around,” said Participant F. “By and large people that I know seem a bit more dependent on it than before the pandemic.”

One of the most frequent trends between participants in the cross-case analysis was guilt. Participants' guilt most often took the form of shame in regards to screentime, which most mentioned had increased since the start of the pandemic. Since the interviews were sourced from undergraduates, many mentioned going online during classes.

“Especially classes that I don't find that interesting,” said Participant G. “I had one class I was finishing up for my minor and I wasn't that interested in it, so I'd shut off my camera and zone out, check social media. Remote classes make it worse.” G then stated that social media hadn't necessarily impacted their performance, but rather the overarching fact that they were not engaged in the material.

When asked whether they tracked their screen time, participants would often show hesitation or even embarrassment. Several participants mentioned spending about 3 hours per day on their phones; some preferred not to know.

“I've been disappointed with myself for using it so much throughout COVID. My average is like three or four hours a day, which isn't good,” said Participant A.

When asked whether they monitored their screen time, Participant I responded promptly: “No.” They then backtracked: “Oh, I thought you said do I want to do it, I was like, no, I don't want to show you my screen time! I don't keep track of it. Normally I see the notification and go ‘Oh, that's bad!’ and continue on. It makes me feel guilty. And the

guilt has been building up for years.” Participant I elaborated that they *did* feel good about themselves if they only used social media for a small amount of time in a day.

“In high school I was talking to this girl and she was like, ‘Oh yeah, I spend 13 hours a day on my phone,’ and I was like, ‘Damn, I feel bad about two hours a day,’” said Participant J. “I set timers on apps. I have a timer on Snap, Insta, and Youtube. Twenty minutes for Snap, an hour and a half on Youtube. I set it that way because I think there are more valuable things I can be doing with my time.”

People may also feel guilt concerning their feelings towards others in an online space. Participant D reacted adversely to photos of attractive people with large follower accounts, drawing negative assumptions about the personal qualities of individuals who are popular online. When asked whether they would respond the same way to a selfie posted by a person they considered unattractive, Participant D responded, “No. If I actually saw the same kind of selfie from someone I found attractive versus unattractive, I think I would have less negative assumptions about the unattractive person. Am I a bad person?”

When asked what would happen if they deleted their social media, Participant D responded, “I think I would be more present. I don't even mean to, but I'll be in a conversation with someone and I'll just pick up my phone and be on Instagram. And I'm like, 'Why did I do that?' I'm trying to listen to this person talk and I'm being rude and I don't even realize I did it. I would be more present in my life and listen better. I get distracted too easily with social media.”

Two participants cited the Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, as being responsible for them becoming more aware of, and making effort to change, their media

habits. “Partway through the pandemic I watched *The Social Dilemma* and deleted Twitter,” said Participant H. “That was my social media of choice, so I was really proud of myself when I deleted it.” H deleted Twitter when they became concerned that it was unhealthy. “I would go on there and look at toxic political stuff and I would get all mad. It was kind of like my guilty pleasure was to get myself all riled up.”

Participant H also felt that deleting social media would have a positive effect on them moving forward. “I’m sure long-term I would be happier if I deleted all of them [SMSs]. I would have a hard time deleting Snapchat, stuff I use to actually talk to people. Also I know for the next week I would open my phone habitually. I don’t know what I would do with that time. But I think long-term it would be good for me.”

“Most of my friends, their perception of social media is like, ‘I should get off it, I should really delete it’,” Participant H said when prompted to think of their peers’ attitudes toward social media. “Of course, no one ever does. Everyone recognizes it as sort of a bad thing. It’s weirdly hard to get rid of it.”

“Before the pandemic I had a goal of weaning off of social media altogether,” said Participant E. “I was gonna get off Snapchat, I was gonna get off Instagram, I had no intention of downloading TikTok. After the pandemic hit, I was like, ‘What am I going to do?’ I was in limbo, I didn’t have stuff to do all the time. I downloaded TikTok because I was convinced there was an educational portion, but I haven’t seen that so I think i’m going to get rid of it.” A follow-up two months later revealed that E had followed through and uninstalled the app, but not deleted their account. When asked if their perception of social media had changed, E responded, “I look at it the same way I look at my old Ford Taurus car. It serves a purpose in my day-to-day life and at some point I will get rid of it

because I know it's not good for my health. The moment I get any success in life, I'm off of it.”

Participant E deliberately moved TikTok and Instagram to an unfrequented folder on their phone and turned off notifications. They estimated that the two measures together had reduced their screen time from around seven hours to one in the course of a month. Without the recurring prompt of notifications, red text alerts on apps when screens are opened, or even the immediate presence of the apps themselves, the participant was less inclined to return to the platforms. When asked what they were seeking when they had previously responded to notifications, the participant replied, “The endorphin rush. It’s sort of like a slot machine. [They] try to get you addicted to the possibility that the next thing you see in your feed is [going to be] the funniest thing you've ever seen, that the next thing you post is the thing that blows up. It was a habit I just had to break.”

When asked what would happen if they got rid of social media entirely, Participant E responded, “I lowkey dream of doing this. I haven't yet. But I'm going to at some point. I would say in the short term, some FOMO. I would have a lot more free time during the day to fill up and figure out what I want to do. I would have to answer some questions from friends, I think I would miss out on a couple things. There are things I hear about over social media, or interactions I have. I'd probably get more done, I'd probably be more productive.”

Participant C felt that phone usage dominated much of their free time, and that rather than do hobbies or their schoolwork it was easier to go online and check social media. Although they had deleted the Instagram app from their phone, they still were able

to access their account through a web-browser, and did so multiple times per week, but for less time than they would have otherwise. “I’ve probably felt more confident since deleting it,” C said. “I kind of encouraged my boyfriend-- well I didn't really encourage him, but when I deleted Instagram he did too, and TikTok, because he kind of felt the same way. But he’s redownloaded both of them by now, and this isn't really relevant, but I do notice that he is so much worse at going on Instagram out of habit and just scrolling, and not even looking at the pictures or anything. I didn't go on it like that, where I would scroll so mindlessly, but it was kind of out of boredom.”

When asked what they thought would happen if they got rid of their phone entirely after the pandemic, C responded, “I think I would probably be happier than if I did have my phone, but I might not be in the loop. And I don't really care about that. I feel like I would try it, but I haven't thought about doing that.”

“It's often more like a creative project I want to share. I don't advertise it. Put it out there, if people find it, good,” said Participant J in regards to why they posted. When asked what the difference was between posting and their camera roll, J said, “That's the thing, right. The slight opportunity of exposure.” J was asked if they were chasing fame, and said, “I guess, but I'm not expecting it.” When asked whether they would be opposed to it, J replied, “Are you a psychologist? I'd feel like a phony. If people like it, good for them. Mac DeMarco said, 'I'm not really good at any of the instruments I play, but people like it so I give them what they want.' My friend posts on instagram to have a portfolio. Would I be opposed to fame in *that* regard?...You make me want to delete it.”

When asked what would happen if they *did* delete social media, J said, “It would be annoying for some people who I solely communicate with on Snapchat. If I got rid of

Snapchat I don't think it would be an issue. Instagram would be a harder habit to break, a lot of the humor between me and the crew is from Instagram. It would be rough to see the memes go and not be up to date. I wouldn't be able to go look at the memes. Part of the reason I don't want to delete Instagram is, I save posts. I think deleting Snapchat wouldn't be a problem. Instagram, if I did delete it, it could be done. It probably wouldn't be that bad. I very infrequently look at that stuff I save. I think one day I might use it but I rarely do it. I don't think it would be a big deal. A lot of the FOMO doesn't stem from Instagram. That wouldn't matter. Youtube would be the biggest challenge. Most of the time I spend on my phone is on Youtube.”

Participant J deleted all their social media following the interview, after concluding that they didn't need it, and followed up a week later. “I don't feel guilty about using my phone anymore,” they said, of sharing projects directly with friends instead of posting them. “I ended up redownloading it in a dream, and in my dream I was ashamed of myself for having no self-control, but then I woke up.” After a full week without their primary social media platforms, they found that their screen time had remained the same.

“It's like a parasite,” said Participant G on Twitter. “Like I *think* I do, but I don't actually need Twitter or social media to stay on top of things. I think it's probably negative and I should delete it, but we'll see what happens.” A lot of people say that they should delete social media. When asked why they hadn't, G said, “I've deleted it before! And then something happens, some event happens...a lot of journalists I like will post on Twitter, and their immediate reactions I can't get anywhere else. So then I redownload it.” The participant had done this multiple times. “I think if I actually deleted my account,

it would help. But if I just delete the app off my phone, I secretly know I can just redownload it. I'd probably be more like I was before, and I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing. but I don't think I need twitter to be a more informed person. I'd probably be fine if I deleted it.”

On the flipside, Participant F felt that posting online and increasing the salience of their achievements, even in their own eyes, helped with their self-image. “If I look back on my instagram profile, I've always struggled with feeling proud of things in the moment. But I can look back on a post I made with an achievement when I'm feeling bad, and be like, ‘Wow, I did that,’ and then I feel a little better. It makes it a more palpable achievement. It's nice to look back on. At the same time I don't like that dependency. I don't feel as proud of things that I don't have a picture to look back on.”

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION OVERLOAD

“Another reason I deleted TikTok (other than spending too much time on it) was because of how much exposure the world's problems have on it (stories of sexism, violence, stuff like that),” said Participant C. “It was starting to be overwhelming to me, as if I was constantly watching the news.”

The overload of negative information was a more common ailment among Twitter users. Participant B was part of a political group and mentioned using Twitter to meet people involved in their organization and interact with them even if they had not met in person. Notably, few participants had used social media to meet new people. Due to their career aspirations, B felt they were more reserved on Twitter than they would be with people face-to-face. “I know that when you apply for political jobs, they do look at your

Twitter.” They also said that they primarily used Twitter to follow politicians and keep up with political news.

If different social media platforms fulfill different information drives for different people, Twitter seems to be most frequented by those seeking political discussion.

Participant E did not have a Twitter account but still used the platform. “I do go on the Explore page just to see what the trends are, to see what people are talking about that day. If there’s breaking news you can see on-the-ground footage.” When asked why they didn’t have the app, E responded: “Life’s too short. Here’s my problem with it: the President of the United States is presented in the same way as Joe from Hannaford. As a medium, the message is saying that these two are equal. I think a lot of people use it to complain about stuff. Each application has its own culture, and I find Twitter’s to be extremely toxic and negative.”

“I use Twitter the most,” said Participant G. “It’s my main source of news besides Google News. It’s probably not that healthy, but I check it often just to stay up to date to see certain stories, or people’s reactions to stories.” When asked what features Twitter had that appealed to them more than Instagram, an app the participant rarely used, they responded: “The access to information is a lot quicker. The feeds are shorter. There’s more people on there that I’m interested in listening to. They’re forced to say things in fewer words because of the character limit. It’s easier to take in more information, faster. Instagram is just pictures. For what I’m interested in, which is hearing about what’s happening in the world, Twitter is a pretty easy way to get a quick sense of what’s going on.” They also felt that Twitter was more thought-provoking: “If I go on twitter I’ll think

about what I saw afterwards. If I go on instagram, I'm only thinking about what's on instagram while I'm on instagram.”

G had been a user of Twitter for five years, but had only entered the political Twitter sphere at the start of the pandemic as part of a deliberate effort to become a more informed citizen. They referenced the overall atmosphere as being negative and unrepresentative of the general population:

“I think it's a reflection of the worst parts of humanity. Most people aren't on Twitter. Most people on twitter are not commenting. Most people who are commenting are not getting in silly arguments or saying horrible things. So it's a very small fraction of people, but it's all you see. So it makes it feel really bad.”

Participant H had previously been an avid user of Twitter, and following the deletion of the app found that they still used their phone about as much as before: “At first, I probably played a phone game instead. I think at some point Facebook filled the gap.”

Information found online is not only limited to world news and trending celebrity drama, but can provide more insight than ever before into the lives of peers, friends, and family.

“My aunt is a huge Trump supporter and posts so much stuff on her Facebook,” said Participant C. “That has gotten my family members mad about it. So we have a terrible relationship with her now, and she blocked us on everything, so that's an example of a relationship that's been harmed by social media.”

SMSs are also constructed in order to maintain a baseline level of connection in every user. Notifications and unread messages serve as prompts to return to the application; some platforms even offer other incentives in the form of scores, like a game.

“I use Snapchat. I used to put a lot of effort into maintaining my streaks, and then like three months ago I just let them all die and was like, 'I don't care about this anymore.' I had several [streaks] that were two-plus years. I just didn't go on my phone for a couple weeks during the summer, and afterwards I came back and I had this sudden attitude shift, and I was like 'Oh, I don't want to prioritize having streaks anymore, I'll just reach out to them when I need to.' It also started because I was like, 'I want to see if I don't snap them, if they'll snap me first?'” said Participant B, and said that the Snapchat users with whom they had shared streaks had not commented on letting them die.

Several participants mentioned going online in order to further their education or improve their area of knowledge for areas of interest in regards to their different hobbies.

“It depends on how much interaction I'm having...now it's more for entertainment value, or learning. I'm trying to be more educated on random things,” said Participant E about watching YouTube during meals.

“Aside from my close friends, the other people I follow do what I do,” said Participant J. “They specialize in my hobbies.” While they did not use social media to procrastinate, J felt that there was a downside of getting inspired by a never ending stream of ideas. “It motivates me to focus on one thing, but then I see another thing online and get motivated for another thing.”

Information is not necessarily limited to useful or relevant topics. Most participants mentioned following influencers and celebrities in some capacity, although

none considered it a primary motive to go online. Participant B referenced following interior decor or lifestyle bloggers for inspiration. Participant D mentioned following famous people: Participant D had intentionally unfollowed some questionable fitness bloggers in favor of more body-positive models, but said, “I still follow my favorite celebrities, or even not my favorites. I follow Kylie Jenner. And I don't give a f*** about Kylie Jenner.”

“If you have a large following, people tend to look up to you,” Participant I said in regards to the influence of online celebrities. “People will be more inclined to look at things you promote. There are incidences where people follow people because they hate them. I don't like following people that I hate. That's a negative emotion. I don't want to be positive because of negativity.”

“Oh, I'd probably be happier,” G responded, when asked how they would feel if they deleted Twitter. “I'd be happier and more productive. That's strange, because until like two years ago I didn't pay attention to anything that was happening in the world besides sports. Now I feel an obligation to know what's happening. At the same time, it's my cognitive dissonance, because I know that if I unplugged from social media I'd realize that the sky is not falling all the time and that things are kind of okay. It's partly because of how the news is structured nowadays, it's very ominous. If I deleted Twitter I would certainly be happier, but I want to be informed. I would have more clarity.”

“Social media can be tiring to use, even though you're just lying down,” said Participant I. “People don't tend to view it as an activity, but it's mentally exhausting. You're inundated with so many opinions and information. I feel mentally drained.”

Especially when you get to the political sides. Some are nice but a lot of it can be repeat information, it can be negative.

“IF YOU’RE SMILING YOU MUST BE HAPPY”: SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL COMPARISON

“Not gonna lie,” said Participant B when asked about whether they considered the possible response when they posted. “Everyone likes getting likes and comments. It makes you feel really validated.”

“Likes,” Participant H said they had sought when they had posted frequently as a teenager. “Likes and followers. It feels good to have a big number of likes. And I'd compare that with what I saw other people's posts getting.”

“It feels good to get likes on a picture,” said Participant G. “You post a picture, check your likes, and like thirty minutes later you check again. It's stupid. especially where I don't post very often, it's like, ‘Ooh, people haven't seen *me* in a while!’”

“Definitely in the beginning I was posting for comments and likes. It's like that quote: ‘If you're beautiful, everyone in the world will let you know. If you're ugly, you gotta figure that out on your own.’ It's the same way with social media. If you're a social media person, other people will let you know.,” said Participant E. “I posted a TikTok that got a lot of likes and views. I told people I know...especially if they're always trying to get likes. I took it down. If I post a funny thing I don't get to hear people laughing. I'll just tell a couple friends and I'll actually get to hear them laugh.”

“I think I started documenting my life more because of social media,” said Participant D. “I didn't used to care less if people knew what I was doing, but now...in my

head, people assume I'm doing nothing. But I'm not thinking of other people, so why would they be thinking about me? It's weird when you say it out loud.”

“I guess you're trying to craft the ideal image of yourself,” said Participant J. “I'm trying to slowly dissolve my ego. I like anonymity. I want people to enjoy my content but not put a face to me. The same feeling I got as a child when I got on a void of Minecraft videos. I never saw their faces but I enjoyed their content, then you'd see their face and be like, ‘This is ruined for me.’ if people can enjoy what they see I’ve served my purpose...it's a little bit of a reflection of my personality.”

“I would post more of me with friends I thought were cooler, than with other friends,” Participant H said of their SMU in grade school. “It was pretty f***** up.”

Participants were asked if their opinion of a stranger would change if that person had an exceptional online following, either high or low.

“It wouldn't be negative. I'd be impressed, I guess,” said Participant G. “I don't know if it would change. I definitely wouldn't be negative.”

“Interesting, because when you first mentioned follower counts I immediately went to the low end, like if someone didn't have a lot of followers would that affect how I thought about them, no, but if someone has a lot of followers, yes. I immediately get a negative feeling toward that person. If I see they have like 13,000 followers I'm like ‘What did you do to deserve that?’” said Participant D. “I see girls who went to high school in the town next to mine and they have thousands of followers, and I'm like, ‘okay, but ten bucks your photos are filtered as heck, you probably facetune and photoshop.’ I mean, also, ‘you think you're better than me? yeah okay you have thirteen thousand followers so what.’ In a way it's my own insecurities. ‘So what? I bet there's nothing even

going on in your head.' I have bias against people with high follower accounts. I associate that with being fake. When my friends post pictures, it's like 'Me and my friend at a baseball game.' If I saw a friend, I would go, she went to a baseball game. But I feel like influencers go to a baseball game to get a photo. With an influencer I'd be like, 'She wants clout.'" When the interviewer pointed out that no one started off with a high follower count, the participant said, "Yeah, you're right, they didn't. But I knew this kid who became instagram famous...and all of a sudden he had thousands of followers, and I started to dislike him more. Because I feel like he changed. People tend to change with the number of followers they get."

"Probably not. I don't think it would," said Participant F. "I might find it a little strange. For me I only tend to let people I know in real life look at my stuff. When I see that [high follower counts] it confuses me, but it doesn't change my perception of them."

"When I see people who do that I always wonder if they're doing it for self-opinion. I wonder if they need to be validated, if they're self-conscious, and if they feel validated by [having] more followers on Instagram," said Participant A. "When I see fewer followers it almost makes me feel better that they don't feel like they need to find more people and be more active on social media."

"Some people are genuinely addicted to likes, and that's how they value themselves. It's set up where you kind of get the celebrity experience," said Participant E. "The more followers, the more unhappy I'd assume they are. Like I think The Rock is a good person, and he's got tons of followers. But I've never met anybody with over 5,000 followers who's happy. They have to listen to all these people's opinions. If I were to get famous for whatever reason, I would get off."

“I started a lifting account last year, [to show] my progression. Then I was like, ‘This is stupid.’ My boy, Chris, started around the same time as me, and he has around 20,000 followers. But he's become obsessive. His life has become obsessive. Not only has he suffered various injuries but he's semi-famous, with not nearly enough followers to advertise and turn it into a career. At the same time you're juggling university, then building this physique, then working with these algorithms. It's annoying as an onlooker. I didn't want that.”

“Over the summer one of my friends got like over a hundred thousand Youtube followers, she just blew up suddenly,” said Participant B. “And I guess that changes how I see her a little bit, but she also before that wasn't someone I was insanely close with, you know? I did have this feeling, like, 'Oh, I feel like I can't message her anymore because she's super cool.’”

When asked how they wanted people to view them online, Participant C said that they presented a more idealized version of themselves, and when asked what attribute they thought of when they imagined the idealized self, they said that that version was more ‘chill’. This was interesting in comparison with other participants’ mentions of presenting a certain image, since Participant C was more interested in presenting a certain aspect of their personality.

“I don't try to do much with my appearance because pretty much everyone who sees me on Instagram has seen me in real life. Obviously I'm not gonna want to post a bad picture of myself, but I'm not gonna go to the length of making myself look different. I try to do what's desirable to myself. A lot of the time I'm seeing things that I don't like, or that annoy me, and I just try to be the exact opposite of that. Because I don't know

what other people think of it, but I know what I think of it, so I kind of go with what I think is cool. But I will say that the last post I have on Instagram, I downloaded Instagram to post it because I thought it was cool. And I posted it because I thought it was cool. I was hoping people would comment 'This is cool.' The pictures were of me but that wasn't the point of it. And the comments I did get were about my appearance, which I was like, 'damn it!' I didn't want this to be about this. But that's what everyone's making it to be. The pictures I posted were pictures my boyfriend took of me because he likes to do photography, which is cool in itself, like they're good pictures. But then I edited them to make them sort of like Wes Anderson-inspired I guess, and I thought people would maybe recognize and be like 'Oh cool edit' or something. Not like that. All the comments were like 'You're so pretty!' And I know those comments 99% of the time are like mindless. But that's not really what I wanted to get out of it.”

“And also maybe it would be different for people who have more of an artistic reputation, there would be an understanding that this is more of a creative thing than a 'look at me' thing.” When asked whether the image they aspired to was more artistic, C said, “Kind of. That kind of goes along with the thing that's like, I want to post something if it feels cool and that's usually in an artistic way, not a physical way. And I also have VSCO that I haven't used in a long time. But in high school that's where I would do all my creative stuff, because I would go hard on my phone like editing things. I would never really post any of that stuff on my Instagram.”

“If I tout the mantra, 'I don't care what people think about me!' then why am I posting pictures of myself?” said Participant D. “I will say the truth is: affirmation. I don't know if that sounds conceited. I'm a very insecure person, so when I post photos, I'm

constantly checking how many people have liked it, if anyone's commented. And do I base my worth off of how many likes I get on a picture? Probably. I don't expect comments as much as I expect likes. But for that reason comments mean more to me. If someone decided to comment something as simple as a heart-eyes on a picture of myself that means way more to me than 50 extra likes.”

“I've always been a pretty insecure person, but I think that it's highlighted in social media,” said Participant D. “Like seeing photos of my peers. Let's say they post like a bathing suit photo, then I'm like, ‘Oh my god, I need to go to the gym.’ I have a more negative perception of myself because I'm seeing what other people are doing with their lives and what they look like.”

When asked why seeing people in-person didn't bother them, D said, “It's easier to make assumptions about people online. If I see a really nice picture I can be like 'I bet she's a b****. She's prettier than me? I bet I have a better personality.' Because you can't really show personality on social media. But in person I'm less likely to compare myself so negatively because it's more even battleground.” When asked how they would respond to meeting a prettier person with a good personality in real life, Participant D said they would simply die.

The same participant mentioned ‘cyber-stalking’ their current partner’s previous partners. When asked whether it made them feel better, they said, “No, never, like I never feel good, in fact I tend to feel worse! Even if I look at pictures, and I'm like looking at his ex-girlfriend, I'm like, 'Oh, she's so pretty, do I live up to that?’ The main time I'm stalking people is if there would be a reason in my head to compare myself to them. And that goes for my own exes too. I don't follow my ex-boyfriend and he doesn't follow me,

but I will still go on his page. I don't care about him anymore, I have no feelings whatsoever, but sometimes either to reaffirm that that relationship's over, or like, 'Yeah, he was never cute.' Always like the affirmation.”

“I don't compare myself to people I know. I don't necessarily compare myself negatively,” said Participant I. “It's more like looking towards a goal than anything else. I don't like to be like, ‘Oh, I’m better than this person... I do it! But I kick myself for it afterwards.”

“If I go do something fun, an important event, that's when I post,” Participant I explained. “I feel weird to take a selfie in my room when I’m not doing anything and then post it to social media. I don't want to put effort into keeping up to date. Some people go crazy with social media. If I was doing more I'd probably be a little more active with it, especially if I was doing things with more people. Like, ‘Look at this fun memory that happened two hours ago!’” They said they enjoyed seeing others’ posts: “I like when I see people doing activities and stuff. ‘You look like you’re having fun, you look like you’re doing well. I'm glad for you.’”

Two different interviewees had a twin, and had similar comments on their impression of their twin’s usage of social media.

“I don't compare myself to my twin, because we don't share many interests. He acts and sings, I backpack and scuba dive. I think I compare myself to people more on TikTok, because I follow more people that I don't know in real life on Tiktok. It's not necessarily like they're better or worse than me. I use TikTok to explore my identity. I'm nonbinary and I don't have a lot of friends who are transgender or nonbinary. I use those platforms to see content put out by other people who identify in those ways. I compare

myself to see if I can relate,” said Participant X (identifier recoded for potentially sensitive information). In regards to their twin, they said, “He definitely portrays his social media as a bit more...ungenuine—disingenuous!—than I tend to. Which is fine. He's also pursuing a career as an actor. He tends to model his social media off of high profile actors,” said Participant F of their twin, adding that the style of their twin’s pictures and their captions were similar to those of the actors he wanted to emulate. “It's not *fake*. It's a specific part of him he puts out, and not other parts of him. If I look at his social media, it's very polished, trying to look as professional as possible. I know him as more like a doofy kid. He has funny pictures and videos of him having fun, but that's not what he puts out.”

Participant A mentioned having a twin who posted a lot, and said that since they looked so similar they hoped other people would look at the twin’s social media so they wouldn’t have to post. “For a lot of my younger childhood I was very aware of her Instagram following and tried to copy her, but now I don't because you can't copy your twin to every extent in your life. But yeah, I think for a while...I was very self-conscious of not using social media on that level. I think it correlated with how popular Instagram was at the time. 2016–2017, in the middle of high school the social media increase and my self-consciousness were correlated.”

Later in the interview, Participant A elaborated on their own disillusionment with social media: “I see it a lot with my twin...it disillusions me because it doesn't really present any feature of yourself except for your image. It doesn't really reflect any of your dedication on any topic, anything that you feel active about, it doesn't discuss any social

or political issues that we should be aware of.” They felt that their twin presented a different and idealized image online, and that this was a near-universal condition.

“I would say it's an idealized version in image,” they continued. “Because if you're smiling, you must be happy! You must have had a wonderful day. You must know how beautiful you look. I don't see that as truth at all. It makes me sad that people can't be more open about their issues, we can help people with more than just a like! But I think that's just the easiest thing to get right now, and it's what everyone uses. It makes me kind of sad, but I can't change it on my own.

THE PERFECT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Most participants displayed a general mistrust of social media, and the misinformation that it can spread.

“I think they're all pretty misleading in their own ways,” said Participant G. “Any platform where you just see headlines and you don't click on whole stories is pretty uninformative.”

“I think the way social media is right now, it needs to be regulated,” said Participant E. “I know that's a big thing in the news, information sharing and privacy. That should be a conversation, but these companies need to be broken up. There need to be regulations on how addicting they can be made to be. I think they need to be boring. I see kids who've had it their whole lives, that they're very poor at person-to-person interaction. They have a warped sense of reality. I think it's going to lead to the downfall of society, how we interact. We've been built to interact and then that's changed in such a short period of time. Not to be regressive but I think we need to revert back to ways of thinking and interacting that are a little bit older. Maybe we shouldn't be so concerned

with what's happening across the world every day. We should be more concerned with local issues. I don't think the human mind is built to manage a social circle of seven billion people, I think it's more like 500.”

“I would make it something you can't log on and use,” Participant E replied, when asked how they would design the ideal platform. “You know in *Iron Man* when he sleeps with the reporter and Jarvis comes out-- that would be my social media app. If there's important information you want people to know, you give it to the application and rate it on urgency. Just think of things you want people to know. I've been reading like handwritten letters, and thinking about what people need to know. If we get back to thinking that way with social media, we'll be a lot happier. People need to get more focused on their communities. They entertained themselves for thousands of years without social media. You can't submit information, it staggers information, here's what's happening, here's important information. More of a debriefing.

“Phone bad, for the most part,” said Participant G. “People are trying to make social media that's healthier. One of them's Clubhouse. You can join a room, and it's just conversations, like audio conversations. It's chatrooms. So people will go on and you can invite people to listen to conversations. So if you're a fan of someone, you can enter their chatroom and listen to them talk to other people. That way it's like people actually talking to one another, it's a lot more substantive. You don't click on a post and see a bunch of horrible things that people write. You can write things and make someone feel pretty bad on Twitter, but it's much harder to say it. Social media is going to evolve away from that. Poeples are going to try to create platforms that are less toxic. I don't think it would be worthwhile making social media that was just text because I think it would just devolve. I

know people are looking at SM platforms that will make conversation healthier. I'd be very wary of restricting certain people, or letting others talk.”

“What's really cool that I've seen lately is integrating physical interactions into social media. Stuff with wearables, where it lights up if you share an interest with a person it lights up to spark a conversation. That kind of stuff is cool. One of the big problems with social media is because it's online through a screen you don't have meaningful connections ever. If there was a way to bridge the gap into reality that would be ideal,” said Participant H, and concluded: “Social media bad. Phones bad.”

“Like Snapchat but without the promoted stories,” said Participant I. “Just stories and messages. I feel like the basic idea behind social media is nice. The reality is negative. It affects a lot of people. There's been movements that help in some ways but you'll never get rid of that kind of stuff.”

“I mean, if I ruled the world, I would just make Instagram not exist anymore,” said Participant C. “I would make a new app that's more like VSCO, if I think about it. With Instagram, maybe my fear of posting things, is I think things need to be really important to post on Instagram. I have to justify it before I post on Instagram. I don't know if I'll ever use it again. I think Facebook sucks. I hate that the most.”

QUALITATIVE DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Questions about participants' reliance on social media to cope with loneliness and ostracism were met with mixed results. Participants were aware that they tended to go online when feeling lonely. Most were equally aware that using social media did not alleviate their loneliness, and many suspected that the habit only worsened feelings of isolation. However, in these instances, this proved not to be a deterrent from going online anyway. From 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been forcibly ostracized from their most frequented spaces, and restricted from seeing their friends and families. The unique circumstances of the pandemic and the remote socialization, learning, and working conditions presented by it establish these interview data as artifacts, in that the exact present conditions will not be able to be replicated (hopefully) anytime soon.

There was a notable finding in that all participants used social media to “keep track of people,” and that many of them used that exact phrase. This may simply be a byproduct of social comparison theory. Yet, it could also be the result of our generation having become conditioned to be intimately familiar with what is going on in the lives of our associates. The act of deleting social media severs the relationships we keep not with our close friends, but with acquaintances with whom we otherwise would not contact. The idea of severing these almost nonexistent and functionally meaningless relationships seems to result in anxiety in most participants. Therefore, there may actually be some merit to these connections, but it is unclear what purpose they fulfill.

Further research might examine the similarities and differences between a person's attitude and feelings toward acquaintances on social media versus characters in

common ‘comfort’ TV shows like *Friends*. Having knowledge of the lives of acquaintances could play a new role in the need to belong that could not have even existed preceding the existence of SMSs.

A significant amount of research has been conducted into the social climate of online multiplayer video games and how players connect (Rogers, 2017). The similarities between social media and multiplayer games have been considered before, but they are worthy of more in-depth cross-examination. The SMDS scale used in the present research (Eijnden, 2016) was originally adapted from a survey analyzing multiplayer game addiction. There may be more potential overlap between surveys developed to evaluate video games in regard to social media, and visa versa, that are worthy of exploration.

Most participants mentioned experiencing anxiety to some degree when they wanted to add someone on a platform, and this was always due to the other person being an acquaintance with whom they weren’t sure they could form a relationship. There seems to be some unspoken level of familiarity at which people will add someone online. Nobody knows what it is, and it is certainly not universal.

Some research has examined online relationships and found that positive relationship development was associated with public posts (Steijn & Schouten, 2013), and that people were more likely to evaluate acquaintances favorably if they had viewed their Facebook profile (Vogel & Rose, 2017). The act of adding someone online or even simply viewing their profile may be considered a special type of preliminary contact that has not previously existed. Vogel and Rose stated, “surprisingly little research has been conducted in which perceptions of acquaintances made after viewing social media profiles are compared to perceptions retained without this SNS information.” The present

study indicates a need for research that specifically examines the state of online acquaintanceships in terms of belonging.

No participants had used social media as a primary way to form friendships, but some had used it for romantic interests. Research examining reasons for using a platform like Bumble, which is theoretically set up both to form friendships and relationships, and users' success on that platform, might provide further insight as to why friendship seems to be restricted to a physical space, but people are more open to date someone they met online.

In regard to the differences in male and female perception of social media, qualitative research as to motivation to go online is recommended to identify motivators for different genders. Online spaces are also particularly important to members of the LGBTQ+ community, because people are able to interact and be themselves safely without publicly outing themselves.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for social media usage warrant further study in many regards. First, the distinction is between high-level extrinsic motivation (such as *integrated regulation*, in which there are extrinsic motivators but the actor has nearly fully internalized the behavior) and true intrinsic motivation (where the actor behaves solely for the pleasure of the behavior itself) may be almost impossible to distinguish through self-reported answers. A neurological approach to self-determination theory is already being established, and could hold the answers for identifying the true motivators behind Social Media Usage (SMU) (Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017).

In the student interviews there was a suggestion of a correlation between the age at which participants began using social media and their attitudes towards it. Younger

individuals are more likely to develop social media addiction (Abbasi, 2019). The present study has noted a difference in attitude toward social media, as well as toward phones in general, depending on the age at which the participant obtained a smartphone. A longitudinal study on late middle school to high school students, monitoring phone usage as well as related risk factors such as drug usage, depression, and anxiety, is recommended in order to assess directional correlation.

As of 2021, Youtube was the most commonly used social media platform, used by 81% of U.S. adults (Pew Research Center, 2021). The observation that male users tended to use Twitter as their primary SMS, while women preferred Instagram, is also supported by findings from the Pew Research Center that 44% of U.S. women and 36% of men use Instagram, while 25% of men and 22% of women use Twitter (2021). Interestingly, the most commonly used social media platform across all demographics is Facebook, but few participants in the interviews mentioned being active users of Facebook, suggesting that it might be a passive platform for people in younger age groups. TikTok has one of the highest divides in usage by age group, being used by adults ages 18–29 more than twice as much as any other age group (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Most social media platforms have seen little growth in their user bases since 2019, with the exception of Reddit and Youtube (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Interviewees commonly mentioned using Youtube during meals. Several referenced using it for educational purposes. Others said that it sometimes served to keep them company in the absence of others to eat with, and still some participants only used it for entertainment. Reddit and Youtube differ somewhat in content from other social media platforms in that

they place little focus on people the viewer knows *personally*, and instead share trending information. It seems likely that due to the perceived reduction of shared meals that people can have because of the pandemic, and because of the increased amount of freedom people have had in staying home, Youtube and Reddit have increased in usage.

The companies behind social media platforms may require more accountability for the negative effects of their app designs on their customers' lives. Several participants mentioned deleting apps on their phones and then using the same platform on their desktop. This seemed to help curb undesirable impulsive behavior. The significance could still be related to the accessibility of a smartphone. Yet, there is still an effect unexplained by the assumption that, considering most of the participants who had deleted apps had done so over the pandemic, those individuals would have likely spent more time at home with free access to their computers, yet still mentioned using social media significantly less when it wasn't on their phones. This suggests that traditional motivators for SMU (such as maintaining relationships and observing the news) may actually be entirely separate from the problematic habitual opening and scrolling involving the phone app itself.

Much of the current research performed on social media has grouped the apps and the platforms together, when there could be potentially significant results from evaluating the two separately. A study could be conducted where a sample would be evaluated concerning each individual's social media usage and phone screen time. The same pool of participants would then be directed to delete their phone applications for a two-week period, and they would be again be assessed for their social media usage and phone

screen time. Other scales such as the OES-A employed in this survey, or various scales for depression, belonging, and anxiety, could also be incorporated.

Many participants displayed a general mistrust of social media companies, primarily Facebook, due to the salience of the company's privacy infractions (Brandon, 2021). Moderation of online content varies wildly between corporations and lacks concrete universal regulation (Grygiel & Brown, 2019). A study analyzing the components of a free app that encourage users to download it found that trust significantly increased a person's intentions to download an app, and that "stickiness," or a person's repeatedly visiting a website or app, was strongly associated with the user receiving positive emotions from the app (Wu, Lien, Mohiuddin, Chien, & Yang, 2016).

For users who open social media apps habitually, will supplanting the impulse with another virtual stimulus work to override the response? The question presented here is whether social media is *only* alleviating boredom, or whether there are other factors that drive the addiction.

To an extent, the habitual use of social media apps may be partially due to *gamification*, or the incorporation of interactive game-like elements with the aim to motivate and engage users with a system that is not an actual game (Seaborn & Fels, 2015). This would explain the observation in the present study that people have been successfully able to moderate SMU (but *not* screen time) by introducing online games in lieu of scrolling social media apps like Instagram and TikTok. The only participant who was successfully able to decrease their screen time did not play phone games. One participant deleted their social media apps and also did not download a phone game, but instead they seemed to fill the same amount of time with Youtube.

There are a number of possible explanations. First, people who have already become conditioned to seek stimulation from their phone during downtime will not suddenly have less downtime because they deleted their social media apps. This hypothesis also assumes that people not meeting the criteria for social media addiction will not sacrifice other pastimes in order to spend more time online. If a person habitually checks Instagram for an hour every night before bed, suddenly deleting Instagram cannot be expected to change the impulse to pick up the phone itself.

Another possible explanation is that the stimulus people are seeking online, whether it be socialization, entertainment, or information-gathering, is not being adequately met outside of the online environment. Quantitative research in this area is recommended in order to identify emotional and cognitive differences in reacting to stimuli from social media versus phone games, as well as testing whether supplanting social media apps entirely with a phone game could have an impact on total screen time.

Notably, most participants exhibited some level of shame in regard to their screen time. Within the interviews, no participant was proud of spending a significant amount of their day on their phone, and there were consistent negative attributions made to most social media platforms. The baseline assumption is that people must go online for some amount of enjoyment, but the language used by participants indicates otherwise. It is unclear whether this is a negative association that is encouraged between peers through their own observations and discussion, an opinion enforced by media such as *The Social Dilemma*, or a response based exclusively on users' own experiences with social media and their emotional reactions to it.

The language and attitude participants displayed in regard to their social media habits, and the platforms in general, were bitter and arguably displayed signs of learned helplessness. When asked what would happen if they were to delete all their platforms, most participants took pause and considered the initial difficulties, but nearly all arrived at the conclusion that there would not be lasting significant damage. Most felt they would be better off without it, and that they had been considering deleting their accounts for some time. Participants who had deleted and redownloaded their accounts multiple times were unable to give a concrete reason as to how they had benefited from redownloading. Finally, all of the individuals in this category displayed unhappiness with the action of redownloading the app.

Qualitative research is suggested to specifically address this cycle of deleting and redownloading, in order to identify what people experience when they delete a commonly used app, since it does not *seem* to be loneliness. This is linked to the ability of some users to moderate their habits by using platforms on their desktop rather than the app. The addictive components of smartphone apps should be considered in research concerning impulsive and disordered usage. Furthermore, recommendations and resources ought to be provided to users who want to moderate their usage, or quit using social media altogether. New SMSs should be employed which encourage healthier interactions both with other users, and with the platforms themselves.

Research is suggested in regard to the salience of world problems such as political strife and violence on information-based platforms such as Twitter, and feelings of helplessness or worldview-related cynicism based on the present evaluation of participants' attitudes toward the news cycle as viewed on Twitter. The exhaustion

experienced by social media users after spending too much time online may also be worthy of research into the specific causes, and how these reactions are identified on a neurological basis. In other words, if there is a different level of brain activity depending on the amount of time an individual is online, is this mediated in any regard by the content that is absorbed?

In regards to social comparison, future research is suggested in order to analyze the attributions people make based on a stranger's online following. The attributes assigned to people with high followings based on the interviews ranged from jealousy to pity. A set number of fictional profiles would be created and scrambled to have either high, low, or average follower accounts, and would then be displayed to the same number of participants under each condition and evaluated to see whether identical profiles would receive different feedback based on their following. Additionally, although the design would be limited due to subjective and cultural differences in regards to attractiveness, a study that examines identical posts with different subjects could be implemented. For instance, a sample pool of straight women would be asked to evaluate a stranger based on an Instagram post that either contained an attractive woman, an unattractive woman, or a man, and would otherwise be identical.

Finally, longitudinal case studies using "influencers" as subjects (mainly those who acquire moderate to large followings on Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok) are recommended in order to closely analyze how and *if* people do change when they begin to gain traction online. Vanity Fair has done something similar with Billie Eilish yearly for four years now (Sabia, 2020), although due to the interview being produced for entertainment, it does not achieve the level of depth that research might. Researchers

might identify a number of influencers with a growing fanbase on a number of platforms, for various reasons, and conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews bi-yearly or every several months depending on design. This would provide important insights into how low levels of online fame change people, how those people perceive that change, and if certain types of influencers (i.e. fitness, lifestyle, fashion, etc.) experience pressure in different meaningful ways.

CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods research combining a quantitative survey analysis and qualitative exploratory case study research provides insight for further research. The quantitative portion suggests: people who were high in ostracism and social media usage disorder prior to the pandemic remained high in both scores during the pandemic, but people who were not as risk before the pandemic did not experience increased levels during the pandemic; and nonbinary and genderfluid people feel less excluded, but more ignored, than men and women.

The qualitative research suggests that:

1. People may experience anxiety at the thought of deleting social media *primarily* because they risk ending almost nonexistent relationships with acquaintances;
2. Most people, particularly those with private accounts, require a minimum level of acquaintanceship before they will add someone online, and people will experience minor anxiety wondering whether the recipient on the other end of the request: A) likes them; B) has the same minimum level of acquaintanceship as the actor;
3. Minimal-contact (i.e. never DMing, but liking one another's posts) online relationships, particularly acquaintanceships, may constitute a new classification for a relationship that did not exist prior to social media;
4. Gender, and being a member of a sexual minority, may play a role in the motivation to go online, and may influence a user's platform preference;

5. People who begin using social media at a younger age are more likely to develop problematic attitudes toward usage, while those who begin using it later may be less likely to do so;
6. People may be more likely to watch Youtube during meals when feeling lonely;
7. Using social media platforms on desktop rather than a phone app may help to moderate usage;
8. Downloading phone games may help to moderate social media usage, but *not* screen time;
9. Twitter users may be at greater risk for experiencing negative worldview than users of other platforms;
10. People may assign certain attributions to strangers based exclusively on their follower count.

The present study is limited due to time constraints and the small sample size for the survey, and all participants being undergraduate students at the same university. Most of the survey participants were sourced from only two departments. Several interview participants were friends of the PI. The findings are preliminary and not causal.

This study concludes with implications for further research regarding the significance of online acquaintanceships, the unspoken rules around them, why they matter, and whether they serve a purpose in fulfilling the need to belong. Then the implications include the moderating role of gender identity on motivation to use social media; the potential causation between Twitter and users' negative worldview; and how using social media platforms on desktop versus a phone app affects users' mood and SM

habits. The overlap of tools for analyzing multiplayer games and online forums may also be significant and worth further consideration. Resources should be structured and advertised, particularly on college campuses, for people who struggle to moderate their social media usage.

Recommendations for future research include: a longitudinal study on late-middle school and high school students in the U.S. evaluating the effects that the age of starting to use social media has on attitude toward social media; experimental research that evaluates participants' screen time and SMU before and after they delete social media apps from their phones for a period of time; a longitudinal descriptive case study on influencers with growing followings to examine the short- and long-term effects of internet fame; and a controlled experiment providing qualitative insight into the evaluation of strangers based on social media following.

This mixed methods investigation sheds further light on the paradoxical nature of belonging and ostracism in regard to social media. The survey and interviews suggest that users' relationships with others online are complex and may contain more nuanced levels of familiarity than traditional relationships. Users' motivations to go online, while varying based on the individual and their needs, cannot be reduced to a simple binary distinction between lonely people and people who belong. However, considering the vast network that social media entails, its indirect *and* direct effects on feelings of inclusion versus exclusion in its users should not be ignored. People are willing to risk the experience of exclusion or ostracism (in experiencing "Fear of Missing Out", or FOMO, at seeing friends spending time together in posts, or in having friend requests ignored) for the chance of increasing belongingness (by connecting with someone online).

The present circumstances presented by the pandemic further illuminate what is ultimately a paradoxical relationship between user and platform. As people with social media addiction may sacrifice their workplace efficiency and their social lives, while eliminating social media altogether sacrifices workplace relationships and severs countless online acquaintanceships, to the distress of the user. Because of the pandemic, students and those with white-collar jobs are often forced to turn to remote communications for work, and many have had to translate their social life to a mostly online platform. Yet, users of social media feel guilt associated with their usage and dependency. In accordance with Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), people may evaluate themselves on the axes of distinctiveness and belongingness by using social media to “keep tabs” on acquaintances, in order to analyze how unique or similar they are to peers in their demographic.

In conclusion, there is much work to be done if social media can be evolved to a more beneficial and supportive standard, and this research provides indications as to the specific triggers, such as disclusion, that drive people toward unhealthy relationships with social media.

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APPENDIX A

The following survey was administered to all participants for the quantitative data collection. It contains three demographic questions, the Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS) administered both in terms of prior to and during the pandemic, and the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A). It received IRB approval (see Appendix C). Please note that this is the original survey, as the incorrectly administered Likert scale for the SMDS was collapsed to the correct dichotomous scale after the survey had been administered. While all of the following language was included, the format of the actual survey was altered from how it appears below due to it being conducted on Qualtrics.

Please answer the following demographic questions:

What is your current gender identity? (Check all that apply.)

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Transgender female / trans woman (or Male-to-Female (MTF) transgender, transsexual, or on the trans female spectrum)
- D. Transgender male / trans man (or Female-to-Male (FTM) transgender, transsexual, or on the trans male spectrum)
- E. Non-binary, genderqueer, or genderfluid
- F. Gender identity not listed:
- G. Prefer not to reply

Consider a hobby as an interest you pursue that does not influence your academic/professional career or benefit you financially. How many hours per week do you spend on your hobby/hobbies?

- A. Fewer than 1
- B. 1 - 4
- C. 5 - 9
- D. More than 10

How many social media accounts do you have?

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4
- E. 5 or more

In general, others...

Treat me as though I am invisible

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Look through me as if I do not exist

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Have ignored my greetings when we are walking by one another

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Ignore me during conversation

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Ignore me

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

“Hang out” with me at my home

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Invite me to join their club, organization, or association

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Include me in their plans for the holidays

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Make an effort to get my attention

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Invite me to go out to eat with them

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Invite me to join them for weekend activities, hobbies, or events

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

During the year before the pandemic (2019), did you...

Regularly find that you couldn't think of anything else but the moment that you would be able to use social media again?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Regularly feel dissatisfied because you wanted to spend more time on social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Often feel bad when you could not use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Try to spend less time on social media, but fail?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Regularly neglect other activities (e.g. hobbies, sports) because you wanted to use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Regularly have arguments with others because you want to use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Regularly lie to your parents or your friends about the amount of time you spent on social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Often use social media to escape from negative feelings?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Have serious conflict with your parent(s) and/or sibling(s) because of your social media usage?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, have you...

Found that you can't think of anything else but the moment that you'll be able to use social media again?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Felt dissatisfied because you want to spend more time on social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Often felt bad when you can't use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Tried to spend less time on social media, but failed?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Neglected other activities (e.g. hobbies, sports) because you want to use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Regularly had arguments with others because you want to use social media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Lied to your parents or your friends about the amount of time you spend on social Media?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Often used social media to escape from negative feelings?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Had serious conflict with your parent(s) and/or sibling(s) because of your social media usage?

1 - Never 2 - Rarely 3 - Sometimes 4 - Often 5 - Very often

Are you interested in participating in a follow-up interview?

(This will link to a separate survey form, in which participants may submit their email address for further contact.)

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW:

The interview will be in-depth and semi-structured, and conducted over Zoom. The interviewer plans to keep the conversation within the scope of the research topics presented:

Introduction Script: This interview is voluntary and you may stop at any time. The interview will be recorded and transcribed directly to the password-protected computer owned by the interviewer, and will not be stored on any Cloud. The recordings will be deleted by 06/01/21. The transcriptions will be kept on my personal password-protected harddrive and will be deleted by 06/01/22. Identifying information will not be connected to your interview. The recording will not be released to anyone other than the co-PIs. We ask that you do not take any screenshots or otherwise record information exchanged in the meeting. In the report, you will be referred to as ‘Participant A, B, etc...’ In order to protect your privacy, please complete the interview in a private and quiet space, to ensure that conversations are not overheard or interrupted.

Reasons for social media use. I.e. “Why do you use social media?”, “Do you use social media to meet new people?”

Goals for social media use. I.e. “When you post online, are you hoping for interaction from followers?”, “Is it important to you that you get a lot of likes on your post?”

Reactions to social media interactions. I.e. “Do you feel bad if you get fewer likes than you wanted?”, “Do you feel better about yourself when you get a lot of likes?”

Social media interactions versus in-person interactions. I.e. “How much of your social life do you feel is conducted online?”, “Do you feel that social media meets your social needs?”, “Do you check social media *more often* when you think peers are spending time without you?”

-do you follow back people you don’t know? Who *do* you follow?

Reactions to ostracism. I.e. “When you feel left out at a party, do you go on social media?”, “When you feel excluded, what is your first instinct?”

Ostracism and coping mechanisms. I.e. “Consider if you would change something about yourself, if given the opportunity. Is this the person you present on social media?”, “What are you seeking distractions from?”

Social media’s effects on feelings of exclusion. I.e. “What are your experiences with FOMO?”,

Social media and self-esteem. I.e. “Do you compare yourself to people on social media?”, “Does social media change how you see yourself? How?”, “Are you yourself on social media? How are you changing your persona online?”

Social media reliance. I.e. “If you were to delete all of your social media accounts right now, how would that affect you for the next week?”

APPENDIX C

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS

Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 400 Corbett Hall

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Emmeline Willey EMAIL: emmeline.willey@maine.edu CO-INVESTIGATOR: Michael Socolow EMAIL: michael.socolow@maine.edu FACULTY SPONSOR: Michael Socolow EMAIL: michael.socolow@maine.edu TITLE OF PROJECT: Coping with exclusion: a case study analysis of self-reported social media usage as it links to ostracism. START DATE: 2/3/20 PI DEPARTMENT: Department of Communication and Journalism CO-PI DEPARTMENT: Department of Communication and Journalism

STATUS OF PI: UNDERGRADUATE

If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:

for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone? for a master's thesis? for a doctoral dissertation? for a course project? other (specify)

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. REMINDER: if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.

Email this cover page and complete application to UMRIC@maine.edu

***** FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # 2021-01-09 Review (F/E): E Expedited Category: ACTION TAKEN: *****

**XXJudged Exempt; category 2 Modifications required? Yes
Accepted (date) 2/3/2021 Approved as submitted. Date of next
review: by Degree of Risk:
Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
Modifications accepted (date):
Not approved (see attached statement)
Judged not research with human subjects**

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN 2/3/2021

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Emmeline Page Willey was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, on January 24th, 1999. She moved to Monmouth, Maine in 2007 and graduated from Monmouth Academy in 2017. In her time at the University of Maine, she has participated in Student Government as a senator, the Chair of Services, and as the Vice President for Student Organizations from 2020-21. Her work for Student Government culminated in the construction of a swingset on campus that all students are able to enjoy. Emmeline has acquired experience in public service and state government as an intern at the Maine Department of Education and as a congressional intern for Maine's Second District Congressman Golden. She has published articles for DownEast Magazine. Following her graduation from the University of Maine in May of 2021, she is thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail before applying for Master's programs in Education Policy Research or Social Science Research. Emmeline hopes to conduct qualitative research in order to identify directions for the advancement of K-12 education.