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Exploring The Selfie Phenomenon: Identity Representation in Middle School Female Students

A Senior Honors Thesis
Alexa Horwitz

Advising Committee:
Julie Dobrow, Ph.D. (Principal Advisor)
Barbara Wallace Grossman, Ph.D.
Calvin Gidney, Ph.D.

Abstract

This present study investigated how Middle School female students use selfies to represent identity. The study aimed to understand why this demographic takes selfies and how they share these images of themselves with their peers. The thirteen participants for this study were recruited from the greater Boston area. Interviews were conducted with the participants and the responses were then coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis. Results from the findings pointed to status updates, physical appearance, dialogue, and individual/group positioning as four reasons that motivate middle school girls to take and share selfies. In addition, this study provides a foundation for understanding several social norms relating to middle school female students' relationship with selfies. This thesis specificially explores those social norms relating to the dialogue these girls use while referring to their peers' selfies and the expectation that this dialogue will be instantaneous. The results of this study suggest that in future studies, researchers should continue to explore the relationship between emerging digital trends and identity representation through the malleability of images and perceptions of those posting and manipulating them.

Key words: social media, adolescence, mobile technology, selfie, identity representation, social norms

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CHAPTER 1: Problem Statement and Significance

The relationship between adolescent girls and identity representation has always been complicated. With the rise of social media, it's become even more vexing. In 2015, CNN's Anderson Cooper collaborated with two child psychologists, Marion Underwood and Robert Faris, to study how teenagers use social media. The two-year investigation analyzed the social media accounts of more than 200 eighth graders across the country. According to Mr. Cooper, the findings of this study "were terrifying." I was lucky enough to speak with him about this research when he spoke at the 2016 Edward R. Murrow Forum:

> "It's amazing what this age group is doing with selfies. They'll take anywhere from 150 to 200 selfies before they actually choose one to post on social media. And after all that effort, if they don't get what they consider to be enough likes and comments on the post, they'll remove it from social media" (Cooper, 2016).

Today's adolescents are the first generation to be considered "digital natives" having grown up texting (and not calling) on iPhones, and posting on Instagram and Snapchat. Gone are the days that Mr. Cooper described where social status was determined on whether or not you were invited to a dance. Now, it's hoping to receive as many likes and comments on social media posts as your friends do.

If you ask any thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl in the United States if she uses social media on a daily basis, you will be hard- pressed to find one who does not say yes. In fact, 82% of all girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen use their cell phones to access social media (Lenhart, 2013). Additional research has shown that according to adolescents, social media plays an important, even integral, role in the lives of

adolescents (Boyd, 2008). In a semiannual survey of American teens, one-third described the photo-sharing app Instagram as their most important social network followed by Snapchat (Seetharaman, 2015). However, there's a gender breakdown: research has found that females of all ages are more likely than their male peers to use social media in general, and these image-based social networks such as Instagram and Snapchat are no exception (Lenhart, 2013).

Online, mediated networks not only provide people the opportunity to create curated versions of themselves, but they also serve as a source of information regarding other people. We use social media to make sense of ourselves and our communities. In 2013, we started taking and sharing selfies for these same reasons. These digital self-portraits function as data points, each one telling us how to feel or how we should feel. Separated by a phone screen, selfies give people the chance to assess not only their own lives, but also the lives of those around them. Selfies also give us the opportunity to post images of how we'd like to present ourselves. People use selfies to make digital comparisons, and with Internet access and a smartphone, anyone can do it. Most talk by the media on selfies is focused on young women—creating a narrative of apparent narcissism and negative personality traits (Carr, 2015). However, when someone tries to find out from the girls themselves, as I have, it is clear that there are other ways to interpret the selfie phenomenon. There are a few central issues that this project will investigate: how are girls using selfies to present images of themselves to their peer groups? How do they use them to convey a certain sense of self? How do they view the selfies of others; are there ways in which this regulates certain adolescent norms and narratives?

In the digital world in which we live, where every day there seems to be a new phenomenon connecting us to each other, selfies are a trend that we can use as a frame for this issue. Despite the growing research on the effects of media on children, selfies are still a relatively new phenomenon, beginning only in the early 2000's. Numerous quantitative research studies have studied the sociological and psychological framing of selfies. Until now, however, there has been little qualitative research conducted with the goal of understanding the specific ways in which adolescents take and share selfies.

Through my research, I looked at these questions by conducting in-depth research and in person interviews with middle school female students. Since selfies are a structured (i.e., social-by-design) form of interaction in social networks, I sought to understand whether this new type of content could uncover larger patterns of social interactions. I began by gathering an understanding of the stages of adolescent development, what constitutes being active on social media platforms, and the role social media and selfies play for female adolescents. After reflecting on the existing literature about social media trends among youth, I interviewed thirteen middle school girls to examine the rise of the selfie phenomenon with particular attention to identity representation. As both the use and underlying rules of social media are changing before our eyes, it is important to understand why adolescents are taking and sharing selfies, and to what ends. Has growing up with a cell phone and active on various social media platforms made it easier to navigate this digital world of continual connectedness and constant communication or has it become an unnecessary stress? The qualitative approach used in this study aimed to understand how and why adolescent females are

engaging with selfies to ultimately uncover the importance of selfies in the daily social interactions of young teenage girls.

The following chapters discuss the literature consulted to gain an understanding of adolescent development, social media platforms, and selfies, a detailed description of the qualitative methodology used in this research study, the study's findings, and finally a discussion chapter that will attempt to contextualize the findings of this study within a larger frame of how middle school girls might be using selfies to navigate peer relationships and social norms.

CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

I. Milestones of Female Development

Adolescence is a unique developmental period, made up of both psychological and physiological changes in brain development, emotions, cognition, behavior, and interpersonal relationships (Isomaa, 2012). As a developmental psychologist, Erikson (1959) is known for his theory of psychosocial development of human beings. Erikson argues that adolescence (ages 13-19) is the time when youth are most concerned with how they appear to others (Erikson, 1959). According to Erikson (1959), a large part of these developmental changes have to do with adapting to an increased cognitive capacity and social understanding (Erikson, 1959). Erikson claims that it is during adolescence that there is a strong tension between internal forces of the self and external forces of society (Erikson, 1959).

Piaget (1936) studied and observed children to better understand how they view the world around them. According to Piagetian theory, the ability to separate oneself from one's own thoughts and reflect on them, in addition to conceptualizing others' thoughts is only developed at young adolescence during the formal operational stage of adolescence During this stage, Piaget argued that children gain the mental capacity for thinking abstractly (1936). Although the majority of research Piaget conducted about the study of egocentrism primarily focused on early childhood development, Elkind (1967) furthered this research and found that egocentrism is also present in adolescence. To describe this behavior during adolescence, he discusses the imaginary audience concept, which is the idea that others are looking at and thinking about you at almost all times (1967). Lapsley (1989) reconsidered Elkind's (1967) research and found that adolescent egocentrism is a way for an adolescent to express his or her identity in relation to others

and maintain connections with their peers. Therefore, adolescent egocentrism can be applied to the use of social media where children seek to balance their own interests from those of their parents.

In his book *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978) argues that psychology should be looked at from both a cultural and social perspective and that the mind cannot be understood without also understanding the surrounding society. Vygotsky studies internalization, or the process of learning and understanding symbols. He believes that this understanding is only accomplished when a child externalizes the meaning and perception into the society around them. This can be applied to the digital world of today as social media can be considered as one such symbol.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (2011), adolescence is the passage from childhood to adulthood and is divided into three periods: early (10-14), middle (15-17) and late adolescence (18-21). Since the early twentieth century, G. Stanley Hall's work (1906) has shaped the understanding of adolescence. He proposed that adolescence is marked by biological, cognitive, psychological, and social transformations. This time period also represents a complicated set of changes that are dependent on the particular cultural context which has changed in the last century given different economic, demographic, and sociopolitical trends that emerged during the industrial revolution. Family, peer, and community interactions within individual's social contexts influence this transition and play a role in the multilevel transformations that take place during adolescence.

Generally, girls experience puberty between the ages of 8 and 13 years. Attention is paid to sexual maturation and visible physical changes during puberty, and adolescence

is the time when girls become more sexually objectified (Hall, 1906). However, even though much attention is paid to sexual maturation and the visible changes that take place during puberty, a great deal of maturation also takes place in other body organs, impacting both the emotional and behavioral development of the adolescent. The gray matter in an adolescent brain reduces, and studies have found that it is during adolescence that people develop and refine cognitive abilities such as emotion regulation, reasoning, and planning skills (Lerner et al. 2002).

An aspect of transitioning into adolescence is the increased awareness one has of identity and self-identification. These concepts are vital for an adolescent's social adaptation and portrayal of actions and beliefs that are associated with either males or females. This is also the time in which the development of the ability to engage in self-reflective thinking takes place. Therefore, it is during adolescence that a more thorough assessment of values, interests, and abilities takes place (Hall, 1906). This all coincides with the transition into middle or high school which represents a new school environment. This transition typically brings additional challenges such as adjusting to academic demands, expectations, and a growing social network (Daniels, 2011).

Adolescence is when the development of interpersonal skills becomes salient. The emotional and social adaptations to the new environment provide for more decision-making opportunities which have an impact on determining personal interests and interactions with peers. Research has found socioemotional development during early adolescence to be indicative of future adjustments. This is the time in which personal identity is explored in that it is during adolescence when youth become more aware of the impact their behaviors and actions are having within their social context (Rice, 1987).

The study of peer influence is centered on the observation that youth tend to want be very similar to their peers. A substantial body of research has studied the area of peer influence and has highlighted the complicated and multifaceted layers of these relationships. There is also a lot of research that has shown the powerful source of influence that individual friendships have during adolescence. Individual peer relationships make up a larger group context (Piehler, 2011). These peer groups represent a group of adolescent youth who are associated with each other in some way (typically friendship, interests, characteristics, or activities).

Peer groups provide valuable information, both verbal and nonverbal, about how an adolescent is supposed to act. Peer groups can include sports teams, extracurricular clubs, and homeroom sections, among others. It is during adolescence that kids more actively seek like-minded others, and therefore a peer group that is often studied during this developmental stage is a clique. Piehler defines cliques as being groups that are easily distinguishable within a school setting due to the shared style of dress or appearance, location, or reputations (Piehler, 2011, p. 250). According to Rosalind Wiseman (2002), author of *Queenbees and Wannabes*, a clique is an exclusive group who are friends that have come together to understand the social challenges of adolescence (Wiseman, 2002). It is during the adolescent years that the importance of cliques tends to reach its peak (Giannetti, 2001). A study conducted by Bryne (1987) confirmed Kelman's concept of identification and found that we like people who are similar to us, and we tend to emulate their behaviors (Kelman, 1958).

Peer groups exist within larger groups of individuals in environments such as schools and neighborhoods. Social networks tie individuals and their peer groups together

through a shared association or setting. In the digital age in which today's adolescents are growing up, social networks extend into nonphysical, online communities. On these social networks, users can create and maintain relationships that otherwise would be impossible due to geographical constraints. Boyd (2008) argues that online social networks create and encourage sociability just as much as physical spaces do. A study conducted by the Government Office for Science in the UK found that social networking sites are a venue for developing and shaping a sense of identity. The study concluded that there are four major ways in which digital technology and online social networks have changed identity exchange in the 21st century: the ability to record and share personal history, the ability to create personal profiles that reflect behavioral choices, the ability to belong to online, social communities, and the ability to use these platforms as a way to see public rankings and reputation ratings (Briggs, 2013). As part of this study, the research team describes a framework comprised of two identity dimensions that show how the aforementioned components shape the future of identity exchange. This is partly done through comparing social and temporal contexts. Social contexts are power and status relationships—the framework is the range from personal, biographical history such as disposition and family to social, imagined communities such as organizations and networks (Briggs, 2013). Temporal contexts have to do with the interconnectedness of events—the framework is the range from ascribed social categories such as race, gender, age, and religion to elective, opinion based groups such as political involvement and leisure activities. In both of these dimensions, identity representation and relationship development takes place in online and physical settings. This is important because within the current social landscape an equal emphasis is placed on adolescents' in-person and

online reputations and therefore it is necessary to understand how these social networks impact the relationships of this demographic.

There has been some research conducted to determine the role conformity plays within adolescent development theories of influence. A meta-analysis conducted by Eagly (1986) found that women are more likely than men to conform to in-group pressure conformity experiments. This tendency has been found to peak during adolescence (Piehler, 2011). According to a study done by Deutsch and Gerald (1955), adolescents who are concerned with being evaluated by their peers were more likely to change their behavior to mirror that of the peers who they perceive as judgmental. Interesting

Adolescents shape their behavior through social comparisons with peers. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals evaluate themselves based on their comparisons with similar others. The theory explains how people use these comparisons to define the self (Festinger, 1954). Adolescents' identities are established through interactions with others (Buckingham, 2008). As adolescents transition from childhood toward adulthood, they rely on social comparisons with others to establish an identity that allows for a positive self-perception. These comparisons often influence adolescents' use of social networking platform privacy settings. Walrave, Heirman, and Vanwesenbeeck (2012) found that the amount and accessibility of content varied if they perceived that their friends posted large amounts of content on their respective pages. This highlights the importance of perceived norms on online social media networks.

Steiner-Adair (2014) has studied the impact social media and digital technology has on promoting anxiety among teenagers. She believes that girls are particularly at risk because they are socialized to compare themselves to other girls in order to better

understand their own identities (Steiner-Adair, 2014). Moreno (2009) argues that adolescents use social networking sites to compare themselves to others. Understanding the role social comparisons play in females' adolescent development is important because they are a factor in constructing both physical and digital friendships.

Gender and self-esteem are lenses to examine how early adolescents construct their narratives. These narratives provide for a window into the dynamics of these students' friendships and relationships during this time of transition. According to Selman (1980) it is during this time period that friendships undergo important changes in intimacy and mutuality that affect adolescents' conceptualization and understanding of these relationships. These narratives organize how we conceptualize ourselves within a larger community. There are cognitive advances that allow this age group to self-reflect on their own behavior, emotions, and intentions. Female adolescents' personal interpretations of their present, past, and future selves dictate their self-esteem, and it is during this stage of development that adolescents learn to identify key events that contribute to the orienting of their narratives. This results in deeper understanding about their friendships and interpretation of friendship experiences.

According to Rosenberg (1965) who is the author of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RHES) which is a self-report instrument which is used to evaluate an individual's sense of self, self-esteem can be defined as a positive or negative attitude about the self which accounts for a major part of one's self- image. Self-esteem plays a role in our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (Rosenberg, 1965). Several studies have concluded that girls and boys differ in their primary source of self-esteem. Girls tend to be much more influenced by their relationships (Heatherton, 2001). It has also been found that from the

beginning of early adolescence, women are more likely than men to equate self-worth with their sense of body image (Heatherton, 2001). Looking specifically at girls' self-esteem is important because girls have been found to have lower self-esteem, higher levels of social anxiety, and more depressive symptoms than boys (Heatherton, 2001). Fascinating

II. Social Media Platforms

Engaging in social media is a part of everyday life, and although the specific sites and apps that are utilized may change, the practices that teen engage in remain the same (Boyd, 2014, p. 8). As mentioned above, a Pew Research Center 2015 survey administered online in English and Spanish to a sample of over 1,060 teens ages 13 to 17 found that of 91% of teens report going online daily, and 24% of these teens say they are online almost constantly (Lenhart, 2015). Mobile devices make this possible with only 13% of teens 13 to 17 report that they have no cell phone (Lenhart, 2015). Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens with 71% of respondents using this site as compared to the 52% who use Instagram and the 41% who use Snapchat. Girls are more likely than boys to use image –based social networks such as Instagram and Tumblr. Younger teens who are 13 and 14 are more likely than older teens who are 15 to 17 to list Instagram as their most visited platform (Lenhart, 2015). This survey found that the social media network reported most used by a participant differed based on socio-economic status. Snapchat was more likely to be used most often by wealthier teens, while Facebook was the most popular social media network among lower income youth (Lenhart, 2015). Teenage girls were found to be most active on visually-oriented social media sites and reported sharing more than males of this age.

Sixty-one percent of girls used Instagram and 51% of girls used Snapchat. Most individuals send selfies back and forth as a form of communication which highlights the two-way modality of image communication and suggests that there is a grammar of these image exchanges (Lenhart, 2015). Snapchat is the social network site that is used most frequently for this purpose. Half of girls use Snapchat, and 31% of boys use it. Teens from the lowest income households (earning less than $30,000 a year) are the least likely demographic surveyed to use Snapchat.

What makes Snapchat different from most other photo-sharing application is that the sender can determine how long the viewer can see an image being shared with them. This gives both the sender and receiver of said image a sense that their interactions are passing. Both Facebook and Instagram do not have this feature. If users decide to share their selfies on these social network sites, their images remain public and permanent for their viewers to access. A study conducted by Katz and Crocker (2015) found that teenagers view selfies generated via Snapchat as impermanent, unedited, and more private (Katz & Crocker, 2015, p. 8). Managing and revising one's online profile content is a vital aspect of an adolescent's online identity and "e-personality" (Aboujaoude, 2011). As a way to manage the content on one's online profile, "59% have deleted or edited something that they posted in the past, 53% have deleted comments from others on their profile or account and 45% have removed their name from photos that have been tagged to identify them" (Lenhart et. al, 2013). In addition, this same study found that nearly 52% of adolescents online express they have had an experience through a social networking site that boosted their confidence (Lenhart et. al, 2013).

III. The History and Development Of The Selfie

Before there were selfies, there were self-portraits. A product of the Renaissance, the self-portrait is a genre of painting that depicts the author creating it. During the Renaissance, there was a sudden availability of mirrors that allowed painters to become their own subjects and record their own images (Cep, 2013). According to *The Encyclopedia of Art* (2016), the earliest surviving self-portraits after Antiquity are by Jan Van Eyck (*Man in a Red Turban, 1433)* and Jean Foquet (Self-Portrait miniature, 1450). Then during the German Renaissance, the Nuremberg painter Albrecht Durer completed more than twelve paintings and drawings of himself. During the Italian Renaissance, it was common for painters to insert images of themselves in their paintings. Botticelli used an image of himself in his *Adoration of the Magi (*1481) and Raphael included himself in *School of Athens (*1510). Well known nineteenth-century works include those by Francisco Goya (1800), Eugene Delacroix (1837), Edouard Manet (1879).

When photography came along, the possibilities for visually depicting one's self increased. Louis-Jacques-Mande Daguerre invented the daguerreotype process which was the first successful form of photography (Rosenblum, 2015). In the 1820s, Daguerre was a professional painter for the opera and was interested in the effects light has on an image. He found that if a copper plate was exposed to light in a camera and then fumed with mercury vapor and made permanent by a solution of common salt, then a permanent image would be formed. The daguerreotype reduced exposure time from over eight hours to 30 minutes (Rosenblum, 2015). A great number of daguerreotypes (especially self-portraits) were taken during the mid to late 19th century.

As the daguerreotype became more popular in places other than France, photography as an art form received attention. The immediacy and seemingly automatic

image is what set photography apart from other image making techniques of the time. The spontaneous appearance of photography gave it a sense of authenticity that wasn't present in other picture-making and image capturing practices. Despite this, many people viewed photography as a shortcut to art that required little to no mastery of skill (Rosenblum et. al, 2015).

In 1880, the photo booth was introduced into society, allowing people to take group self-photographs. The ferrotype made this possible by producing a positive proof on a metal plate painted black. It involved reproducing a photographic image on sheets of iron instead of on glass, and this process was faster and cheaper (Bloch, 2012). People would use a self-timer to preset a camera that, after 5 to 10 seconds, would take a photograph (Rosenblum et. al, 2015). The act of distributing "cartes de visite" or pocket sized photo cards dates back to the 1860s, but this became extremely widespread in the United States in 1925 when Anatol Josepho opened the first Photomaton Studio in New York (Bloch, 2012). The store was open until 4 a.m., and much of the business took place at night. Photobooths gained popularity, and during World War II there were more than 30,000 booths in the United States as these images were a way for soldiers to exchange photos with their loved ones. (Rosemblum, 2015).

The introduction of celluloid film and easy-to-use cameras in the late 1890s sparked what Erkki Huhtamo describes as a "camera epidemic" in Victorian society (Huhtamo, 2004). Writers, like Huhtamo, who have studied the evolution of personal photography, cite that the rise in its popularity can be understood by the relationship between public photographic practice and private memoralization (Huhtamo, 2004). George Eastman has been cited as leading this change in public perception. He was the

premier manufacturer of portable photographic devices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By 1905, Eastman emphasized the way Kodak snapshots were an aid to one's memory (Walton, 2002). In 1914, a 13-year-old Russian Grand Duchess named Anastasia Nikolaevna took one of the first self-portraits using a Kodak Brownie box camera. Fascinating!

It is during the 1920s that photography became more recognized for the visual language that it is seen as today (Rosenblum, 2015). Alfred Stieglitz is often credited with changing the public's perception of photography and breaking down the boundaries between traditional art forms such as painting, drawing, sculpting and photography (Rosenblum, 2015). He promoted a style of "art photography" and produced images that showcased the medium's originality (Rosenblum, 2015).

Shortly thereafter, in Germany, the introduction of the photojournalism magazine into mainstream media took place. Although by this time newspaper-style magazines included images, it was during the 1920s that editors and photographers would work together to produce a story told by pictures and words, or cultlines (Rosenblum, 2015). The layout and writing became more important in new photojournalism style as captions helped tell the story and guide the reader through the illustrations. In 1936, *Life* the new general-interest magazine using modern photojournalism conventions was launched. (Rosenblum, 2015). The power of using a camera to tell a story was highlighted when the federal government's Farm Security Administration hired a group of photographers to capture the devastation caused by the Depression in the Midwest. These images showed imbalance to American society and the discrepancy between urban and rural lives and helped convince people of the importance of Roosevelt's social welfare programs. Just as

photojournalism became intertwined with politics after the depression, it also played this role during and after World War II as it was seen as an integral part of influencing public perception (Rosenblum, 2015).

In the 1950s, Pierre Bourdieu conducted a study that concluded photography is both socially constructed and culture-specific (as cited by Gye, 2008). Kodak tapped into peoples' emotional desire to share memories with their loved ones. In his 2010 essay "Emotional Archives: Online Photo Sharing and the Cultivation of the Self", Daniel Palmer argues that Kodak was the first company to sell "moments" as a product. For much of the 20th century, a "Kodak moment" became a common expression to reference any memory worth remembering (Palmer, 2010). Palmer (2010) concluded that Kodak was so successful because it sold the idea that consumers had control by telling them that the camera was able to pause the clock and make memories last forever.

Kodak was also effective in that it tapped into people's interest to present idealized versions of themselves—people could use Kodak moments to create a false memory. Palmer (2010) discusses how Kodak "commodified the convention of the staged smile", and since then personal photography has been as an emotional event in remembering occasions (Palmer, 2010). In addition to being tangible artifacts of a prior situation, photography also served to perpetuate myths of togetherness. Palmer argues how Kodak gave people the ability to document, perform, and re-present the affection that might not be representative of actual feelings. Furthermore, the constant documentation of one's events builds on people's desire to form both individual and group identity (Palmer, 2010).

Camera Phones:

The development of technology that transformed self-portraitures in to selfies is the front-facing camera phone. (Day, 2013). Cameras on cell phones were popular almost immediately after they became available. The first camera phone was sold in 2000 in Japan, and by 2003, more camera phones were sold around the world than digital cameras (Gye, 2007). In 2006, half of the world's cell phones had built-in cameras and Nokia sold more camera phones than Kodak sold film based cameras. The development of the selfie, therefore, is fundamentally connected to the presence of digital devices with front facing cameras that are used to form and facilitate new social ties (Murray, 2015).

These camera phones have the ability to share pictures almost instantly via a sharing infrastructure that turned a images into a genre of digital communication. Multimedia Messaging Service (SMS) involves sending photographs from camera phones to other users. Up until this development, phones had internet connectivity but no offered no way of including a photo in a message or uploading it directly to a website (Gye, 2007). In the digital landscape of today, personal camera phones have become so universal that these devices are producing a new language, and the prevalence of this language has contributed to creating the selfie phenomenon.

Although less explicitly mentioned, the term "selfie" did exist before 2013. In September 2001, a group of Australians created a website and uploaded some of the first digital self-portraits to the internet (Katz, 2015). The first recorded published use of the word selfie to describe a self-portrait occurred on the Australian ABC Online on September 13, 2002 (Amsler, 2014). In 2004, a group was formed on the social network Flickr with the name "selfy". This group was dedicated to sharing and describing self-taken digital pictures. The expression then gained footing on MySpace, which provided

the first definition for the *Urban Dictionary* in 2005: "self portrait of yourself usually by teen girls" (Katz, 2015). At this time, the word became a social media buzzword and in 2015, posing for, taking, and sharing pictures of ourselves is considered second nature.

Our cultural fascination with this phenomenon led *Oxford Dictionaries* to proclaim "selfie" their 2013 Word of the Year, defining it as a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2013).

IV. Identity Representation in a Digital Age

Since this is a qualitative study that will examine only girls' use of selfies, the literature reviewed focuses on female identity representation in the digital age. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found that girls are more likely than boys to use image-based social network site (Lenhart et. al, 2015). Like all images that are shared online, selfies are used to convey an impression of oneself. In 1956, Erving Goffman used the imagery of a theatrical performance to discuss how individuals engage in self-presentation and impression management while in the presence of others. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman argues that when individuals come in contact with one another, they attempt to control others' thoughts of them by altering his or her appearance and behavior (Goffman, 1956). When interacting with others, a person evaluates the situation and how his or her own self fits into that situation. His analysis is centered on the relationship between performance and life. Despite the fact that Goffman was referring to physical spaces, his theories can still be applied when studying identity spaces of the digital age such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat which are used to mediate social interaction and the presentation of the self (Stald, 2008). As thirteen-year-olds move into

adolescence, they become interested in self-exploration. This is done through self-disclosure, problem solving, gossiping, and exploring differences and similarities among peers (Goffman& Mettetal, 1986).

In the study conducted by Underwood and Faris (2015), the majority of adolescents said that their social media accounts are an accurate representation of who they are. They also stated that by looking at someone's social media account, they can determine how popular their peers are. Furthermore, many teens said that you their social media accounts reflected their own popularity. This constant self-assessment is a way for this age group to measure where they stand with peers (Underwood, 2015). When they log onto these accounts, they can see who has liked or commented on their content and compare that to how many likes and comments their peers have received. It also is a way to see what their peers are doing, and if anyone is doing anything without them. It's interesting to note that the same teens who claimed that social media accurately reflect their position in a school's social hierarchy also reported that they used their social media platforms to show an exaggerated version of their popularity. In his explanation of identity representation, Goffman says that people will attempt to control others' thoughts of them. From this study, it seems that these adolescents are using their social media accounts to present an idealized version of themselves, although it might not be entirely representative of the truth (Underwood, 2015).

According to Hess (2015), selfies accent the self and act as a means of self-representation. Selfies represent the exact situation of an individual who exists within multiple situations. In this sense, selfies highlight the complex and always changing relationship individuals have with within the "larger constellation" of people (Hess,

2015). Because selfies are taken with devices that have editing software and are often shared on social network sites, they signal a performative self; in other words, people might be using selfies as a way of presenting a kind of altered or idealized identity, or emphasizing some aspect of one (Goffman, 1956). In terms of adolescents' taking and sharing selfies, it's interesting to consider whether or not selfies provide a "real" glimpse into their sense of self-presentation and impression management. Lyle Ungar studies personality representation in the age of social media. He points to the self-discrepancy theory to make sense of an individual whose posts are not representative of their actual selves (2015). This theory argues that people have three versions of themselves: an "ought", "ideal", and "actual" self (Higgins, 1987). The ought self is the person one thinks they should be while the ideal self is the person one would like to become. People may use social media to convey their ideal or ought self, instead of representing their actual self (Ungar, 2015). Selfies, therefore, embody the tensions between digital technology and identity representation (Hess, 2015). In the digital landscape of today, there are a variety of media platforms on which many media consumers and producers actively present themselves to other users to consume and interpret.

For adolescents, online social network sites are an important part of one's identity and social relationships (Boyd, 2007, 2014). Through creating and maintaining their profiles, adolescents conform to social norms of self-presentation. This includes determining the kind and amount of information to disclose on these sites. According to later work by Boyd (2014), two affordances of digital media pose new challenges in understanding self-presentation and impression management: collapsed contexts and invisible audiences. An individuals' representation of him or herself depends on the

context and who he or she is interacting with. In face-to-face communication, individuals are able to assess both the physical setting and who is physically present for a given interaction and use that information to determine how to act. Online, however, an individuals' knowledge of these two factors is missing, and the individual is unable to control who is interacting with the images, words, or actions they are disseminating. Information that is posted digitally can be viewed by anyone at any time which makes it impossible for people to alter their presentation of themselves for different circumstances. This makes adolescent identity representation on these platforms more challenging because there is no differentiating between who engages with certain posts (Boyd, 2007).

A study conducted by Adriana de Souza e Silva in 2006 looked at the relationship between mobile technologies and the impact they have on physical space. She defined hybrid spaces as the result of virtual communities migrating to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces (de Souza e Silava, 2006). She argues that selfies are an example of this visual self-representation in that selfies visualize the user both within the physical surroundings the selfie is being taken in and as digitally rooted in the social networks they are being shared with (de Souza e Silva, 2006). Taking a selfie, therefore, is to indicate the temporal and locational existence of a person. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center, 91% of teens go online from a mobile device (Lenhart, 2015). With transportable mobile cell phones, the virtual communities like chat rooms and game sites that once only existed online now are taken into urban spaces as teenagers access these forums from their mobile devices while in the presence of those around them (de Souza e Silva, 2006). The blurring of physical and digital spaces makes it so that adolescent girls' various social network profiles are an

extension of the self. Adolescent girls consider the importance of a place and composition of herself in relation to this place before taking and sharing selfies through social networks. The mobile devices they use to frame their position links the physical and digital worlds.

Young girls' online social lives are so entangled with their real life relationships, and this impacts this age group's own self-perceptions and sense of identity. In the digital landscape of today, adolescent girls have to negotiate their impression management through a more controlled and manipulated context. A qualitative study conducted by Mascheroni et. al (2015) examined how adolescents ages 11-16 develop and present their online identities. The researchers found that girls cited the empowerment they felt that comes from being able to control their online appearance. However, further analysis shows how the freedom that comes with selecting what is and is not posted to social networks is actually constraining (Mascheroni et. al, 2015, p. 11). The study references a popular belief among feminist scholars who emphasize that girls are limited in their freedom by aesthetic models of femininity to explain this reasoning (Gill, 2003). Adolescent girls, although given the freedom to choose which images of themselves they share online, get trapped in what has already been defined that they should do (Gill, 2003). Self-confidence is grounded in their beauty and appearance, and therefore young girls link their social acceptance with the approval of their online presentation (Gill, 2003). This relationship is important because girls are more likely to post selfies that conform to these standards rather than selfies they feel represent themselves.

In today's digital world, sharing selfies often evokes polarizing views and is not without controversy. According to psychologist Jill Weber (2013), people who take

selfies are considered to have a poor self-outlook and poor self- esteem (Weber, 2013). The selfie, when debated, often sparks eye-rolls. Critics believe that selfies are vain, attention-seeking, and narcissistic (Barakat, 2014). Some argue that female users' selfies are sexually objectifying (Barakat, 2014), and studies have found that self-objectification is known to correlate with increasing selfie sharing activities on social network sites among young women (Weber, 2013).

With the increase of technology, adolescents are in constant contact with members of their social network without being in the same place as them. Diana Coyl (2008) concluded that 82% of children are online by seventh grade and spend about seven hours per day exposed to some media or technology. Sociologist/psychologist Sherry Turkle points out (in *Alone Together*) that the individual becomes fixed in a permanent transitional situation. After an intimacy with parents, the child moves out into the world and, in this journey, the child needs transitional objects – for example, a beloved toy. Turkle sees social media as this sort of transitional object. Unlike tangible toys, however, online social media does not lead to new social relations and instead the self remains in a permanent transitional situation, alone together with others (Turkle, 2011). Adolescents' interact with selfies much in the same way they interact with online social networks, and Turkle would believe that these interactions do not lead to further interactions or relationships. Girls are found to place a greater emphasis on relationships, however these relationships and interactions aren't always happening in a physical space but rather over social media.

The study conducted by CNN and two child psychologists referenced a source of pain from social media is feeling excluded by others and seeing friends do things without

them (2015). Girl participants stated that Instagram was the primary platform for assessing friendships and position in their social hierarchy. One interesting finding was that youth who used social media to create the illusion of popularity were most distressed. Data suggested that the adolescents spent more time reading others' online content than they spent posting their own. This might be directly related to the fact that participants indicated that they were using social media to see whether or not their friends were including them (2015). In the digital landscape of today, adolescents are spending more time micro-managing their online image than developing and maintaining actual in-person friendships. This same study found that girls were likely to use social media as a way to show everyone who they were friends with and what activities they were doing as a friend group. The fact that there is an emphasis placed on using social media to share an image of friendship means that adolescent girls would turn to these same social media platforms to see whether or not her friends were all spending time together. Social media posts are therefore indicative of where adolescent girls fall within their friend group's hierarchy because when these girls look at social media posts and see that they are not included, it sends a message about the legitimacy of her belonging within the group.

This review highlighted theorists' who that have examined the role peer groups play in female adolescent development as well as the emotional and physical changes that take place during puberty. The second section of this review synthesized social media platforms in general before focusing in on the development of the selfie. Next, the history of the selfie was traced back to portrait paintings from the fifteenth century and then the role photography and the technological advances of camera phones were examined in relation to the selfie. Finally, this chapter concluded by discussing theorist Erving

Goffman's understanding of how individuals engage in self-presentation and impression management.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I considered several methods of research design before deciding on a qualitative approach by means of in-depth, personal interviews. Using qualitative methods to investigate the idea of identity representation and selfies provided a well-rounded understanding of this topic. Qualitative analysis tends to be conducted to gain insight into a particular practice, (in this case selfie culture). Furthermore, conducting qualitative analysis fit my research objectives more than quantitative because there did not need to be pre-determined response categories (Nigata, 2012). Kozinets (2002) explains that, "qualitative methods are particularly useful for revealing the rich symbolic world that underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice" (Kozinets, 2002 p.4). The goal of this research study was to determine how girls are using selfies to present images of themselves and to convey a certain sense of self, therefore, utilizing a qualitative research method to gain an understanding of the trends in this social media phenomena with regard to identity representation made sense.

After determining that I would collect qualitative data through interviews, I began thinking about how I would go about analyzing the information once I conducted interviews. I decided to base my methodology on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). For the purpose of this research study, I believe that thematic analysis was the best choice for qualitative methodology because it is extremely adjustable. This was beneficial given the fact there has been no qualitative research conducted on adolescent girls use of selfies to represent identity. Using thematic analysis was also valuable given the scope of my project; I do not have the resources to utilize an online coding database, nor am I interviewing a large number of girls that would make my manual coding extremely time-

consuming. responses. Also, since this is a theoretical thematic analysis (also known as "bottom up" or "inductive" ways), data consideration will be driven by my interest in the area (Braun et. al, 2006). There was no existing research from which to base a content analysis coding system. I was less interested in knowing the exact number of times something happens and more interested in understanding why something happens.

Boyatzis (1998) writes that thematic analysis is a process of "encoding qualitative information" (, p. 7). Marshall and Rossman (1999) further outline these necessary components. They advise researchers to divide thematic analysis into five phases: organizing the data, generating categories or themes, coding the data into these categories or themes, testing understandings of the data, and searching for alternative explanations of the data. The data originates from the audio recordings and subsequent written transcriptions of each interview. Marshall and Rossman note the importance of re-reading and reorganizing the written transcriptions to reduce the findings into major themes or categories that describe the phenomena being studied (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). This data reduction simplifies the analysis of findings and makes it more efficient to identify trends in participants' answers. The researcher develops codes, phrases, or words that serve as labels for sections of research data. Given the fact that these themes and labels do not necessarily have to be predetermined, thematic analysis is flexible and can be formed based on my findings.

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Baum et. al, 2006, p. 10). For the purpose of my research, I generated the following

themes as a starting point in which I expected there to be a great deal of repetition among participants' interview:

- Status Update
- Appearance Affirmation
- Dialogue
- Group Position

These initial themes came from my review of literature and my own experience with selfies. The process of generating themes involved noting patterns in the data, relating topics described by participants, or describing aspects of what they are referencing (Fox, 2014 p. 2). Within themes, there were smaller categories that refined data collection and helped the analysis portion of my qualitative write-up. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), categories should be both consistent and divergent. When it came time for me to write up my analysis of the data collected, these categories will provide a basis for structuring my commentary.

This research study's sample was thirteen middle school students. Initially, the sample was going to be made up of seventh and eighth grade students from the middle school I attended. Due to scheduling conflicts, however, this didn't end up being the case. After completing and receiving approval for an institutional review board (IRB), the sample instead was drawn from two local Newton, Massachusetts middle schools and one Brookline, MA middle school. Prior to conducting these interviews, I collected signed consent and assent forms from each girl and her parent/guardian (See appendix A). Participants and their parent/guardian were given a week to fill these forms out to ensure that they had adequate time to decide whether or not they wanted to be interviewed.

These forms gave contact information in the event that either the girl or parent/guardian had further questions. The forms also stated that neither participant nor parent/guardian would be paid for their participation, that all partaking was voluntary and could be stopped at any time, and that all identifying information would be kept confidential.

Each of these thirteen interviews lasted no longer than sixty minutes. One of the interviews took place in pairs, four of the interviews took place individually, and two of the interviews were in groups of three. All interviews took place in participant's homes, during two consecutive Saturday afternoons. The interviews were conducted in participants' kitchens where confidentiality could be ensured, and the participants could feel comfortable. Participants' parents were either not home, or they were on a different floor in the house. The participants were made to feel as comfortable in their surroundings as possible. All responses were recorded on Voice Memos, a built in iPhone feature, and Recorder, a built in Mac computer feature. Upon completing each interview, the Voice Memo and Recorder recordings were imported into the Tufts Box portal where they were titled: "Interview A, B, C etc."

An interview protocol was developed by the researcher to guide semi-structured interviews with participants. This included topics to help answer all of the questions. It began by assessing the participants use of phones and social media, before going into greater depth about selfies, and the social norms and rules that surround selfies' use. The majority of questions were phrased to get participants to describe experiences in which they take or share selfies and to understand why and how they use selfies to communicate with one another.

After completing all interviews, I re-listened to all interview recordings to become more familiar with it. Interview data were then transcribed from the original audio recordings which were taken at the time of the interview. These transcribed interviews were then read by the researcher to get a better understanding of the emerging trends. It was determined that an organized approach was needed to archive and access information. The Tufts Box portal was utilized to store all information by date with clear title and indication as to what each document was. The Tufts Box portal allows you to search keywords or phrases among all documents which was helpful in highlighting the frequency of said searches.

While reading the transcripts several times, each question was coded by looking at themes and patterns in responses across all participants. This coding process involved me re-reading each interview transcription numerous times, analyzing the text for relevant and repeating themes, and looking for and highlighting unusual responses. The coding was done manually on Microsoft Word and different color font highlighters to identify categories within my transcriptions. This was a very visual way to see the themes.

CHAPTER 4: Results

For this research study, thirteen female participants were interviewed about their relationship with selfies. Two girls were in sixth grade (both were twelve-years-old). Three girls were in seventh grade (one was twelve-years-old, the other two were thirteen-years-old). Five girls were in eighth grade (all five were thirteen-years-old).

Cell Phone Use

The interviews revealed that all participants got their first phone by the age of ten, and six of the fourteen participants' first phones were flip phones. The remaining seven participants received an iPhone as their first cell phone. At the time of being interviewed all thirteen respondents had iPhones. Of the thirteen girls interviewed, all say they use their cell phone to text their friends and state that this is the way in which they most use their phones. None of the girls claimed to use their cell phones to pick up the phone and call their friends, however, they do make phone calls with their parents to discuss their whereabouts and plan for being picked up from school and social activities. None of the girls use their phones to send or receive emails. In terms of parental supervision and restriction regarding cell phones, all thirteen participants are in possession of their phones at all time. Only two of the thirteen participants are connected to a parent via social media (both on Instagram). Three of the thirteen participants are connected to a sibling via social media (two of which on Instagram, one on Facebook), and said that this connection with relatives on social media makes it so they are more aware of what they are posting. These three girls viewed these relationships as sort of a filter in the sense that the connection with relatives on social media makes it more likely that something they post will make its way back to their parents.

Social Media On Cell Phones

Twelve of the thirteen girls interviewed use one form of social media on their cell phones. The most popular platform was Instagram (eleven of the twelve users had an account), followed by Snapchat (nine of the twelve users had an account). Three girls had Twitter accounts, two girls had a Tumblr or Pinterest account, and one girl had a Facebook account.

What It Means To Be Inactive vs. Active On These Social Media Platforms

In addition to asking participants about their cell phone history and social media habits, a number of questions discussed what it meant to be inactive vs. active on social media platforms. Interestingly, participants had different definitions of what it meant to be active on Instagram:

> Participant: "I'm not active on Instagram. Like, I'll post every three weeks. It really depends. I go on it every day and look through my feed and see what people are posting, but I only share something every like nine weeks or so."
>
> Participant: "I think to be active on Instagram you need to comment and like a lot of people's pictures. If you just use it to look at them, people don't know you have seen them. Everyone you're following needs to know that you have seen their pictures, if that makes sense."
>
> Participant: "I don't know about that. Like I think it has way more to do with the amount that you post on Instagram. If I someone only had three pictures posted, I wouldn't think they were active even if they went on it to look at other people's pictures everyday."

The definition changes again when it comes to describing activity on Snapchat:

> Participant: "Being active on Snapchat basically means using it all the time. If my friend and I are having a back and forth conversation on Snapchat, it has to be really immediate. Like, I wouldn't say you're active on Snapchat if you don't go on it at least twice an hour.
>
> Participant: "Yeah, I agree with that. Snapchat is all about responding as soon as you get something. Like you don't have to post pictures or selfies on your story all the time to be active. You just need to use it to talk to your friends. But it can't

> be like you send a snapchat to a friend and then get one back and don't open it or respond…you have to send one back right away."

The participants gave a number of reasons as to why they thought that social media was an important part of their day-to-day interactions. Three participants indicated that it was necessary to know what their friends were up to. Eleven of the thirteen participants stated that social media was a way to talk with friends at any time throughout the day, and six girls stated that social media was the primary way in which she stayed in touch with peers from other school districts. All of the girls mentioned that being active on social media platforms meant liking and commenting on other people's posts.

Of the thirteen girls interviewed, only one said that social media was not an important part of their lives. The most common reason participants gave for not being active on certain social media platforms was that they perceived it to be a waste of time.

Where Are Selfies Posted: Snapchat Vs. Instagram

There are several factors that Middle School girls take into consideration while deciding whether to post a selfie to Snapchat or Instagram. The first major factor is viewership. When the girls I interviewed were concerned with their selfie being viewed by a select audience, the image was shared via Snapachat:

> Participant: "Snapchat is definitely more private. You can choose who sees every thing you do. Like on Instagram, you post something and everyone who follows you can see it. On Snapchat, you can take a picture and only send it to your best friend, and no one else would even know that it happened."

The second aspect of choosing where to share a selfie is the quality of the image, itself. Snapchat is seen as a platform on which anything goes in that posts aren't permanent. Images are deleted after a maximum of ten seconds when sent to individuals and 24 hours when posted to a story. On Instagram, however, posts remain indefinitely.

This distinction seemed important to the thirteen participants in the research study. One girl captured these sentiments in the following statements:

> Participant: "Snapchat is way more laidback. You can look pretty stupid on it. Like, I don't care what I look like in most of the pictures or selfies I take using Snapchat, but I wouldn't post something where I didn't look good on Instagram. If I make something my story for Snapchat, I know it will be gone in less than a day. On Instagram, people can look at your profile and see it forever."
>
> Participant: "Instagram is more serious. On Snapchat you can take a silly picture, and it wouldn't matter. If you did that on Instagram, it would be weirder. You try to impress people on Instagram where you wouldn't as much on Snapchat. Like I know girls who have Instagrams, and they try to make all of their pictures artsy with themes. Like they'll black and white them all, or they will give them all the same filter. On Snapchat, you wouldn't do that."
>
> Participant: " You post a nice picture on Instagram. When it's just you and your friends doing something really dumb or stupid it would go on Snapchat."

Through the individual interviews with participants, it became clear that although both Snapchat and Instagram are social media platforms on which people post images, these posts are interpreted differently depending on what site they are shared. The fact that Instagram is seen as being more permanent makes the images that are shared there more "serious."

Selfies

Four major themes emerged from the data about middle school females' use of selfies. This includes how they are using Snapchat, Instagram, and group messages to share selfies as well as why they are using each network the way that they are.

Theme 1: Status Update

The participants of this study had many different examples of how and why they would take and share selfies, but one of the four major themes was that selfies was a way for individuals to share what they were doing with their followers on social media. The

interviews highlighted that there are certain activities, such as going on vacation or working out at the gym that are likely to be shared as a selfie via social media. These posts could be shared on both Snapchat and Instagram, although there is a definite backlash against the ways in which girls post these status updates as seen by this short interaction:

> Participant: "I went on vacation and posted some stuff from there. I posted a lot of scenery and nature on Instagram because I thought it was pretty, and I thought other people would think it was nice and stuff."
>
> Participant: "Sometimes I'll send a selfie of myself on Snapchat to my friends when I go to the gym to be like look, I'm doing something and not being lazy today. I never post them on Instagram because that would just be weird and obviously looking for attention."
>
> Interviewer: "What do you mean by that?"
>
> Participant: "Like, mostly it's how they're doing it that's annoying. Like maybe they're like oh, I went to the beach today so I should take a picture of it. But usually it's because they want to show people that they look good even after they have been swimming in salt water or something. Like, I'm doing whatever it is that you're seeing I'm doing in style."

Of the thirteen girls interviewed, four discussed the materialistic aspects of posting selfies to social media. These four participants stated that girls who are seen as being more upper-middle class will post selfies with their "nice cars or fancy homes". Adolescent girls want to their peers to know what objects they possess, especially if they think it will gain them popularity. It is more common for these to be shared on Instagram, as ten of the thirteen girls interviewed referenced that they had seen a posts like these on the social media platform. These girls said that these selfies are an especially common way for middle school girls to share what gifts they received for the holidays or for their birthdays:

> Participant: “Like some people take selfies to show off their new things. Like here are my expensive clothes that are new. Like they're just showing it off.”
> Participant: “Or it’s like, clearly you have this new thing and you only want me to see it because you want me to be jealous of it. But it’s annoying because like seeing a picture of a girl’s face with all of her nice new clothes doesn’t make me want them, it just makes me annoyed.”

> Participant: “I never rub stuff in your face. Oh, look at all the stuff I got for Christmas--and post pictures of all this materialist objects. It gets irritating. It sounds mean, but the fact that they think everyone else is so interested in the aspects of their life. Like no one is excited that you got so many presents for your birthday.”

Another kind of selfie status update has to do with sharing one’s current emotion. For these status updates, mood is the motivating factor. These selfies are intended to tell social media users how an individual is feeling, and are featured more prominently on Snapchat. One participant explained this was because selfies posted on Snapchat are only there for 24 hours, and then they disappear.

Status updates that have to do with how a Middle School girl is feeling can be showing both positive and negative emotions, but a number of interviewees discussed “artsy selfies”.

> Participant: “And then there are the artsy selfies where it's deep. You take a selfie and you're staring and it's intense and you put song lyrics as the caption.”

The participants said that just as it is common for Middle School girls to post selfies taken in “interesting places” like on vacation, it is equally frequent that these girls post selfies from “boring and lame” places. Four participants said that the place they took the most selfies was in their house when they were “bored”. These selfies are posted both on Instagram and Snapchat.

> Participant: “You'd be surprised. Like girls don't take selfies in places that are actually interesting. Usually, it's in their home and in front of a window. Usually it's when they're bored. Me personally, I'd only take them at home. When I'm

> bored in the evening, I'll be like oh my hair looks good and I'll take a few pictures."

The most common motivating factor behind taking these kinds of selfies had to do with "wasting time". The thirteen participants discussed how sharing selfies on social media to tell followers what they were doing was somewhat addictive, and doing so was often an activity in itself:

> Participant: "It can vary from 30 seconds to 30 minutes when it comes to take a selfie. Like you have to move to get the perfect lighting. Or they will edit it like crazy and go through all of these apps. Like some people are intensely photoshopping it to blur out their blemishes or the background or focus on something and take away color from everything."

Theme 2: Physical Appearance

When I asked each participant what the number one motivator was for middle school girls' decisions to take or share a selfie, all thirteen responses had to do with physical appearance. The selfies that have to do with sharing physical appearance are posted on Instagram as this social media platform is more permanent than Snapchat. They are also sent via group texts. They stated that the more self-confident a girl is in herself, the fewer selfies she will post. They also discussed the way selfies are used to validate one's physical appearance in that the more likes and comments that a selfie gets, the more attractive the girl is. Eight of the thirteen girls interviewed said that the more selfies a girl takes, the more they want attention.

> Participant: " If you take more selfies, you want the attention. When you post a selfie you expect people to look at it. You wouldn't post it publicly if you didn't want the attention for it."

> Participant: "Sometimes, girls are obsessed with themselves. A lot of girls post selfies to get compliments on themselves or to attract a boy attention. Like some of my friends push together their boobs and do an upward selfie to show that they have boobs and that they are really hot."

> Participant: "People that are less self-confident tend to post more selfies on Instagram. These type of girls tend to be worried about how many likes they get, how many followers they have. I've definitely unfollowed some girls who only post selfies of themselves in different places."

These short interactions give examples of how these girls think a girl's body image and and amount of selfies are related:

> Participant: "Sometimes, girls are obsessed with themselves. A lot of girls post selfies to get compliments on themselves or to attract a boy attention. Like some of my friends push together their boobs and do an upward selfie to show that they have boobs and that they are really hot."
>
> Interviewer: "Are these girls taking selfies to show other people what their body looks like?"
>
> Participant: "Yeah, definitely. Like it plays a big role in the confidence piece. But you can tell when they react to the selfie. Usually, a lot of the time what happens is a girl takes a selfie and then think they look good but then will decode it like zoom in and think they don't look good."

Eight of the participants said that they often discussed body image and weight with their female peers. Five of these eight participants said these conversations take place before, during, or after gym class when students have to change into exercise clothes. These participants said that the girls who tend to post the most selfies are the ones who talk the most about their body in relation to others throughout the school day.

> Participant: "Body image is for sure a thing...like there are a group of girls who talk about the way they look during gym class. To themselves they might be joking, it's hard to tell. They always talk about themselves. And then I'll get home and look at my phone, and I always see selfies of them."

During these individual interviews, it became clear that the ways in which girls try to look when they send selfies to boys are different from how they look when they send a selfie to a girl. There was a lot of talk about a girl's "signature selfie pose" when sending selfies via Snapchat to members of the opposite sex:

> Participant: "Girls always take selfies with two fingers spread wide next to their face. Like in a V next to their cheek and eye. I don't know why. Girls just do it. There was this whole thing in 2014 when it meant fierce. No one is letting go of it. Everyone keeps doing it."

When boys are the recipients of these selfie conversations, the thirteen participants said that middle school girls often spend a lot of time making sure one's physical appearance comes across as "cute, but not trying too hard". According to one participant, this typically takes the form of fixing one's hair to "even it out in the front". However, this doesn't extend to putting on makeup.

A lot of times, middle school girls will take a selfie if they're feeling physically attractive to remind themselves of how they looked at a later time. These selfies, as one participant put it, are for yourself. If middle school girls aren't feeling good on a certain day, they use these selfies as a way to feel good (or better) about themselves. Three of the girls I interviewed explained that when it came to taking selfies to represent feeling physically attractive, it was all about how they thought they looked. They would take a selfie if they thought they were looking good, but, they would not take a selfie if they weren't feeling confident in their appearance.

An exception to this rule was when selfies were being taken as more of a joke. There are cues that suggest that selfies are meant as a joke: one girl explained that if she took a picture of her and her friends and social media followers would be able to see it was a "stupid, goofy group thing", then she wouldn't feel self-conscious about posting it publicly to either Snapchat or Instagram. Three of the participants talked about posting purposefully "ugly" selfies to Instagram as it was a way to feel less bad about themselves:

> Participant: "I have a lot of friends who will take a phone and make an ugly face. I do it too, and I know it's so stupid. If you don't put effort into a picture it makes you feel less self-conscious of what people might think about it. So, like you definitely won't edit that picture."

Besides while taking a selfie for the purpose of a joke, it is common for middle school girls to edit the selfies they take. According to all thirteen girls interviewed, editing a selfie is done as a way to "enhance" one's appearance. There are many ways in which girls edit selfies, and one such way is editing apps that are popular such as Factune and Afterlight which were mentioned by all thirteen participants. Another common way to edit a selfie is to adjust the brightness and/or contrast, which can be done directly in the camera roll on one's phone. Another frequent editing technique mentioned by eleven of the thirteen participants was applying a filter to a selfie.

Of the eight participants who said that they have edited a selfie more than once, only one said she would admit it to one of her friends. These short interactions give examples of the various reasons why middle school girls aren't transparent about their decision to edit a selfie:

> Participant: "Some girls edit pictures, but it isn't the type of thing you're going to parade it around. Because they want other people to think they look good naturally."
>
> Participant: "Yeah, that's true. Girls wouldn't post a selfie without editing the contrast or something. Usually, they get defensive about being called out. Like, I know what I did to the picture, don't tell me."
>
> Interviewer: "Why do you think girls edit their pictures?"
>
> Participant: "They're trying to be a lot more natural than they really are. Whenever you see a girl take a selfie, they have taken a million selfies before it. They try to make it look free flowing. They'll pretend to be such a natural beauty. Like I didn't fix my hair for 30 mins, like what are you talking about, yes you did."

Theme 3: Dialogue

Communicating with friends was the number one way that the thirteen participants said they used their cell phones, so it isn't surprising that selfies are used as a form of dialogue. These conversations take place over Instagram, Snapchat, or via group texts. On Instagram, dialogue takes place in the comment section on uploaded images. Participants explained that you're supposed to comment on someone else's selfies, and it isn't uncommon for girls to delete a selfie from Instagram if it doesn't get enough likes or comments:

> Participant: "That's kind of normal. You're supposed to write on someone else's selfies. People would delete a picture if it doesn't get enough likes or comments."
>
> Participant: "It's a mix of liking and commenting, but mostly commenting. It's a lot of stupid emojis or some of it is saying that the girl looks really nice in that picture, or like she looks pretty. Or like oh my god, you're perfect. Why am I so ugly compared to you."

On Snapchat, the conversations are private and take place between two users. One girl explained that Snapchat was an alternative to using text to talk with friends if the conversation taking place was "funny and not that serious". The following excerpts show some examples of how they send selfies on Snapchat as a way to communicate with their friends:

> Participant: "I know a ton of people who post selfies on snapchat because it's more informal...like it goes away in 24 hours. They have this new thing that you can chat with people based on their snapchat, and be like oh you look so pretty."
>
> Participant: "On snapchat I'd post funny videos or things with my friends. Like geotags...with your friends and you take a selfie and put the geotag on to show where you are. Or if you're going to a fun place like a concert. Or really just casually hanging out."
>
> Participant: Snapchat is more informal and for yourself. Like you can rewatch all of your snaps that you put on your story and see what you did during the day."

Finally, a number of participants discussed the concept of "streaks":

> Participant: "There are these things called streaks. You can get them when you send snaps back and forth, and people want to keep the streaks alive. They want to get 100 days or 200 days. I use it to keep in touch with my friends and see how many I can get."

Theme 4: Individual and Group Position

An additional way middle school females take and post selfies is to make sense of their social status. In all of the conducted interviews, there was discussion about the role social media plays in being aware of different, "competing" friend groups. These participants take selfies as a way to show other people who they are friends with just as much as they use selfies to understand who are friends with who:

> Participant: "I know a lot about friend groups because of selfies...like who is in these selfies means that they are friends with those girls."

> Participant: "Everyone follows each other on social media. I follow basically everyone in my grade, so I know a lot about people's social lives on social media. Like people only post pictures or selfies with their closest friends. You kind of see the big friend groups. A lot of people know who I am friends with because of social media and stuff. It's good but like kind of annoying that so much is based on selfies and social media."

Using selfies to alert others of social activities taking place was another common theme, and it often was done at the expense of those who were not invited. Although not all of the participants said that they did this, all were aware that this was something that was done to assert belonging to a group. These selfies were mostly posted on Snapchat.

> Participant: "Other times, it's like to show people that they didn't get invited. Like if it's a birthday party or something. Or if you're mad at a friend and you want to show them that they weren't invited to whatever you're doing that's fun."

Furthermore, participants discussed being more inclined to take a group selfie while with girls who are considered "more popular".

> Participant: “Girls definitely take selfies to tell who they're friends with. If you're friends with someone who is popular than you would take a bunch of photos and post it, so you can be like hey I interact with this person, and they love me.”

Another way in which selfies are used to make social comparisons is through individual likes on Instagram or views on Snapchat. As previously mentioned, it is expected that people will comment on a post when someone uploads a selfie to the social media platform. Therefore, when one girl receives more likes than another girl, it can be a way to determine social standing compared to others:

> Participant: “You can see how many likes you get on a picture. That really matters to people...like if you get over 100 it's good. For some girls it has to be like 400, and then it's a good picture. Sometimes it's like 50. It isn't one set number. I know someone who gets like 12 likes, and they're happy. But for our grade it's like 500.”

Similarly, on Instagram there is something referred to as the “follower to following ratio” that is understood by comparing the number of accounts you follow vs. the number of accounts following you:

> Participant: “I have 458 followers and am following 2000 people. My ratio is not good. Mostly I go on my explore page and then I'll click on random things that i might find interesting and then maybe will look at a few pictures on the account and then I'll follow them. I think I know about a couple hundred of them probably.”

> Participant: “I think people judge you based on how many followers you have. Like if you have 1000 followers, you're probably a pretty popular girl. It's sometimes funny because like I will have friends who seem like they have a lot of friends in person, but then on social media they only have a few followers. Like it isn't necessarily representative, but sometimes it is the same.”

Conclusion:

Thirteen girls between the ages of twelve and fourteen participated in this qualitative research study. This chapter discusses the results of the in-depth interviews

that took place between individual girls and myself. First, this chapter discussed the thirteen participant's cell phone and social media use. Then, this chapter defined what it meant to be active vs. inactive on social media and highlighted the different types of social media posts and selfies that would be shared on Snapchat vs. Instagram. Next, this chapter discussed selfies in depth and broke down the four main reasons why girls of this demographic are motivated to take and share selfies. These were: status updates, physical appearances, dialogue, and individual/group positioning.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The findings from this study shed light on the thoughts and perceptions of selfies and identity representation in a sample of thirteen middle school female students. Specifically, the in-depth interviews with participants provide insight on the unwritten rules of selfies. This chapter will analyze these guiding principles to gain a deeper understanding about middle school females' views and ideas about selfies, their uses, and their potential effects.

Although Erving Goffman's studied the presentation of self in everyday life before terms like "digital natives" and "selfie sticks" were a part of our vocabulary, his ideas can still be applied to the conversations I had with middle school girls about selfies. In his writing, Goffman associates in-person interactions as a form of theater. He believed that depending on the situation, individuals put on masks when they are in the presence of others. This is our natural tendency to guide and control the impression others have of us. We also change our presentations of ourselves based on the responses and reactions we are receiving from others. Goffman's dramaturgical analysis argues that people portray their lives as if it was a theatrical performance in which they can control for their intended response from other people by shifting their own behavior.

The thirteen girls I spoke said that no one their age would take or share a selfie without the intention of receiving likes and comments. Selfies were only shared if a girl determined they looked a certain way. A lot of times, this "certain way" really meant "cool," " fun," or " exciting." In this way, selfies are one such way to manipulate your own image. Pictures can convey our authentic emotions, but just as easily they can enhance or distort certain characteristics that we either want or don't want to be

associated with. The participants I spoke with said that when girls choose to stage selfie photo ops, they are doing so to appear different from how they are actually perceived in person. These girls take selfies to manipulate their own image.

The thirteen middle school female students I spoke with indicated that there are unwritten rules when it comes to selfies. The findings showed that participants seemed to have a shared understanding of what was socially acceptable to post where (status updates), the frequency at which one was supposed to post (status updates) and knowing what the appropriate response was to said posts (dialogue). These rules are obviously not written in a secret manual somewhere. Instead, they're learned through gauging the reactions peers have in response to different selfies.

In recalling what we already know about this age group, social norms are what guide these measurements. Although Hechter (2001) was discussing social norms in the context of in-person relationships when he said that a social norm is the accepted behavior that an individual is expected to conform to in a particular setting, this definition can be applied when thinking about the social norms of taking and sharing selfies. Social norms, in this sense, are the unwritten rules that probably guide middle school girls' thought process considering what is and is not socially acceptable behavior for selfies.

Several of the repeating themes that seem to be the guiding principles for these unwritten rules of selfies had to do with understanding which social media network it was acceptable to share selfies on (Instagram vs. Snapchat), how many selfies were socially acceptable to post (on Instagram vs. Snapchat), and how many selfies were socially acceptable to take (depending on the different situations). Other, and in my opinion, more interesting unwritten selfie rules have to do with middle school girls' understanding of

the appropriate responses to selfies and the expected length of time it will take to receive these responses.

When thinking about the findings of this study, it's important to note that selfies are not products of individual thinking. All of the participants at one point referred to their friends as playing a role in their social media production and consumption. Livingston (2008) discusses how social network profiles are not solely a matter of an independent thought process. Instead, it is highly reliant on peers. This holds true for the findings of this study--the girls' selfie content and habits reflected what their friends were likely to do. Therefore, it isn't enough to think about the unwritten rules of selfies as social norms. It's necessary to consider what influences these standards: peer relationships. Piehler (2011) discusses how friendship dynamics change in middle school as struggles of power begin to play a greater role. There is a greater emphasis placed on determining one's status within a peer group, and this idea was talked about during this study's qualitative interviews. Several girls discussed being part of social circle and were aware of where their group was on the spectrum of popularity. However, they were equally aware of and in many cases more focused on their individual status within their respective peer group, and a number of the girls talked about being the "leader" of their group of friends. This leader-follower relationship is central in middle school. Piehler's (2011) notion that in-person social dynamics are mirrored on social networks is interesting to consider in relation to this research study's findings. The interviews demonstrated a firm belief that peer groups are a major contributing factor for how individuals think of themselves. It is for this reason that the dynamics of a given peer group play an important role in determining how individuals view their identity. Piehler

(2011) found that during adolescence, girls are more likely than boys to conform to in-group pressure. It is during this developmental stage that adolescents are concerned with being evaluated by peers and thus are willing to change their behavior to mirror that of their friend group in fear of being ostracized.

In thinking about this relationship between individual and friend group and the unwritten rules of taking and sharing selfies, it's important to note that not everyone understands what is and is not socially acceptable. What happens when a middle school girl takes ten selfies of herself and decides to post three instead of just one? What about when a girl feels really good about the way her hair looks, so she takes a selfie and sends it to her friends via text--only to hear nothing back? Worst of all, what happens when a girl takes a selfie and shares it on Instagram and doesn't get any comments like, "stop being perfect"?

In terms of the suitable dialogue for commenting on selfies posted on Instagram or taken and sent in a group text message, there should be a translation book that breaks down what is being said versus what is being meant. The participants I spoke with discussed the language they used when referring to someone's selfie. Sayings such as, "OMG, I hate you", "i wish i was u", and heart emojis were popular choices. However, these girls don't actually hate or want to be whoever's selfie they are commenting on. These figures of speech are important because they convey sentiments without actually saying them. Comments such as "OMG I hate you" and "i wish i was u" carry an air of jealousy and evoke feelings of competition, however they are meant to as compliments. It's interesting that the girls I spoke with used insults to compliment one another. Instead of writing "u look rly pretty" they write "hate that u look like this". This is an obvious

difference, and it perpetuates the social norm saying it's okay to use negative language in response to other's selfies that you feel positive about.

Furthermore, the interviews suggest that there are even stricter rules when it comes to immediately responding to friends. In a *New York Times* column "Leaving and Cleaving," David Brooks (2015) discusses how distance from one another no longer plays a factor in determining connectivity. People are now a text or email away, regardless of how geographically far they may be from each other. This doesn't come without problems, he argues. In the digital era that these thirteen girls are growing up in, people have become so accustomed to the "always on" style of communication. This communication technology makes it so people expect to receive a response. And not just any response--we expect instant responses. If these responses don't come right away, we begin to wonder what the intentions are of the person not immediately responding to an email or a text. The same can be said about social media. When one of these girls posts a selfie on Instagram, not only does she expect to receive a certain number of likes and comments, but she also assumes it will be immediate.

In the digital world these middle school girls are growing up in, there's an expectation that all conversations (regardless of whether they are taking place in person or on a social media or via text message) will be immediate. It's interesting to think about how these interactions change depending on which platform they are taking place. When girls are communicating in person, there is the sense that they have agreed to the conversation. If they aren't interested, they wouldn't be there. Online, however, is different. What happens when middle school girls decide they don't want to be next to their phones at all times? Participants said they don't really have a choice: if you aren't by

your phone at all times and something social happens and you don't immediately respond, you feel like you have missed it completely. The girls I spoke with said that they feel an obligation to their friends to respond and to respond quickly to a selfie. Looking back at what we know about this age group, strong relationships with peers are expected. The girls I interviewed talk about how they go online together and talk about online behavior together, and they were quick to say what was and wasn't alright about social media and selfie habits. These conversations are the basis for the unwritten rules of selfies.

In both the examples of unwritten rules concerning selfie dialogue and pace of conversation, some of this study's participants discussed these selfie-related social norms as being a burden. It was as if they felt they didn't have a choice but to participate in the selfie-culture, in fear that if they didn't they would miss out. Furthermore, these findings demonstrated that there is room for error when it comes to understanding selfies. The idea that one girl could take and share a selfie with the assumption that it would be viewed a certain way when in fact other girls would view the same selfie entirely differently makes it so there is a comprehension piece that is lost in the taking, sharing, and interpreting stages of selfies. Although there are unwritten social norms regarding selfies, not everyone adheres to the same rules. The findings from this research study suggest that this possibility of selfies being "lost in translation" was stressful in itself. As such, receivers aren't always perceiving the intentions of the sender. This applied mostly to the sender or poster of selfies in that a selfie would be shared with the hopes of being perceived one way and then would be viewed as something entirely different. The girls I spoke with said that this was the case more so with Instagram and over text than with Snapchat because snap-selfies are erased after a certain period of time. Furthermore,

these girls explained that the self-doubt their age group experiences when they shared something and it wasn't responded to in the way that they had hoped for is more likely to take place when girls felt socially insecure. Participants explain that when a girl uploads a selfie to Instagram with the intention of getting likes and comments on her post and is then met with neither of these notifications, she's left wondering whether something is wrong with the way she looks. Our digital landscape of today has made it so people equate compliments with likes and comments, and this impacts how we perceive ourselves offline in the real world. What makes this wondering worse, however, is that all of this girl's female peers are doing the same thing. It's not as if there is just this one girl within a friend group who takes and shares selfies--every girl in this friend group takes and shares selfies. The interviews conducted during this research study highlighted the social comparison element of selfies: if this one girl's friend then takes and shares a selfie and automatically receives likes and comments on it, the girl without feedback on her selfie is left feeling inferior to her friend.

Thinking about one's social standing is very prevalent at this age, and the findings from this study confirms this. Literature suggests that adolescent females use Instagram as the primary platform for assessing friendship and position in their social hierarchy (Lenhart, 2013). Selfies are an additional context in which these social comparisons take place. The participants of this study found these comparisons to be a negative influence in their lives, and I think this indicates that they are not happy that selfies and social media in general perpetuate these comparisons. However, it's interesting that despite being aware of the detrimental role selfies play in making even more social comparisons, it doesn't stop these girls from taking and sharing selfies.

This research study's findings showed that the majority of these social comparisons are being made about body image. Heatherson (2001) found that from the beginning of early adolescence, women are more likely than men to equate self-worth with their sense of body image. When selfies are being taken to show physical appearance, it's clear that selfies are then used to determine self-worth based on the number of likes and comments these images receive.

The middle school students I spoke with talked about the actual fear they experienced when they were out of the loop on the latest social news or not included to participate in a social outing. According to participants, the always on aspects of social media have made it harder to unplug. They described it as a cycle: choosing to detach from constant connection left them feeling isolated, however, by choosing not to separate themselves from the continuous deluge of social media activity, they are left feeling excluded. Seeing selfies of their peers uploaded on Snapchat or Instagram augmented these fears because it's a way to measure whether you're included or not, and they discussed how it highlighted who was in the "popular" clique as this was the group that tended to be more active with their selfie posts on social media. According to an Australian Psychological Society 2015 study, the fear of not being included in something is more common in heavy users of social media. It's interesting that they used social media to determine whether or not they are missing out of in-person activities. Using one to assess the other creates a unique aspect of FOMO (fear of missing out). This finding is reflective of Turkle's (2015) concept of "alone, together". The adolescent girls I spoke with went on social media alone and saw people interacting together.

A few participants referred to instances where looking at selfies posted on social media left them feeling worse about their friendships and their support systems. To some of the participants in this research study, these selfies represented what they thought they had to do to be viewed as popular. The findings suggest that selfies are taken and shared by everyone--regardless of social group--however, the selfies of girls who are viewed as popular are emulated. Furthermore, the findings show that there is pressure associated with selfies. This supports literature that states a person's frequent social media usage could be a result of imposed necessity for such actions and that adolescents are taking and sharing selfies because they feel doing so is necessary to maintain their social status (Marwick, 2013).

What would happen if these girls were told that they couldn't take selfies? What if their cell phones were taken away and they couldn't look at the selfies their friends posted? Would they feel better or worse? So far, this chapter has discussed the unwritten rules of selfies and how friends guide the formation of these norms. After thinking about these principles and their existence to middle school girls, I have concluded with a suggestion: imposing a temporary media vacation. The idea of switching off from social media in general is not a new one. Dobrow (2014) describes how students in some of her college classes have voluntarily taken a break from social media and have ultimately felt better as a result of it. Although college students and middle school students are at different developmental stages, if we were to think about the takeaways from Dobrow's (2014) media vacation experiment and apply them to adolescents, there is a potential that this age group experiences the same calming and beneficial takeaways as Dobrow's students did.

Thinking about this research study's results from a point of view interested in middle school female students' mental health offers insight into the benefits of taking a selfie media vacation. According to Tobin (2014), a lack of belonging, isolation and low self-esteem can be outcomes for individuals who use social media frequently. When adolescents log on to social media platforms, they are met with images of their peers leading what seems to be exciting and fun lives. What's harder is that they often see these images receive positive feedback in the form of likes and comments. When adolescent girls look at these social media personas of their peers, they can be left feeling that their lives are not as exciting. It's unrealistic that many adolescent girls would be willing to give up social media for an extended period of time given how much of their socializing takes place on these platforms. Taking a media vacation would be a temporary exercise and would hopefully result in a greater understanding of the use of and effects of selfies on this age group. Furthermore, a media vacation could provide girls an opportunity to re-learn interpersonal skills that are often sacrificed when so much time is spent behind screens.

Communicating behind screens can lead to misunderstandings between peers. Examples that were discussed in participants' interviews included confusion about slower response times. In face-to-face- communications, individuals are able to assess both the physical setting and who is present for a given interaction. This information provides context clues regarding how to act. Online, however, an individuals' knowledge of these two factors are missing. The individual is therefore unable to control for who is interacting with their posted selfies, related dialogue, and instantaneous responses. The girls I spoke with discussed the internal discord they felt when a selfie they posted wasn't

interpreted the way they intended it to be. Danah Boyd (2007) writes about collapsed contexts as the result of multiple audiences engaging with the same online content. This makes it difficult for people to use the same impression management techniques that are used in face-to-face conversations where people can adjust their behavior to match the appropriate social context. Selfies are an example of collapsed in that selfies that are posted online can be viewed by anyone at any time, and this makes it impossible for people to change their presentation of selves for different circumstances. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine how people are interpreting said selfies. According to Rice (1987), adolescence is the developmental stage that interpersonal skills become more salient. In relation to the findings from this research study, it's interesting to consider the impact "always on" communication methods have on the development of social cues.

Sherry Turkle (2015) discusses the consequences of online communication replacing face-to-face conversations. She argues that the dialogue that takes place behind screens is harming our ability to interact in person. When we turn to our phones instead of to each other, we lose the capacity to put ourselves in the place of another person and understand what they are experiencing. This, she believes, directly relates to our interpreting and responding to social situations. In relation to this research study's findings, Turkle (2015) the girls I spoke with discussed feeling ignored when they were with friends who were simultaneously speaking with others via text or social media. One participant mentioned feeling less important and diminished when another peer did this to her. She recommends that in order to strengthen our understanding of social cues, we should take limit screen time and focus on face-to-face conversations.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

Limitations:

Sample Size:

This study was limited by the relatively small sample size of thirteen participants. I initially hoped that a larger sample size would be obtained which would have increased the amount of material being analyzed. The small sample makes it so that the findings are only relevant for these specific thirteen participants, and we can't assume that these views expressed would be the same for all female individuals in this age group. The sample was drawn from the same neighborhood and wasn't very diverse. It would have been beneficial to include more adolescent girls from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. Initially, I hoped to ascertain how middle school female students from different socioeconomic backgrounds used selfies to represent identity. The girls I interviewed, however, were all upper-middle class. The participants also all came from one of three middle schools and thus the social media and selfie experiences that were being referred to were all very similar to each other.

Convenience Sample:

Due to the nature of the study, the sample was self-selected and not chosen at random which would have been the preferred method. All thirteen middle school female students were identified through neighborhood friends, and the familiarity between interviewee and interviewer may have hindered the participant's willingness to be candid Each of the middle school female students were asked by their mothers if they were interested in participating in a local student's senior research study. This proximity may have made it difficult for participants to say no. Furthermore, some of the interviews

were conducted within individual participant's homes, and this may have impacted the comfort of being transparent about social media behavior and selfie use. Not sure what you mean here

Directions for Future Research:

While the findings in this study deliver a jumping off point into the understanding of middle school female students use of selfies, it does so at a very basic level. There is still much more to learn about this phenomenon and its implication on the users' emotional state. Selfies are an extremely new trend within the realm of social and digital communication, and there are several different kinds of research studies that could be conducted that explore the role of and impact selfies have on facets of identity representation. More research should be done on the topic of selfies on a global level as it is very relevant to all individuals—regardless of age, gender, or background. Research studies should be conducted that look at issues relating to selfies among different cultures. Questions to consider include whether selfies taken by people from different cultures would have the same aesthetic qualities and serve the same purposes.

Future research that draws upon this specific study's findings could look more in depth at any of the four main motivators understood as a result of this research exercise (status update, physical appearance, dialogue, social standing) and seek to understand more of the nuances of each. A qualitative study could be conducted that looks more closely at the physical composition of selfies and whether there are trends in relation to which types of selfies receive the most likes and comments. Future studies could also look at what happens when the unwritten rules of selfies are broken. By implementing a kind of selfie social experiment in which a portion of the sample deviates from social

norms while others maintain the expected dialogue and instantaneous communication, researchers could determine the ramifications of not complying with the norms. This would assess the role Goffman's presentation of self in everyday life theory has on people's willingness to take and share selfies despite not being socially acceptable. For example, a study could be conducted in which people respond to selfies several hours after they receive them in the first place to see how long the conversation would continue.

Equally interesting research studies could be aimed at measuring the amounts of selfies male adolescents take. An interesting approach could be to look at the differences between respondent's ages and genders with regards to their use of selfies, and a similar study could be conducted using individuals in other age brackets in order to fully understand the impact of selfies and its influence in identity representation. Other research studies could look at whether different kinds of relationships, either friendships or romances, impact the way selfies are used to communicate.

Furthermore, a wide variety of research studies could be conducted that look at the issue of selfies and body image. One such example would be to explore whether adolescent girls sense of body impact the number of selfies they take and share. This could be done by first studying a sample of adolescents to determine whether or not they have a positive outlook on their body and then comparing that to how many selfies they take and share.

When I spoke with Anderson Cooper, he described what it was like to investigate the "secret" lives of American teenagers to better understand the impact social media has on everyday life. He found that thirteen year olds were using their mobile devices upwards of hundreds of times a day, mostly to see (in real time) exactly what their peers

were doing. These teenagers' constant knowledge and continuous connectivity of and with their peers alarmed Mr. Cooper. When I interviewed thirteen middle school female students to understand why they take and share selfies, I too found their use of social media to be alarming. The relationship between adolescent development and identity representation has always been complicated, and selfies doesn't make it any easier. However, the intersection between identity representation and social media trends deserves to be highlighted, especially as these phenomena play such a crucial role in adolescent's everyday lives.

While Piaget, Hall, and Goffman have theories that relate to overarching themes in adolescent development and identity representation which helped to provide the necessary theoretical framework for my research study, these ideas become oversimplified when discussing the modern technology and social norms that "digital natives" are growing up with. Given the prominent role selfies play in popular culture and everyday life, it is necessary to expand on the research Mr. Cooper conducted to learn more about adolescent's interaction with these images.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since declaring my Interdisciplinary Studies Major during the spring semester of sophomore year, this thesis has been in the back of my mind. I thought of it as this scary, abstract entity that (if we're being completely honest) I would somehow finagle my way out of writing. Little did I know that my honors thesis would be such a positive, defining part of my undergraduate education. Still, the past year has been challenging as I actually crafted my senior thesis, and it wasn't until I wrote these chapters that I was able to actually understand all that I have learned.

Julie, Barbara, and Chip, you each have guided me on this journey. Julie, since day one you have always kept my best interest in mind. You have given me so many opportunities that otherwise I wouldn't have been a part of. You have encouraged every far-fetched plan I've thrown your way. Whether I was sending you frantic emails about my thesis or coursework or just showing up at your office unexpectedly, I really value the relationship we have developed over the last four years. You truly have transformed my Tufts experience. Barbara, you have taught my two favorite courses at Tufts, and I am so lucky to have you on my team. During my time at Tufts, I knew that I could come to you when I was seeking encouragement or the occasional pep talk. Your levelheadedness kept me calm when I felt way in over my head. Chip, you agreed to be my major-advisor before we even met, and that speaks to your willingness to help my academic endeavor become a reality. Your interest in my topic re-engaged me this year whenever I was feeling discouraged about the workload.

I am incredibly thankful to have a group of friends who have encouraged me throughout my four years. Your desire to learn more about my Interdisciplinary Studies major and senior honors thesis has left me feeling lucky to have you all by my side.

I'd be remiss if I didn't give a personal shoutout to my " furiend" Gibson, who was "pawsome" enough to help me in my search for local mddle school girls to interview. Zack, your sense of humor kept me sane as I wrote my thesis.

Most importantly, I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for my amazing parents' unconditional love throughout this process. Words cannot convey how extraordinarily grateful I am for your support, and I couldn't have accomplished this without you both reminding me every day of how capable I am.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Interview Questions

How old are you?
What grade are you in?
When did you get your first cell phone? Was it a smart phone?
Which social media platforms do you have accounts on?
Of these social media platforms, which are you active on?
Tell me what it means to be active vs. inactive on these sites? Is this the same for all sites?
Did/do your parents restrict your cell phone use?
Did/do your parents restrict your social media use?

How many selfies do you think you take a day?
When do you usually take selfies?
Where do you usually take selfies?
Are there any places/times you do not take a selfie?
Tell me about a time you took a selfie—did you try to look a certain way?
Do the answers to these questions change depending on who you are sharing your selfie with?
Do the answers to these questions change depending on how/where you are sharing your selfie?

Why do you take selfies?
What do you think your selfies say about you? How do you think your selfies reflect your mood?
Can you think of a time recently you took a selfie with a group of people? Who were they? What were the circumstances of the photo?

Tell me about a time you edited a selfie?
Do you always edit selfies?
How do you edit a selfie?

What makes you save a selfie you take?
Can you think of a time recently when you shared a selfie? Who did you share it with? Why did you decide to share it?
Can you tell me about a time you posted a selfie to social media? What social media platform did you post it on?
Can you tell me how you feel when you post a selfie to social media?

Appendix B: Consent and Assent Forms

Dear Parent/ Guardian:

My name is Alexa Horwitz, and I am a senior at Tufts University.

I am asking for permission to include your child in my undergraduate thesis research. This consent form will give you the information you need to understand why this study is being conducted and why your child is being invited to participate.

STUDY TITLE: The role selfies play in adolescent females identity representation

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE:
I am writing a senior thesis that discusses the selfie phenomenon. I will study how Middle School female students use selfies. The purpose of this study is to review, understand, and analyze selfies and place this social media trend into a broader context of identity representation. Your child is being invited to participate in this study because she is a Middle School female student.

A selfie is a photograph that one takes of oneself (typically using a smartphone) and shares via social media.

PROCEDURES
The format of this data collection will either be in a one on one setting or in a small group interview. This interview will take no longer than 45 minutes. These conversations will take place in a private setting during an agreed upon time. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation. With your permission, your child may be asked to show me a selfie she has taken in the last week or take one in front of me. These photographs will not be collected. The audiotapes and transcriptions will be stored securely at my thesis advisor's office. When referenced or quoted in my thesis, all participants will be given a pseudonym to ensure personal privacy. **The interview subjects and their schools will remain completely anonymous.**

CONFIDENTIALITY AND RISK
Your child's participation in this study does not involve any physical or emotional risk to your child beyond that of everyday life.

WITHDRAWL OF PARTICIPATION
Qualitative data collected in this study will only be used in the written thesis. When quoted or referenced, all students and schools will be referred to with pseudonyms

to ensure personal privacy. If your child indicates discomfort at any point during the conversation, the interview will end immediately and all recordings will be deleted.

COSTS AND BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to your child from participating in this study. However, the information gained from this research will help to better understand how this age group uses selfies to portray their identities. These conversations also give students a chance to participate in a research study and to reflect on their social media use. There will be no payment to you or your child as a result of your child taking part in this study.

REQUESTS FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, feel free to contact me at alexa.horwitz@tufts.edu or 617-780-7225.
If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study that you do not want to address with myself, you may contact my thesis advisor Julie Dobrow at Julie.dobrow@tufts.edu or 617-627-4744.

SIGNATURE:

I confirm that the purpose of the research, the study procedures, the possible risks and discomforts as well as benefits have been explained to the participant.

I, _____ give permission for my child, _____ to participate in this study.

_____ I agree that my child can participate in this study and be recorded.

_____ I agree that my child can participate in this study but she can not be recorded.

_____ I agree that my child's selfies can be described without any identifying features.

_____ I do not agree that my child can participate in this study.

Date: _____

Signature _____

Dear Student,

My name is Alexa Horwitz, and I am a senior at Tufts University writing a thesis that examines Middle School female students' use of selfies.

I am hoping you will take 45 minutes to speak with me about selfies. This semi-structured interview will take place in an empty classroom. If you agree, your comments will be recorded. If I quote you, it will not include your name or any other identifying information. As a part of our conversation, you may be asked to show me a selfie you've taken in the last week or be asked to take one in front of me. I will not be keeping a copy of your selfie. In my thesis, you will never be referred to by name to ensure personal privacy.

Participating in this study does not involve any physical or emotional risk beyond that of everyday life. Your decision to be in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you agree to participate in this study, you can stop at any time without any consequences to you.

Being in the study will not have any benefits to you, but it may help researchers and educators understand how your age group uses selfies to communicate. You may find participating in a research study to be an interesting experience.

Agreement:

By signing this form, I agree to be in the research study described above. I understand that my comments may be referenced in a written thesis and creative podcast.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

☐ I agree to be audio-recorded.

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