

Assembling The Digital Girl/girl: Making Meaning Through Social Media

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the digital becoming of girls through the various ways in which they are (re)made on social media. By using the thoughts and experiences of real girls, we explore together how we “make the Girl/girl mean” in our collective North American culture and society. Through interviews and focus groups with 23 girls located in the Greater Toronto Area, I developed six themes that outlines how the Girl (hegemonic discourses) is currently defined. Throughout my exploration of these themes, I critically analyze these definitions through an extensive review of girlhood, feminist, and social science literature. I bring into conversation previous research and theory with the emerging knowledge produced by the girls in this study and myself. My research creates a context specific roadmap, or what we might call an “assemblage” of the Girl as she exists in this current moment. Further, I think through how these Girl/girlhood subjectivities and discourses work in service to oppressive systems. I then think critically about what the Girl means to the girls in my study and real girls in general. In thinking through the lived, material realities of girls, I offer recommendations that can help us chart paths for the future, in which girls can be supported to safely exist in and explore this one wild and precious life.

Dedication

I want to dedicate this dissertation to not only the girls who participated in my study but to girls everywhere.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Situating Myself in the Research

In this Introductory chapter to my doctoral dissertation journey, which focuses on the social media experiences of girls, I will first situate myself in the research, provide background to the area of inquiry, express its significance, and share my research aims, study objectives, and questions. I have also included a section on my writing style to ensure comprehension for the reader. The chapter will close with the overall structure of this dissertation.

For me, the most significant and meaningful characteristic of feminist thought is self-reflection or “reflexivity.”¹ To say that this idea has helped me in my own personal emotional journey would be an understatement. To argue that academic work isn’t incredibly emotional would be ignorant. Academic work cannot be bifurcated from the emotional, affectual self. I therefore want to situate myself in this work through an emotional lens. Much of this dissertation stems from the intellectual side of my brain, but I want to give credence to the emotionality of this work and to push back against positivist notions of “rationality,” the revered antithesis to emotionality.² In fact, the myth of “rationality” and thus objectivity is nothing but a mechanism of oppression. We bequeath rationality (and therefore the power to control knowledge) to the Man, the ideal human, the referent subject, the mythical norm.

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows “that is not me.” In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society (Lorde, 1984, p. 117).

¹ The feminist practice of reflexivity includes more than just attending to affectual reflection. It also includes situating oneself within unequal relations of power. This important part of feminist reflexivity is embedded within the methodology.

² This is even more significant since I am a woman. The emotionality of women has and continues to be used as a tool to control and oppress women. Since “being emotional” is a devalued trait within our society.

Furthermore, feminism is not immune from the cult of objectivity. Following the legacy of Donna Haraway (1988), I want to avoid a certain feminist “doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence” (p. 579) and instead participate in something else. I want to break from inherited epistemological and ontological paths that uncritically scaffold themselves on “truths” intimately tethered to systems power. This poststructural resistance suggests we shift to an ontology that believes absolute “objectivity” and “rationality” do not exist. Instead, we understand that human beings are a product of the cultural and social beliefs (and yes emotional responses) that have surrounded them since the day we were born and beyond. None of us exists in a vacuum and therefore everything we understand is biased and subjective in its own way. The way we understand and see the world, our individual ontologies come from our experiences, from the beliefs we have chosen to adhere too. What we believe is a choice (albeit bounded), the direction our biases lean is a choice. What I have come to realize is that my bias leans towards reflection, connection, empathy, kindness, care, mutual aid, human collaboration, and above all, unconditional love. I proudly lean into my “situatedness” and center it as a strength to this work, as opposed to something that should be avoided. I do not want to be objective, I do not want to be “unbiased,” as these are impossible goals. In my view, ontologically, too much of academic research is stuck in the positivist frame, where researchers are compelled to seek all ways to rid their studies of bias. Bias, in academia and research, and even in popular consciousness is vehemently resisted. We try so hard to eliminate it that we do not realize this position of non-bias is in fact itself, a bias. Objectivity exists in the subjective eye of the beholder. Since we only exist within our subjective realities then, how do we know the “truth”? How do we know we are on the right path? The fact of the matter is we don’t. The only thing we can be certain of is uncertainty.

I intend to go into this uncertainty, by leading with love, and to create *truth from love*. I am certainly not the first, as Ibrahim (2014) argues that research can be an act of love, and I hope to not be the last. Academic work is nothing if not creating new truths, and I want the arc of history to lean toward love. Love can mean different things to different people. But to me love means mutual aid, which is when we work together to sustain deep personal relationships of understanding as we try to give everyone what they need, not just to survive but to thrive. Love means empathy, which is bolstered by the belief that humans are inherently good, and that circumstances of harm continue cycles of trauma in which people sometimes lead with their pain. Love means compassion in which I am available to collaborate with and help (not save) people who are hoping for support. Love means communication, which is a practice of active listening and honoring each other's feelings and experiences (even when they are vastly different from our own). Love means joy, which is sharing, creating, and experiencing joy both individually and collectively. Love is also often something that cannot be named. Even when I do not have the words, I *know* that love existed in this work.

As I love humanity and all its people, why did I choose to focus on girls? It's quite simple really, I myself am/was a girl. The emotional abuse and neglect I suffered as a child make my girlhood-self part of me. I am with her, and she is with me, always and forever. So much so that she came to the surface, at some particularly inopportune moments during my doctoral journey. Because of this, I was forced to learn how to truly care for her. Although my adult self now has the capacity to care for her, in all the ways the adults in my young life never could, she is and still remains. I am in effect, a girl/woman. In learning how to care for Eleni the girl, I grew a deep sense of compassion for myself. This is the most important part of leading a life through love, is being able to love yourself. My academic work would have suffered, and not be what it is today, if I did

not learn how to love myself. I care for these girls and all girls because I am/was them. Even though our experiences of girlhood may be different, there is a connection there that is meaningful, and I have naturally gravitated toward it.

As a girl-child, I suffered abuse and neglect from a variety of places, my community, the society, and culture in which I lived. This type of harm does not go away in one generation, and it affects us all in intersecting ways. Yet through all the pain I also experienced joy, laughter, curiosity, and love. I believe these girls are experiencing a complex and contradictory existence that cannot be defined in one way. I came to connect with them not because I am looking to save them or for them to save me. What I hope is that through love and connection we can collectively create something better together. I want to foster curiosity and breathe life into something we haven't yet had the time to imagine.

1.2 Background

In this study I explore girl's experiences with social media use and its relation to the social construction of "the Girl" identity and girls lived material realities. First, I want to be very clear what I mean by *the Girl* and *a girl*, or *girls*. The word "girl(s)" little "g" refers to actual girls who live out girlhood daily—moving, shaping, playing with, and navigating what that means to them in the moment. The girl, little "g" is in a constant state of becoming, where what she knows herself to be in one moment, might change in the next. She knows herself as a girl, in relation to the Girl, capital "G." This is a theoretical device derived from Sylvia Wynter as she employs the concept of the genre of Man capital "M" (Parker 2018). What this means is that Man, and in this case, Girl, are not essentialized biological or physical entities, but hegemonic notions: the ultimate ideal, the narrative, the myth, the story. Specifically, we can understand Man and Girl as the "referent subject," by which "Wynter means a shared sense, poetic in nature, that can nevertheless exclude

many who are also expected to live it” (p. 440). This study is therefore interested in the North American mythology of the Girl that becomes experienced and understood not only by society through its media, institutions, and culture, but by girls themselves, who have been born into a metaphysical Girl space. This study is, at its core, about identity and how we understand it, construct it, and ultimately live it. It is itself a study about how we “know” and how we construct our collective and individual ontologies. Many girlhood studies theorists agree that the girl is an idea, created *through* culture (Mitchell & Rentschler, 2016). She comes into being through the normalizing stories we tell ourselves that disseminate through our conscious and unconscious systems. As a discursive formation, she is *assembled* as a subject and identity through the repetition of interconnected narratives and stories. Through this repetition the Girl, becomes a “knowable” and obvious truth—a deeply embedded practice that is continuously produced through the social realm (Driscoll 2002). This dissertation explores the *processes* of how we, as a collective human social, construct girl realities, by looking at a specific “(de)construction site,” that of digital space.

As a collective social space, the digital world has become a central factor in the processes of identity and knowledge construction (Elwell, 2014). As it continues to become further embedded in girls’ daily lives and by default, their daily selves, social science research that focuses on such spaces is necessary for understanding how it relates to the lives of girls. Digital space and digital media refer to images and texts (visual and audio) that appear online and are produced through the Internet and through digital technologies. These technologies include but are not limited to, smart phones, tablets, computers, gaming systems, and televisions. Although digital media can be transferred across a variety of technologies, this dissertation will focus on specific digital sites frequented by girls, often referred to as social media sites or SMS. These included, Instagram, Tiktok, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, Archive of Our Own (AO3), 2Toon,

Discord, YouTube, Pinterest, and Facebook.³ Although Facebook is technically understood by some as a social networking site (SNS) and YouTube and Pinterest may not be considered SMS at all, definitions within this area of media studies are not fully agreed upon and are constantly changing and evolving. If we rely on the definition below, all the sites listed above fit within the definition of SMS.

Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible. (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 17).

This broad definition allows the researcher to create their own parameters for their individual study. Is it also important for this work to understand the unbelievable speed with which new digital media sites both lose or gain popularity. This means that the importance and significance of certain sites will differ between girls and may even change from week to month to year. The social media sites that the girls themselves deemed important are the ones that were factored methodologically in this study. The socially media sites mentioned above are inclusive of all the SMS mentioned by the girls in this study.

1.3 Significance

This study is significant for five reasons. First, and centrally, for its significance to feminism and social justice. This study brings into conversation interdisciplinary fields found in feminist scholarship to further understand the constructions and social significance of gender, girlhood, and the social and material realities of girls. More specifically, it centers and interrogates the social and material realities of the Girl as a gendered subject. What is feminism if not the

³ We can also understand these sites as accessed through apps or applications. Applications are software programs that are designed to perform a specific function directly for the user. SMS apps are often found on smart phones and are used outside traditional web browsers like Safari, Mozilla, Google Chrome, or Internet Explorer. However, these applications can also be accessed through web browsers.

analysis of the lived material and emotional experiences of gender and how these moments relate and interact within the world? Furthermore, this analysis is meant to provide a deeper understanding of the Girl and girls lived experiences so that we can formulate new imaginings of being and create solutions for organizing our social world that promote social and political justice. I have offered some of my own conclusions in this dissertation, but these are not the only conclusions that can be gleaned from this work. My data and reflections exist here for the taking, as future readers and researchers can analyze and interpret what I have witnessed. My hope is that the knowledge included in this dissertation, co-created with these girls, will usher in social change in which girls are offered a different world, structured through care, kindness, and shame-free support.

This work is also significant because of the central way in which social media and online experiences and space have implanted into our current lives. This is doubly significant for the younger generations as children and youth become more and more “plugged in.” We know that youth use social media, as “nearly three-quarters use two or more...[and] especially on photo sharing sites such as Instagram, girls are more active than boys” (Orenstein, 2016, p. 19). Certain SMS are also becoming dominated by youth. As a result of the 2019 Covid pandemic and government mandated sheltering in place, TikTok gained particular popularity with youth as “41 percent of TikTok users are aged 16–24” (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1070). However, even as it is difficult to get large scale data on social media use in general and for girls specifically, SMS “integration into the daily lives of many is indisputable” (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 14). Social media research is still in its infancy and scholars from various backgrounds focus on a wide variety of research questions which leaves this type of research emergent and without standardization—signaling the need for continued research in this area (Mayr and Weller 2016). As social media

apps explode in popularity in one moment and then fade into the background in the next, research within this field is always at the precipice. It is of vital importance that we continue exploring how people experience social media, and particularly girls, who are some of its primary users.

Thirdly, this study pushes back against a major strand in girlhood studies that existed prior to the advent of social media yet continues to permeate our adult understandings of girl's online experiences—the binary idea that the girl is either a cultural dupe, reproducing and citing harmful hegemonic texts, or she is open minded and agentic, countering the various hegemonic gendered discourses (Zaslow, 2009; Keller, 2012) as some kind of child redeemer (Grumet, 1986). Whether or not a girl is a cultural dupe or an active agent is often judged by adults through her relation to dominant discourses and hegemonic “texts.” Currie (2015) reminds us that the girlhood discursive formation occurs at the site of the “text” which includes written language, images, and importantly, the body as a “readable” text. In this sense, girls “do” girlhood through their negotiation of texts both on, off, and through their bodies. Hegemonic cultural norms and commercial interests give girls many texts from which they can do girlhood and orchestrate what is “sayable” and “doable” for girls as girls. Although dominant texts are often the ones being cited, girls will “play” with these texts in a variety of ways depending on their differently situated context. Mainstream media and hegemonic norms are not all encompassing determinants of social reality, even as they offer up certain naturalized mythologies. In this way Walters (1995) wants us to think about girlhood beyond a false consciousness and look at the nuances of “play” that occur between the girl, her body, and dominant texts. The girl is continuously creating herself within the contradictions of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses that structure her being.⁴ Moving away from the rigid active/passive binary that dominates too much of girlhood studies research and instead

⁴ Thinking even more critically about this—who gets to decide what counts as hegemonic or counter hegemonic? Instead of labeling youth behavior from an adult lens, what if we viewed it as something else entirely?

looking at how girls “play” with girlhood discourses/texts through SMS spaces, both on, off and through their bodies, this study is an attempt to map the contradictory processes by which girls come to be known to themselves and others as girls (and the Girl) through digital space.

The fourth area of significance is that this study fosters critical reflection of the notion of a “referent subject” and the ideal that no one can ever successfully embody, as a tool and a mechanism for systems of oppression. By holding the referent subject just out of grasp, institutions (and the people within them) use the referent subject to justify certain peoples and communities’ control. People and communities who cannot perfectly live up to the referent subject are labeled as “deviant” and in need of correction, surveillance, and even violence for their transgression. For example, Black girls are often viewed as “aggressive” which is then pathologized (Morris & Perry, 2017). This leads to a variety of outcomes that disadvantage Black girls within North American social, economic, and political systems. In the school system, the “angry black girl/woman” myth perpetuates, and Black girls are seen as troublemakers instead of curious students. Zero tolerance policies and increased police presence in schools are used to surveil (mostly Black and Indigenous) girls that are “out of control” (Morris, 2016, p. 46). For betraying the ideal “good” girl/woman behavior of being calm and passive, the “aggressive” Black girl faces higher rates of suspension and expulsion which “play a significant part in pushing students out of school and towards criminal activity” (Collins, 2015, p. 304). This small yet impactful example is meant to show that the Girl, capital G, is a tool for oppression. This study intends to further explore other examples of how the Girl as the referent subject, dominates our society and culture in ways that continue to create inequitable outcomes for many, and for girls in particular.

Finally, this study is significant in its intentional creation of space from which girl’s voices and truths are central, believed, and where girls together with the researcher create knowledge

collaboratively. We live in a world structured by adultism and childism, where children and youth who, as a result being severely disempowered and viewed as immature, experience unacceptable levels of psychological, emotional, and physical abuse (Government of Canada, 2018). Challenging systems of power means transferring that power into the hands of those experiencing marginalization. When girls can have time to reflect, share their experiences, connect with each other, and have an adult validate their feelings and experiences, this is a form of empowerment. I felt this empowerment at the end of each focus group and interview where the girls shared their appreciation for the space. They were nervous about participating, and did not know what to expect, but felt a sense of fullness after the fact.

I definitely had a good time. I really enjoyed hearing about everyone else's experience as well...when you're with your friends, you don't often take the time to talk about serious things, especially when you have everything else going on. So, it's really nice to get together with other people, with similar situations and experiences and to talk about it in a more in depth and profound way.

-Emma, age 15

1.4 Research Aims, Objectives, & Questions

By employing feminist qualitative research methods and post-structuralist feminist theoretical frameworks the purpose of this research is twofold:

- To explore the processes by which individuals identifying as “girls,” come to be “known” to themselves and to others as the Girl from within a digital context; and
- To explore the theoretical, societal, and material implications of the “Digital Girl” to create a better understanding of girl’s daily lives and experiences of both on and offline girl selves.

The research questions guiding my project are:

1. How do girls use specific discourses, texts, affects, and moments to produce, construct, and create herself in digital space(s)?
2. How is the “Girl” identity used as an (in)direct tool for the maintenance and reproduction of inequitable distributions of power?
3. As complex social processes of power take place on the level of both the abstract and (un)conscious, what kind of material realities are being produced for these girls?

1.5 A Note on Writing Style

Academia has formalities and processes around the organization and style of writing. These can be helpful, but they can also be limiting, and I have made some choices in my writing that gently challenge academic convention. This section is an explanation of some of my writing style choices to ensure comprehension for the reader.

Use of the term “we” and “our”: Throughout this dissertation I often use the word “we” and “our” which is not typical of social science writing as it potentially suggests universality. I believe that universal narratives should be avoided and thus, I am using these two words in two different ways. First, it should be understood as a general, North American, collective. In my introduction I state that I am writing from a North American context, the reader should not assume I am talking about countries outside of North America. My ontology section and theoretical framework section should deter the reader from assuming I am making grand assertions about girls and peoples all over the world. If I use the term “the collective consciousness” it would still refer to myself, the reader, and anyone involved in North American culture. The “collective consciousness” is another way of understanding hegemonic ideas, which none among us can resist or avoid since none of us live outside of culture. “We” or “our” is signaling that we are all subject to these hegemonic meanings. How we experience them or interact with them will certainly be

different and subjective to each individual, but the point is that we all encounter them one way or another. Second, “we” or “our” is inviting the reader into a collective sense of meaning making with myself. I am inviting the reader into a collective consciousness that we are creating in the moment of their reading. It is asking them to reflect on what our collective history might be. The very act of reading my words is creating a collective consciousness between us.

Use of italics, parentheses, and quotation marks: This is a prime example of where I want to shift formal writing rules. APA guidelines suggest using italics for emphasis sparingly, however, I find italics meaningful in my writing to suggest an idea is important. My use of italics signals that a concept or idea is important to this dissertation, but it can also signal that this idea is not static. To me, the physical representation of italics creates a sense of motion. The letters are angled forward as if they are themselves, actually physically *moving forward*. In this sense, italics represent an important idea that is constantly *becoming*, shifting, or changing. Parenthesis are used to suggest a sidebar. The information is not central to the main idea, but an important side note to consider. Using parentheses in this way does not break or follow APA guidelines. It is not entirely clear how to exactly use parenthesis in APA and therefore this choice entirely my own writing style. Finally, quotation marks are used in a few ways. First, they are used to suggest a new or emerging term, which follows APA guidelines. Second, my use of quotation marks suggests the word’s meaning is slightly shifted from its popular definition. More specifically, the word is meant to be understood as contentious, ambiguous, and open to reader interpretation.

“The girls” vs “girls”: When the phrase “the girls” is used this is in reference to the girls who participated in the research study. The word “girls” on its own refers to a general girl population in North America. This does not mean all girls experience this idea or theory in the

same way. Simply, “girls” refers to a well-documented trend across North American girls and girlhood.

Use of [sic]: Use of the word “[sic]” in the girl’s quotation marks was avoided for a few reasons. English was a second language for some of the girls in my study. To point out where they had incorrect grammar seemed belittling and elitest. There are ways to ensure clear communication without reinforcing grammatical hierarchies which have historically and are currently used to delegitimize the voices of marginalized populations. Instead of using [sic], where grammar was not entirely correct, but the sentence was still comprehensible, I left the sentence intact. For more grammatically incorrect quote sections, I used ellipses (...) to space out sentences that might have otherwise been confusing. What was removed between the ellipses were sentences or parts of sentences in which the girls were gathering their thoughts and therefore, these were choppy and confusing. However, they would repeat themselves and form more cohesive thoughts. I removed the confusing bits and included the cohesive bits, connected by ellipses.

Removal of the word “like”: This decision was not made lightly. There is an important historical context to attend to as “teenage girls and women are repeatedly criticized and scorned for the way they speak” (Freed, 2020, p. 13), specifically in relation to their supposed overuse of the word “like.” The girls in my study extensively used “like” as a filler word. However, overuse of the word “like” can create a barrier between the girls and a variety of readers who may find the word distracting (myself included). As someone with a neurodivergent brain, the word “like” can act as a distraction and limit deeper comprehension. The word “like” was removed much of the time to preserve comprehension and significance of the girls’ thoughts. While this word was left some of the time, to give a sense of how the girls actual talk. This is a both/and approach to honour how girls talk and honour how a variety of people read.

Identifying demographics: In certain direct quotes from the girls, I removed identifying information, for example their family's countries of origin. I replaced this with a typical, political term that subsumes certain countries. This is to protect their identities, from themselves and from others. If the girls should read this dissertation and can identify their own words there might be some misinterpretation around what is being said about them, which could be potentially harmful. If they have told their parents, friends, or family about the study as well, and they were to read this dissertation, it might be potentially harmful if they could identify the girls. Hiding certain demographic information about the girls does limit a richer intersectional analysis, however, protecting them outweighs this.

1.6 Structure

This dissertation is divided into eight sections including the introduction (Chapter 1) and conclusions/recommendations (Chapter 8). The body of the dissertation includes Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks, Chapter 3: Literature Review, Chapter 4: Methodology, and Chapters 5-7: Analysis and Discussion. Within these chapters there are subsections that divide the work in an organized manner to help with comprehension for both myself, my committee, and any future readers.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks, outlines the main theories guiding this work, namely assemblage, Judith Butlers theorization of gender, intersectionality, discourse, and Alexander Weheliye's racializing assemblages. These works guide my ontology and are also used throughout. As this dissertation is focused on how we define the Girl, these theories guide my epistemology around thinking through that question.

Chapter 3: Literature Review, briefly presents a variety of themes I found present in a more general collection of girlhood studies texts, which includes what some consider girlhood studies

canon. These themes represent some of the ways girlhood studies has come to theorize the girl, for example through adolescent development, the body and body image, citizenship, desire, heteronormativity, identity, innocence, their relationship to magazines and the media, menstruation, and motherhood, postfeminism, risk, sex education, sexuality, sexualization, public space and surveillance, and their “voice.” The bulk of this chapter then offers a more concentrated review of a collection of girlhood studies texts from within digital media studies. It is divided into five themes: *Heterosexuality and Femininity Online*; *The Girl in Danger: Sexual Agency, Deviancy, and Victimization*; *The Neoliberal Girl: Online Responsibility*; *Girl-ed Bodies*; and *Active Agents or Passive Dupes?*

Chapter 4: Methodology, gives a detailed outline of the highly organized, rigorous, and feminist inspired methodology. I explain which feminist practices I have embedded into my methodology, namely self-reflection or “reflexivity,” “co-construction of knowledge,” “member-checking,” and intersectionality. In this chapter I outline my process for recruitment of participants, how I contacted and connected with them, how I organized my focus groups and interviews, and how I collected the data. The chapter then explains my reasoning for electing to use thematic analysis and how I used it, from code and theme creation to my utilization of NVIVO. Finally, the chapter explains how I exhibited rigor through credibility, dependability, and triangulation.

Chapter 5: Gendered Subjectivity and (Dis)connection, outline the first two themes. The theme *Neoliberal and postfeminist (digital) subject formations* represents the ways in which the girls in my study construct these subjectivities online, furthering the existing girlhood studies research on the relationships between girlhood, girl identity, neoliberalism, and postfeminism. The theme of *Modern world (dis)connections* represents the ways the girls connect and disconnect with

other girls and other people from within social media spaces. For the girls, connection is one of the main reasons they use social media.

Chapter 6: *Desiring Control and Navigation Harm*, outlines themes three and four. The theme of *Desiring control in a chaotic world* represents the ways in which girls work toward controlling their experience on social media, while acknowledging that “true” control is hard to achieve. The theme of *Navigating (digital) harms* represents the social media harms that the girls have named themselves. Harms they experience and have witnessed, almost exclusively coming from men and boys. This theme also documents and the ways they understand and ultimately try to manage these harms.

Chapter 7: *Seeing Digital Life*, outlines themes five and six. *The Becoming of (Digital) Girl Bodies* reflects on the ways in which the girls experience their own bodies and interpret the bodies of others through the images shared on social media. As the body is a central place to produce gender, and social media is a prominent place from which bodies are shared through images, social media becomes a significant place where girls make meaning of their bodies. In *Witnessing (Digital) Life*, I explore the ways in which the girls are seen on social media and how they see others through the discourses they play with and moments they create together. (Digital) life is made and experienced through the complex histories and emotional lives the girls bring online.

Chapter 8: *Contradictory Girl/girl Becomings, Paths for the Future*, outlines the outcome of the collaborative Instagram project through feminist reflection. This chapter also includes high level summaries and conclusions of the six themes. It ends with recommendations and final thoughts about the research and my experience.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Introduction – Who is the Girl?

Who or what exactly *is* ‘the girl’ and how is she constructed or viewed in hegemonic discourse? Theoretical frameworks are helpful in unpacking such complex questions, and further enable one to make sense of large data sets to discuss the findings through a particular lens. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical frameworks that inform this dissertation.

In academia, popular culture, and our collective North American consciousness, many may assume the “girl” is something (or someone) obvious that we already know. Girlhood studies theorists have used poststructural, feminist, queer, Black feminist, affect, and cultural studies theoretical frameworks to explore how the Girl, as an idea, an identity and ultimately a lived material reality, comes into being. Yet defining the girl might be an impossible ontological task.

The term ‘girl’ itself is a broad signifier; it is employed in a wide range of contexts and for diverse purposes. In recognising the discursively and culturally constructed nature of girlhood, scholars are united in resisting a conception of girls as a homogenised group, and in their commitment to exploring the power relations that frame diverse girls’ experiences and identities. This is particularly with regard to inclusion, exclusion and intersectionality (Paule, 2017, p. 16)

How the girl is defined or “made to mean” sits at the precipice of deeply oppressive power relations. To understand the Girl is to understand the enduring legacies bequeathed upon her by the mutually reinforcing systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy. In their important girl studies text, *Reimagining Girlhood in White Settler-Carceral States* (2019), Sandrina de Finney, Patricia Krueger-Henney, and Lena Palacios further our conceptions of the “girl.”

The very notions of girl and girlhood are embedded in a colonial privileging of white, cis-heteropatriarchal, ableist constructs of femininity bolstered by Euro-Western theories of normative child development that were—and still are—violently imposed on othered, non-white girls, queer, and gender-nonconforming bodies. Colonial developmental frameworks

of race, gender, sexuality, age, and class that shape these normative constructions of girlhood and femininity continue to dominate girlhood studies and girl-centered practices (p. ix).

Considering this, the theoretical frameworks that follow are not necessarily about the parameters or boundaries for how we define the girl, but the social processes which bring her definition into being. These theoretical frameworks frame my own ontology and my interrogation of what is meant by ‘the Girl’ and ‘girls’, namely the feminist use of assemblage theory, discourse, Judith Butler’s theories of gender, the Black Feminist concept of intersectionality, and Alexander G. Weheliye’s use of Sylvia Wynter’s exploration of the Human through racializing assemblages. It is imperative to bring these feminist theories into digital space and media studies discourse.

2.2 Feminism and the Girl Assemblage

Although much of modern assemblage theory originated with Deleuze and Guattari (1987), many feminists have adapted this theory to align with a feminist ethos. Other theorists have done so as well, namely queer theorists, decolonial theorists, critical race theorists, and more. Weheliye (2014) argues that these modern “thinkers” offer new and current contextual employments of Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas.

These thinkers productively rearticulate and reframe Deleuze and Guattari’s thoughts, creating novel assemblages and insights that only become possible when these ideas are put to work in milieus...beyond snowy masculinist precincts of European philosophy; these thinkers also heed Deleuze and Guattari’s invitation to plunder their ideas in the service of producing new concepts and assemblages (p. 47).

It is for this reason that I will attend to Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose as two prominent girlhood studies theorists who have employed the theory of assemblage in their understanding of the girl (instead of going directly to the source). When thinking through the ways in which girls assemble themselves (or are assembled) online, assemblage theory expands what counts as the

Girl. It also allows for the Girl to be a moment in time, whereby her definition relies on contextually specific, ever-changing notions. She is not static, but always becoming.

Assemblage theory decenters the subject, to show how it is made up of and criss-crossed by multiple external forces, of the non-human, inorganic and technological kind. It thus enables us to map the dynamic processes of an extended and ‘unfolding subjectivity outside the classical frame of the anthropocentric human subject, relocating it into becomings and fields of composition of forces and becomings’ (Renold and Ringrose, 2017, p. 1067).

Assemblage theory provides the idea of an identity map and positions digital media and technologies as core components. The “act of mapping” the social realm is a theoretical process of understanding and exploring all the connected, disparate, contradictory, and overlapping factors that come together (assembled) to create meaning and metaphysical experience(s). For feminist social scientists, the girl becomes a map to (dis)assemble and interrogate. Assemblage theory helps us explore and conceptualize what we might call a Girl Map - a map intent on outlining what it means to be a girl (the Girl) assembled within digital media in this specific cultural moment. However, this map cannot capture everything, it is merely a snapshot. Its intention is not to explain what all girls experience, but to find overarching dominant meanings for girlhood and how different girls might experience these meanings in their material and emotional lives.

When informed by assemblage theory, the Girl may be understood as constituting a set of physical and social meanings which are socially constructed and relational. This means that the “Girl” is an idea. She is a cultural formation and social location that becomes manifest through the individual/collective mind and body. Being and becoming a girl is an event that, “unfolds through microparticulate movements with her others” (Gonick & Gannon, 2014, p. 25). Making this more complex is that this meaning can change with each passing moment. “Girls” are continuously being made and re-made, becoming in the moment in which they exist and potentially shifting in the next. Who the subject is and who the subject becomes, is a complex mass of contradictory and

often unknowable factors. Yet even when we cannot entirely know exactly how to define the subject, social scientists still attempt to create partial understandings of said subjects. In relation to digital technologies, the girl becomes an assemblage of herself within the digital space as subjectivities and girl “bodies do not come to be before their interactions, but emerge through their interacting” (Rich, 2018, p. 704). The girl brings the Girl into being within moments of digital space and Assemblage Theory offers a framework for us explore these “little moments” as they come together to make the digital Girl and girl possible/knowable.

2.3 Discourse

One of the “little moments” that piece together and assemble the girl are the many different girlhood discourses circulating and pervading our culture and thus, our conscious and subconscious selves. Stuart Hall (2013) reminds us that discourse refers to a set of images or statements that create a formation of knowledge and meaning around a specific topic. In what Foucault calls the “discursive formation” (p. 29) images and statements appear across “a number of different institutional sites” within a current historical moment. These different institutional sites include—schools, the law, academia, medical field, family—and popular culture—literature, television, film. This formation is not natural, but culturally and socially produced.

Discourse(s) becomes a central factor in how we know the girl as they are part and parcel of the narratives that construct our collective consciousness. Discourse is also part of the “criss-crossed external forces” working to construct what we know as the girl. We know who the girl is by how we talk about her and who has the authority to say what about her and when.

[Girlhood] is understood, not as a natural state best described through developmental accounts but that these very accounts can be understood as historically specific “regimes of truth” that constitute what it means to be a child at a particular time and place...the human subject is produced in the *discursive practices* that make up the social world. (Walkerdine, 1998, p. 20, emphasis mine).

Within digital media spaces, many girls use the discourses and social meanings that surround them to “assemble” themselves as girls online (Buckingham, 2008). The internet, online spaces, and digital media have become central sites for this discursive formation. Furthermore, discourse is, “about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak when and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power” (Renold et al., 2015, p. 176). Girls come into being through the discursive formation, by (re)producing certain ideas that have been made permissible to be “spoken” or expressed”, thus they become regulated into being via systems of power. To understand the Girl, is to understand which knowledges become privileged and how those hegemonic knowledges work within an overarching patriarchal, racist, ableist, heterosexist and cis-sexist mechanisms for the maintenance of inequitable distributions of social power. In many ways, girls come into being through the discursive formation of the Girl, by (re)producing certain ideas that are only *allowed* to be said. To understand the girl, is to understand how she knows herself as a girl through specifically “girl-ed” discourses, i.e. girl power, slut/prude dichotomy, sexualization, innocence, postfeminism, and so on. Digital space has become yet another social arena from which girl-ed discourses are shared, experienced, used, and spoken. Infusing the theory of discourse, grounded in understanding power, leads us to then ask what definitions of the girl are the current “preferred” meanings? In our modern North American social collective, what is the dominant “regime of representation” that we know as the Girl? Specifically, how are these discourses assembled online and how are girls themselves understanding and using these discourses? For many girls, the digital world becomes a modern space that alters, expands, and extends the girlhood assemblage and its corresponding discourses, as well as girlhood lived experiences. Discourse theory is helpful to further our understanding of ‘the girl’ and her interface with the digital space.

2.4 Judith Butler and Gender

The girl is an assemblage of the Girl as a gendered being. Gender is one of the most prominent forces in our society that shape our reality and how we understand ourselves. How we conceptualize gender is going to frame how we “map” the Girl. In relation to this study specifically, in mapping what it means to be a girl (the Girl)— how does gender intersect with technology? Judith Butler’s work is illustrative in assisting this understanding. She is known mostly for her theory of performativity, which people have interpreted and used in various ways. Performativity is different than simple performance, in the way that it is deeply repetitive.

We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it’s a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start (Butler, 2011).

Judith Butler (2000) views gender as set of repetitive performances, that when committed continuously by various bodies across the social milieu, begin to create a meaning around what gender is “supposed” to “be.” Gender, and therefore the Girl, becomes a “knowable” and obvious truth. Yet, Butler wants us to be critical of gender, not to think of it as something that was always already⁵ there, waiting to be discovered, but a deeply embedded practice that is continuously produced through the social. Butler continues, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the

⁵ “Always already” is a phrase present in poststructuralist literature/theory, sometimes used by Heidegger, Althusser, and Derrida. The phrase does not suggest that all people at all times have the same experience, but that they are all constituted within dominant and hegemonic ideologies. Butlers “heterosexual matrix” is an example of a subject who “always already” exists within heterosexuality. Not everyone is heterosexual, not everyone experiences heterosexuality in the same way, and yet we are all, always already constituted by this ideological system. Adriene Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality” is also an example of how subjects are “always already” positioned within the heterosexual ideological landscape. As I “think” and therefore “become who I am” I am thinking about myself through these ideological narratives, whether or not I have a choice in the matter. Another way to think about it, is that “always already” is a fancy way of naming something as a dominant/hegemonic discourse. Since no one lives outside of culture(s) and therefore no one can avoid these hegemonic discourses they are thus always constituted by them and “known” to themselves and others through them.

appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). The social collective creates the parameters of what it means to be a “girl.” Butler’s performativity has been used and reused by many as Gonick and Gannon (2014) suggest, it is a “theory of normatively regulated repetition as a means through which human subjects become recognizable and intelligible as appropriately gendered subjects” (p. 118). Through repetition of available discursive meanings, the girl as an assemblage becomes the Girl in the exact moment in which she exists. What Butler also alerts us to is the significance of the body and its relation to the Girl discourse and gender. The body is a central space from which human social meanings aggressively gravitate and accumulate. To sustain themselves, these repetitions of gender need a space and a place to locate, and they find this in “girl” body. The body becomes *the* central site to produce the Girl. The digital girl body then becomes a gravitational force for reproducing gender. Although this study is focused on girlhood from within a digital space, the “real” physical world and the digital world inform each other and bleed into one another in such a way that we cannot always know where one ends and the other begins. In fact, feminist scholars have suggested that technology and gender work together to create new forms of meaning.

Feminist technoscience scholars have acknowledged that a deterministic approach to the relationship between gender and technology might neglect (a) the interpretative flexibility of the sociocultural impact of technological artifacts and (b) the co-constructing process between gender and technology fabricated through heterogeneous posthuman networks. In other words, contemporary feminist technoscience studies have asserted that neither information technologies nor gender are fixed entities; instead, they are co-constructive, that is, not regulated by a monolithic group (Yoon, 2021, p. 580-581).

This is significant in a digital space which transforms and transmits bodies to be gendered. The assemblage of the girl online, is a dance between technological and gendered movements and moments as girls use discourses to assemble themselves online. Finally, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) discusses various apparatuses for the technology of gender, as “gender...both as representation

and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (p. 102). With the ever-changing movement of social media, we want to look at the ways in which digital spaces work as technologies for gender, and as technologies for the Girl. The connections between gender, performativity, technology, and digital space (in this case social media) are central to this study and Butler’s theories (and others) provide a framework for “mapping” the “repetitions” of gender.

2.5 Intersectionality

Although the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article, *Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex*, intersectionality has been an analytic practice for Black feminists for decades; from Sojourner Truths *Ain’t I a Woman* speech, to Claudia Jone’s analysis of working class Black women’s “super exploitation” (Lindsey, 2019), and the Combahee River Collective’s analysis of Black lesbian woman (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin et al., 2020). This rich history leaves static definitions of intersectionality elusive, as it continues to be debated inside and outside academia, in what some have dubbed the “intersectionality wars” (Nash, 2019). With such a loaded history, it becomes for the individual to decide which definition works for them. At its most basic, intersectionality is an analytical framework that explores the ways in which certain social locations interact to produce a certain material reality. Intersectionality theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) also give us an excellent definition of the term.

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an

analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (p. 11).

The key detail of intersectionality is that it is a framework for analysis. Intersectionality is not an identity, or a buzzword, or something to be used for political points, it is a practice and something that we must actively “do.”

Even still, we do not want to gloss over this history, as anything produced by or for Black women (and by extension oppressed peoples) needs to be handled with care. It has been suggested that intersectionality has become “cannibalized” (Nash, 2019, p. 4) within many academic disciplines, specifically feminist studies programs. Nash uses this term to suggest the ways in which intersectionality has and continues to be co-opted in the name of white supremacy, colonialism, and empire. Jennifer C. Nash has done incredible work discussing this specific violence, while also discussing its historical theoretical trajectory, various theoretical strands, numerous contradictions; as well as the popular and academic uses of this idea. She reminds us that intersectionality is more than just ticking identities off a list. Nash (2011) argues:

The fetishization of intersectionality suggests the existence of a kind of feminist theoretical utopia, a promised land where the “etc.” that marks so much scholarly writing on identity (“race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, etc.”) will be replaced by an attention to all difference...ultimately, this plea for increased intersectionality suggests that “attending to” or naming difference will undo hegemony and exclusivity within our own ranks. While naming difference certainly allows feminists to bear witness to power’s operations, it does little to analyze the mechanisms by which these systems of exclusion are replicated and re-created” (p. 1).

Intersectionality is itself a specific modality for inclusion beyond simply listing for listings sake, or listening for listening sake, to performatively show you’ve “done the thing,” without actually hearing or critically reflecting. In her second piece in which she employs intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) provided a powerful example of how a non-English speaking woman

became materially disenfranchised due to the intersection of her gender and language. The woman was attempting to receive services from a rape crisis center but because she did not speak English, she could not get the help she sought. The intersecting forces of her inability to speak English (the dominant language) and her requiring rape relief because of her gender, produced a material reality in which her humanity was denied and she could not receive community support. Intersectionality as a framework and a form of analysis incorporates and accounts for the many ways people's identities can intersect with one another to produce a certain social and material reality. As we reflect on the idea of a girl assemblage, many of these "little moments" are influenced by and exist because of the intersection of our social identities. Intersectionality actions the theory of assemblage that posits people's lived realities as "criss-crossed by multiple external forces"—with social identity as but one of many external forces. Girls come into being not solely through the axis of girlhood but the ways in which other identities intersect and influence her individual experience of girlhood. To be a disabled white girl living in a high-income family is a completely different experience of girlhood than a disabled Black girl from an immigrant family. In these examples, intersectionality understands that at the intersection of identities including Blackness, disability, and girlhood, a specific set of experiences and material realities will transpire—more specifically that these identities intersect to produce experiences of oppression and/or privilege. Intersectionality attends to how these identities work within social, cultural, and power systems. From that we can have a deeper understanding of people's experiences, and leverage that to redesign our social systems for a more just future.

2.6 Racializing Assemblages

Acknowledging and honoring the intersections of girls' social locations is important, yet this project intends to take the idea of gender further, through the belief that the signifiers of gender

produce the categories of race and vice versa—we cannot know one without the other. In other words, the systems of representations and symbolic codes that produce gender are formed through narratives of race. Weheliye (2014) would argue that we only “know” gender through how we “know” race and his work attends to some of the ways in which assemblage theory and Judith Butler’s theories have not adequately included race in their analysis. For example, dominant gendered meanings attached to “woman” is that she is pure, virginal, demure, and subservient, yet these characteristics are only properties of whiteness. We “know” that a woman is “innocent and virginal” because of her deviant, racialized hypersexual Other. Weheliye’s ideas follow Sylvia Wynter’s argument that race is a key constitutive of gender, and gender is a key constitutive of genre as she is concerned with “genres of the human” (p. 22). Race is used to create the difference that we understand as gender, and that understanding of gender is used to create the difference that we understand between human and nonhuman. Race and racialization are used in the creation of socially constructed binaries then deployed to legitimate, validate, and reinforce identity and power structures. In this way, difference is used in the ways that makes the “white, bourgeois man as Man, as norm, and as the human itself” (Haynes, p. 94). It is not simply about creating the difference of Blackness as “other” and therefore non-normative, and of less value to justify their mistreatment, rather difference is used in the very construction of knowledge(s) of the human. Weheliye argues that racializing assemblages, “construes race not as biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans (p. 4). The goal of this dissertation is to look at how those racializing assemblages manifest as the process of *becoming* Girl occurs through digital media online spaces. This dissertation will use this theory to look at the ways girls use discourse of girlhood to work within knowledges of the human and thus, suggesting that our very subjective

selves and ways of being are part and parcel to the overarching colonial project of domination by Man. This will further highlight Wynter and more so Weheliye's argument that we need to dismantle current genres of the human and imagine new ones from which to speak from and "know" of. To remove these structures of difference, and therefore structures of power and oppression, we need to create a new language and new codes for understanding by moving "out of our assigned categories" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 23). Although Weheliye does not necessarily use the girl as a lens from which to advance his ideas, the girl as we know it can be used to further expand upon his (and by extension Wynter's) theories. It is my assertion at the outset of this work, that girl is an assemblage of cultural knowledge, and that cultural knowledge is formed through race, with whiteness serving as the all-powerful norm. For example, instead of asking whether girls are "safe," "healthy," "sexualized," or "exploited," Weheliye's theoretical reflections would suggest we want to break down the very symbolic structure from within which those theoretical projects exist and are constructed. Moreso, how do these normative questions around girls contribute to reinforcing Man? The girl can be understood as yet another case study from which to understand this process of constructing genres of the Human.

2.7 Conclusion

Assemblage theory, performativity, gender, discourse, intersectionality, racializing assemblages, and all the ways in which these theories incorporate understandings of gender and identity, support my attempt at expanding and creating knowledge of the Girl and girls. These theories not only frame my ontology and epistemology, but they have informed the structure of this study. What I wanted to study, what questions I asked, how I organized my methodology, were influenced by these theories. More than simply understanding how I conceptualize or define the girl/Girl; this is a chapter that articulates the theories that inform my overall epistemology.

How do I know what I know? How do I make sense of my reality? These are ideas, garnered in part by these theories, that shape my understanding of the world and influenced why I did this study, how I designed it, and the research questions that guided me. We gravitate toward theories or ideas that make us feel good; it can be a sense that can't always be explained through language. Academic work is imbued with affect—we feel and emote within and through our work. For me it's not about trying to convince anyone that these theories are “right” or “wrong” because if feminism has taught me anything it's to avoid such binaries. Theories help us tell a story, about how we exist in the world in this moment. I am certain my understanding and use of these theories will change over time. What I like about these theories, and much of poststructural theory, is that they offer a sense of (fleeting) peace in the unknown. We can construct our reality however we want and be comfortable with the fact that this reality may change in the future. As I have already mentioned, my intention in my work is always to participate in creating a reality built on kindness, empathy, care, open-heartedness, and love. I believe that these theories have helped me on that path.

Chapter 3: Focused Literature Review on Girls and Girlhood within Digital Space

3.1 Assembling Identity

The field of girlhood studies has expanded almost exponentially since the 1970s, starting with Angela McRobbie's work on girls' exclusion from youth subcultures in the United Kingdom (UK), to gaining even further attention in the 1990s and onward. Specifically, the book *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) by Mary Pipher, gained critical attention and is still referenced in girlhood studies literature today as either part of the girlhood studies canon or part of the problem (Marshall, 2007). Regardless of the pitfalls of this book, it put girlhood studies on the map as society at large became more interested in "what's going on with girls." A deluge of research and programs aimed at understanding and helping (or saving) girls continues to be exported through academia and beyond. In this exploration of the Girl,⁶ girls, and girlhood and their experiences of digital space, and specifically social media, some background scholarship on how the girl becomes produced, constructed, and assembled within these spaces is essential. Within these spaces, narratives, myths, and discourses come to be known to the girls and larger society about what it means to "be" a girl. Yet these narratives, myths, and discourses also come to life, they are not just theories on a page, as girls themselves experience them in their own ways. Scholarship has engaged with many girlhood discourses, but there are certain themes that are particularly prominent in the literature, specifically, how we understand the digital girl as heterosexual and feminine, as always in danger, as a neoliberal subject, as agentic or passive, and as defined through the Girl body. These themes

⁶ Reminder: The girl is sometimes represented throughout this dissertation as Girl, capital "G." This is a theoretical device derived from Sylvia Wynter as she employs the concept of the genre of Man capital "M" (Parker, 2018). What this means is that Man, and in this case, Girl, are not biological or physical entities, but hegemonic ideas. The ultimate ideal, the narrative, the myth, the story. Specifically, we can understand Man and Girl as the "referent subject," by which "Wynter means a shared sense, poetic in nature, that can nevertheless exclude many who are also expected to live it" (p. 440).

help us further explore what it means to “be” and experience *being* a girl within digital space and social media.

This literature review partly consists of what we would consider “outdated” research, in that it involves bygone social media platforms that are no longer used by youth. It also consists of critically relevant research that engages with the latest platform or trend, within the quickly changing landscape that is social media. Both sources are significant, as understanding how identity has been shaped by social media since the early 2000s, even if the platform has changed, is important. The medium is not always the message, instead, the message(s) are continuous, temporally ambiguous legacies that exists in liminal past/present space(s). What does it mean for girls to understand their identities through Myspace or Snapchat, Facebook or Instagram? As this literature review and research study will explore, even if the medium and narratives sometimes change, the *power* of dominant discourses remains constant. Furthermore, is it important to include all these sources to put into context the ways in which social media use for girls has changed or remained the same and been (re)purposed over time. The most popular and current social media platforms are the offspring of the more dated ones; they have a lineage and a connection to each other. With this in mind, and the reality that social media and technology change faster than research can be published, I paid special attention to search for articles and books published within the last few years between 2017-2024. The themes discussed in this chapter were pulled from literature I found through the York University Library search engine, as well as external search engines namely JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, Scholars Portal, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. Each search engine has their own set of key words, however some of the key terms I used in my search were activism, agency, Black girlhood, body image, cyberspace, digital culture, digital media, disability, feminism, fitspiration, gender, girlhood, girls, heteronormativity,

heterosexism, identity, Indigenous girlhood, influencers, Instagram, media, queer, race, racialized girlhood, self-esteem, selfie, sexting, sexual harassment, sexuality, Snapchat, social media, technology, TikTok, online, online spaces, voice, and more.

3.2 Heterosexuality and Femininity Online

One of the most significant themes within the literature is the reflections on heterosexuality and femininity. Although these are two different concepts, they intersect and even reinforce each other. Heterosexuality itself is contingent upon the gender binary—which restricts humans into two gender categories, girl/boy and man/woman, to which specific physical attributes and social behaviors are expected or assumed. What is considered feminine are often specific behaviors that govern heterosexual relations. Since gender and sexuality are such powerful forces within our current society, femininity and heterosexuality become difficult for “girl-ed” bodies to avoid. To resist can mean social death. Girls are, “compelled to ‘cite’ the norm of [femininity] in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not a product of choice, but the forcible citation of the norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, and punishment” (Gonick & Gannon, 2014, p. 103). Girlhood theorists have interrogated digital space as a place from which girls are compelled to cite femininity and heterosexuality. Kanai (2019b) specifically calls these digital intimate publics, “a digital space operating on a fantasy of fitting into a feminine generality, offering a sense of ongoing attachment through the expression of emotional likeness” (p. 5). These digital intimate publics are regulatory, yet they also offer the girls feelings of pleasure through the connection with other girls on their knowledge and expression of the feminine. However, what is “feminine” is defined in a variety of

ways. Bailey et al. (2013) looks at the way girls “read” gendered stereotypes via SNS⁷. In their study they found that girls spend an incredible amount of effort curating images of themselves to fit narrow “ideals” of femininity by, “positioning the self as always ‘up for it’ and the ‘performance of confident sexual agency’,” as these have become, “a key regulative dimension of idealized femininity across mainstream media and advertising” (p. 94). Social networking sites and social media have become a place from which girls can “freely” chose to (re)produce dominant forms of femininity. These spaces heavily emphasize being attractive, being in a heteronormative relationship, being sexually free, happy, carefree, and self-confident. Looking at 1500 profiles of women between 18-22 years old in Ottawa Canada, the authors discovered that almost all the profiles incorporated representations of girls in these traditional meanings of femininity. When girls “read” other girls’ profiles as well, the girls do not destabilize gender but actively reinforce it concluding that, “girls’ and young women’s impressive rates of participation in online social media do not appear to have translated into widespread defiant gender performances” (p. 108). Femininity in its modern formation—attractive, can-do, smart, capable, sexually knowledgeable and available—becomes difficult to avoid for girls as they construct themselves online.

To be feminine is to also be sexually knowing, but not too much. Modern feminine girlhood becomes represented online via the discourses that girls should be sexually available to boys, but at the same time are “sluts” for being “too” sexual. Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016) provide an example of this in their study in which they interview girl’s attitudes toward other girls posting sexualized images online. Girls are compelled to express themselves sexually yet are penalized for that very behavior. Slut shaming was rampant in their study as they found the girls judged other

⁷ A reminder from my introduction, definitions of social media change and are dependent on the researcher’s own context. Many of these sources use social networking sites (SNS) and social media sites (SMS) interchangeably. For the context of my own research, I understand all sites mentioned in this literature review to be SMS regardless of if the original source uses the term SNS.

girls harshly for posting sexy photos, often calling them “slutty.” None of their participants considered the photos “empowering.” Occasionally girls posting a swimsuit photo under the “right” conditions could get a pass, but underwear photos were always harshly judged. Self-sexualization was unacceptable and often viewed through gender-based moralizing language. In this way, we can understand girlhood online femininity as felt and expressed *through* the policing of girls for not practicing the “right” kind of femininity. The right kind of femininity online is also expressed through the abled-body, as disabled girls online are erased as girls, as feminine, desirable, and therefore worthy of attention and their humanness.

Feeling cute is associated with stereotypical markers of femininity, such as smiling brightly and wearing make up, as some disabled young women choose to emphasize their heterofemininity in order to counteract the aforementioned stereotypical view of disabled girls and women as desexualized, infantilised and vulnerable (Hill, 2023, p. 1321)

Practicing femininity for disabled girls can be *the* access point to digital girlhood. They feel compelled to participate in it to remain a viable online subject.

A central part to femininity, is its assumed heterosexuality. To be a girl means you are expected to desire boys/men and to be desired by and available to the desires of boys/men. As Grisso and Weiss (2005) explore through girl’s discussion of sex online, it is “discussed as an obligation they must fill, either to their (male) partners or to their own sense of self-identity” (p. 46). Girls talk about sex online in relation to boys as if it is something to be expected of them, not as something they could want. In talking about sex online, girls engage/produce a discourse that creates an identity that (hetero)sex is something boys and men should expect to get *from* them (girls). Renold and Ringrose (2017) also explore this through the subtlety of “tagging” on Facebook. Another central tenant of femininity, and thus heteronormativity, is submission to boys/men. They equate “tagging” as digital touch that reifies gender and acts as “potentially coercive.” In on example, they explore they way a young boy has claimed “ownership” over a girl

via Facebook “tagging” as he uses language to discuss the image of a girl in which he has tagged with ownership, invasion, capture, and power. Charteris and Gregory (2020) also found this in their study of girls who use Snapchat, who were often pressured by boys to send sexually explicit images through the app. The girls felt pressure and contradiction in the sense that to both comply (be a slut) or not comply (give their bodies over to the desires of boys/men) was to betray “proper” feminine girlhood. In this way, girls online are always already feminine within the heterosexual matrix from which it is almost impossible to escape expressions of male (boy/men) domination.

Ringrose et al. (2021) explore further how girls are assumed to be heterosexual, in their study on sexting⁸ through exploring the phenomenon of “dick pics.” They found that 76% of girls received most often unsolicited “dick pics.” These “dick pics” were from unknown men as well as boys in their peer group, most often on the social media platform Snapchat. In sending “dick pics” the sender assumes the girls desire to see their dick, thus reaffirming her assumed heterosexuality. Even if they do not assume the girl is heterosexual herself, they have forced her into their own heterosexual power relation. Even if she is not heterosexual (and the sender may know this) the act of sending the dick pic calls her into the heterosexual matrix without her consent. However, one of the more interesting findings in their study was that girls were judged and shamed for receiving dick pics, even if the majority of the time they were unsolicited. When a girl received a dick pic it becomes assumed that she is participating in sexting and labeled a slut accordingly. Although boys and men possess nude photos of women as “trophy” girls are not afforded this same privilege, and any dick pics they have in their phone “become a source of sexualised shame for girls” (p. 573). In their study of 115 Canadian teens, Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) also find such narratives are reinforced through the act of “sexting” in which “the persistence of the gender

⁸ Sexting can be defined as the act of sending partially or fully nude images of one’s body or sexually explicit text via phone messages or social media messaging systems.

double standard has created an online youth social culture where sending ‘dick picks’ is normalized and commonplace” (p. 568). They found that girls continue to be labeled as sluts and boys as “studs” for participating in similar (if not identical) sexual behavior. Girls were surveilled, policed, and shamed for participating in this kind of exchange. These studies reaffirm not only the double standard for girls but also that the double standard, femininity, and heterosexuality are all concepts and narratives that intersect to inform and produce each other. Girls online are inevitably called into being via reproductions of femininity and heteronormative behaviors (intelligibility) while simultaneously finding it difficult to avoid becoming the receivers for boy’s reproduction of their own gendered behaviors within the heterosexual matrix.

Heterosexuality becomes assumed and known online even if the girl herself is queer.⁹ Offline queer sexualities are erased (Lugg, 2016; Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Magnet, 2005; Meyer 2020), so why would online be that different? Even as online realities can sometimes mean an increased opportunity for queer connection and expression (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Miller, 2017), social erasure of queer sexualities is difficult to avoid. Brown and Thomas (2014) explore Judith Butlers concept of recognition theory as one reason why heteronormative becomings are inevitable in girl’s online self-expression. The authors argue that queer girls want to be “known” and seen as human. To fall outside the symbolic order of recognition is to be denied social intelligibility, and therefore social connection and social life. Operating outside of the dominant order becomes difficult as human connection becomes strained or even dangerous—and the symbolic order is heterosexual. The authors use Myspace to show the processes by which girls create their

⁹ Queer theory and praxis remind us that the definition of queer is neither agreed upon or static. For the purpose of this work, I define a queer girlhood as any girl that operates outside of dominant heterosexual behaviors, one of the more prominent being that “girls like boys.” Yet this also includes a variety of feminine behaviors, affects, emotions, dress, and values that reinforce the heterosexual matrix. I am not using the definition of queer to mean *all* girls, as some theorists have argued for “queering girlhood”—i.e., since girls themselves are not “the mythical norm,” this defaults them to being always already queer (White 2015).

“authentic” identity through the images, cultural codes, and discourses available to them. Even as the girls proclaimed themselves as alternative (queer) their limited range of discourses only allowed for so much. For example, the authors argue that the girl’s representations of an active queer girl sexuality, came to be (exist) on their Myspace pages, “through the display of thin embodiment and sexualized poses and dress, both constructed through masculinist framings” (p. 961). Queer girls still construct and know themselves online with meanings produced through the heterosexual matrix. This exclusion has continued even with the advent of newer social media platforms. Simpson and Semaan (2021) argue that Tik Tok excludes queer identities through “algorithmic exclusion,” which they define “as the ways in which algorithms construct and reconstruct exclusionary structures within a bounded sociotechnical system, or more broadly across societal structures” (p. 251). They found that queer Tik Tok accounts are hidden in people’s feeds, forcing all queer communities, including youth and girls, to construct their sense of self through limited (read heteronormative) imagery and texts.

Even still queer girlhood subjectivities can be possible even as they are sidelined and erased, they can still be experienced. Blackburn (2010) reviews the way queer girls, “read, resist and make media.” For example, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, many queer girls were disappointed that the relationship between Willow and Tara was less sexual than the heterosexual relationships on the show. The girls then took to fan websites where they wrote fan fiction, creating the type of relationship they wanted to see, thus making queer media for themselves. The girls also discussed how they derived much pleasure from creating these alternative medias. Through the process of resisting heteronormativity, the girls make themselves online by created non-heteronormative realities for themselves. Even if this is out of the mainstream eye, the experiences still occur. Although reference to a study discussing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a tv show that ran from 1997-

2003 may seem dated, the act and significance of writing fan fiction which is now called “fandom” culture, still persists.¹⁰ Bailey and Steeves (2015) suggest that because of the non-commercial nature of fandom, girls who occupy non-dominant identities, for example those who are queer or are experiencing financial marginalization, can partake in self-expression or representation of themselves and other girls that are otherwise ignored in mainstream media. Thus, these social media sites, like Archive of Our Own (AO3), offer spaces for girls to push back against normalizing (e.g., heteronormative) scripts which in other spaces they may be required to follow (for safety or intelligibility). This website was mentioned by one of my participants, yet it was difficult to find any literature on queer girlhood and AO3. Much of the research on girlhood and social media continues to sideline queer sexualities and identities. Research on queer experiences online often center adults or youth as a monolith. This shows that not only is queer girlhood erased within digital space, but also in the media, public discourse, and our education systems including higher education and academia. This erasure further solidified that compulsive feminine and heteronormative behaviors are difficult for girls to avoid online as they inevitably construct themselves through these meanings for the purposes of intelligibility and recognition.

3.3 The Girl in Danger: Sexual Agency, Deviancy, and Victimization

To be a girl online is to be constantly in danger. Boyd (2014) outlines salacious media stories starting from the 1990s that have North American parents believing there is a “predator behind every keyboard” (p. 103). Protecting children from public space has become a cultural imperative, as adult fears lead to moral panics that lead to government policies that give adults a “sense” of control over the lives of youth. School has also become an insidious place from which

¹⁰ Buffy also continues to be an important cultural piece, used and referenced in current fandom, made possible through streaming services where older TV shows are accessible.

to reproduce these myths that youth online are always in danger. Schools create media literacy programs, framed through the very idea that media literacy is necessary for child safety—further promoting the view that online spaces and social media are illegitimate, and potentially risky/dangerous places for students to exist and learn (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). These myths continue to manifest in current online debates around youth.

There seems to be a sizeable disconnect between adult framings of teen online activities, and teens' reported experiences. For instance, adults are disproportionately concerned about sexual risks including exploitation and harassment that most teens do not report actually facing to the same degree (Redden & Way, 2019, p. 478).

Although digital safety is often discussed in relation to all children, the girl occupies a specific place within these debates. The girl in danger and adult concerns around her digital safety, “has been routinely linked with various agendas, ranging from radicalisation and terrorism, to intellectual property, commercialisation and sexualization” (Tsaliki, 2015, p. 504). Sexualization has become a major theme within the debates of girl's online practices. Egan (2013) explores this by claiming that adults, “need the threat of immanent sexual corruption because it deflects from the unbearable truth of what it means to live in a culture with decreasing social safety nets, joblessness, eroding security for the middle class, environmental degradation, [and] increasing isolation and insecurity (p. 9). The sexual girl online becomes the placeholder and the scapegoat for a huge mass of adult fears, anxieties, and social problems.

Mazzarella (2019) argues that in relation to digital safety parents, politicians, researchers, and academics, “have raced full steam ahead off the cliff of moral panic by ignoring the complexities of girls' relationship to digital media and presenting an overly simplistic cause–effect scenario” (p. 98). As adults refuse to self-reflect on their own emotional responses and forge ahead recycling, reusing, and repurposing tired old theories based in panic and colonial narratives, these ideas inevitably work their way into cultural notions of common sense, and girls have no escape.

Girls have come to know themselves online through these adult fears, even if their own experiences might signal otherwise (Shade, 2014). Girls reproduce these fears themselves, thus contributing to the overarching cultural machine that ignores realities and instead feeds myths and narratives that work to reproduce systems of social inequality—as fears increase surveillance which increases social control over populations experiencing marginalization (Fyfe, 2014). Finally, what is also overlooked from these narratives is that these fears are constructed through whiteness, as if this violence only effects, white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual girls. Black girls, for example are often left out of the narrative, and their experiences with racism online are sidelined for more popularized conversations around protecting the innocent (white) girl from sexualization (Williams & Moody, 2019). Furthermore, these narratives of safety are used to reinforce racist discourses that demonize entire communities. For example, Mirza and Meeto (2017) discuss the ways in which the Muslim “girl in danger” is used to reinforce Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hate.

There has been a heightened focus on young Muslim women of school age as the new ‘folk devils’ at risk of radicalisation becoming ‘jihadi’ brides. ‘Groomed’ through social media, they are seen to be drawn by the excitement, romance and promise of immortality as ‘mothers’ of new Islamic caliphate (p. 228).

These types of narratives are used as justifications for the “white male savior” to insert themselves (i.e. their countries militaries, economies, and political ideologies) into Muslim nations through violent force. The Muslim girl using social media is not “in danger” through any form of genuine care, but only so she can be “used and abused” for imperialist ends. These realities signal that an absence of inclusive holistic analysis will likely lead to limited understandings of girl’s realities, which leads to inadequate conclusions, support systems, and solutions for changing or challenging our social institutions.

Through these danger narratives the girl comes to know herself as a potential victim. Already briefly touched on, sexting has become a central topic within the discourse of the girl-in-

danger online as the sexual victim. However, it is a perfect example of how these myths effect material realities by ignoring historically entrenched economic, political, and social systems thereby reinforcing power dynamics along colonial, racist, or patriarchal lines. Hasinoff (2014) critiques anti-sexting arguments claiming that this discourse relies on simple models of media effects. Sexting as dangerous is assumed to be “common sense” yet it ignores the material conditions that make sexting unsafe for girls in the first place. Parents, teachers, and policy makers argue that they need to police girls sexting because when they self-sexualize, they will “entice” abusers, thus furthering a narrative in which the girl becomes responsible for her own abuse. Sexting has become a criminal issue, which Hasinoff argues is not a reason to restrict girls consensual sexting. Sexting is not inherently problematic, as the dangers that may exist come from our social systems, not the moral or ethical considerations of sexting. Involving the criminal justice system or carceral logics in this regard will only further marginalize the marginalized for example Black, Indigenous, racialized, the LGBTQIA2S+ and communities experiencing financial marginalization, to name a few, who are already overpoliced and criminalized at higher rates than their dominant counterparts across a variety of metrics (Maynard 2017). This goes beyond sexting too, for example, a Black girl being punished through school suspension for using social media “during schools hours” to speak out against white supremacy (Kelly, 2018). The “Digital Girl” becomes another covert vehicle for continued marginalization of certain groups, which continues specific social, political, and economic inequality. The sexting girl in need of “saving” comes from the historical legacy of white girl (childhood) innocence (Doezema, 2010). The sexting girl is thus, herself experiencing sexting as something to which she should be afraid of, and inadvertently by feeling as such, contributes to white middle-class sexual respectability discourses (Karaian, 2014). These narratives are part and parcel of the processes that produce race and gender. The imaginary

innocent white girl needs to be protected from this deviant sexuality as opposed to their counterpart, the Black girl who because she is not positioned in need of saving does not actually count in the collective mythology as a Girl. Many girls then come to know themselves online through this historically racializing discourse (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). Girls inherit the beliefs (in this case around sexual morality) of their parents' generation. They don't always accept them willingly, but neither are these overwhelmingly powerful beliefs easy to resist either. Furthermore, when girls come to know themselves through these discourses of "danger" they inevitably reproduce this as *the* Girl identity/experience/reality, effectively limiting the possibility of an identity outside of this discourse. The girl online becomes knowable explicitly *through* danger.

There is no denying that actual danger exists on the Internet, and actual physical, emotional, and metaphysical harm can be experienced by girls, for example online sexual harassment (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017). As already mentioned, there is research that suggests one prominent way girls and young women experience sexual harassment is the receiving of unsolicited "dick pics" (Mishna et al., 2023). Yet this research and attention focuses on narrow types of danger often only offers solutions that further disempower girls (e.g. more surveillance, restrictions on participating in public life, etc). The concern is that the myth of the "predator" might not reflect their realities—leaving many girls to know themselves as "in danger" in ways that may not reflect their experiences and offering minimal discourses or language to help them understand and contextualize these experiences. Heath (2015) reiterates this by arguing that "these kinds of harms, however, are highly unlikely to occur and the interventions adults rely on to protect youth from them are often at odds with the experiences of young people" (p. 364). As discussed above, girls may know themselves as in danger, but they also might reject this narrative and therefore reject adult moral panics. For example, a study done by Handyside and Ringrose (2017) found that girls

sometimes challenged the “double standard” and slut shaming by finding humour and thus pleasure, in dick pics sent to them via Snapchat. Their study challenges not only the content of adult moral panics, but even certain feminist discourses (as discussed above in relation to femininity and heterosexuality), which signals a significant contradiction of girlhood. If girls are not necessarily experiencing “danger” as adults have conceptualized, how are they experiencing danger? Goodyear and Armour (2018) explore the way girls (and youth) are being targeted by advertising algorithms, thus putting them in more danger of misinformation for the sake of profit. They argue that “the proliferation and pervasiveness of the World Wide Web means that internet memes now spread in moments and are increasingly used to spread ideas that serve both for-profit businesses and government bodies. They certainly aren’t designed to serve the needs of young people” (p. 166). Capitalism might just be more dangerous to youth than the myth of stranger danger. As well, the advent of “alternative facts” and misinformation on social media is a more current and immediate problem, not only for girls but democracy as well. Anderson (2020) points out that “journalists and researchers are consistently finding and reporting on the problems with how quickly myths, conspiracies and false information spread within [TikTok] and onto other platforms” (p. 3). It is difficult to find targeted research on the intersection of girlhood and social media misinformation however this is yet another example of misalignment around girls lived experiences of danger or harm. This misalignment on what adults should be concerned about again, signals toward the ways in which certain social narratives hide the root causes of material realities to continue reproducing the current hierarchies. Better research and further study need to be done on the actual felt and physical danger that girls experience online that do not feed into adult fears and socially normalizing narratives of race, class, gender, ability, and nationality, to name a few, since we know that much of girlhood studies research ignores critical analysis of race (Kearney,

2017), and other non-dominant identities. Goldstein and Flicker (2020) also argue for a more nuanced approach to digital danger for girls. In their study they found that instead of the popular notion of harm as sexual exploitation, for heterosexual girls there were more subtle experiences during online dating. The girls reported harm as “someone playing with your emotions and pretending to like you when they do not...someone communicating with many people at once and treating dating as a game without informing the other person of the supposed rules [and]...someone suddenly disappearing without explanation (p. 73-74). These are more complicated emotional and relational experiences that operated far outside mainstream discourses. Ignoring these real experiences limits how girls might be emotionally supported.

As another example, Cho (2017) argues that social media sites like Facebook and Instagram have a “design” bias that leads to a “default publicness.” The default publicness of these sites has grave material, physical, and emotionally negative consequences for many racialized queer youth. Cho argues that this default publicness ultimately works to reinforce social hierarchies and work in the service of capital as, “the architecture of publicness itself is shaped through power” (p. 3186). The racialized queer youth he interviewed all claimed that Facebook is a dangerous space for them because of social stigmas around queer sexualities, two were even disowned by their families after being “outed” on Facebook. Jenzen (2017) also explores this to argue the Internet is a transphobic and heteronormative space by design. He specifically outlines how programs and computer algorithms create a “cis-normative Internet” (p. 1629). During Jenzen’s interviews he found that trans youth prefer Tumblr to Facebook as it has a highly structured framework that requires a strict identity construction. Jenzen and Cho’s research signal that what many youth (this includes girls) may actually experience as dangerous online, is not what is being represented as danger in mainstream discourse—e.g., that a Black queer girl might be

more in danger of being “outed” or called a racial slur on Facebook than a random online sexual predator. This fits within *who* we define as in danger according to mainstream media, normalizing narratives, and dominant social systems. When we focus on the “ideal” girl in need of saving we miss what harms might actually be experienced. We miss the opportunity to look at the systems causing real harm and instead engage in narratives that work to reinforce those very systems.

3.4 The Neoliberal Girl: Online Responsibility

Neoliberal ideas have become some of the central processes by which girls construct and know themselves online. Neoliberal ideas of self-sufficiency, self-reliance, self-betterment/care, and personal responsibility are rampant in girlhood discourses. Much of these ideas become manifest under the quite popular (maybe the most popular) postfeminist girlhood discourse—that of Girl Power. Undergirding all of this, is the notion that the girl has the responsibility to make the right choices in life, that will lead her down the path to responsible neoliberal citizen. More importantly, she has the power to break the patriarchy. Yet McRobbie (2007) argues that gendered hierarchies have been reformulated under the guise of girl power by positioning girls as “capable.” The same hierarchies still exist, they just look different and thus are not immediately identifiable. These patriarchal norms become invisible, as the powerful discourse of the “freedom of young women” dominates. She even argues that the explosion of girl and girlhood research, has contributed to this “process of gender re-stabilization” (p. 721). Girls have become an assemblage for capacity and productivity, central neoliberal ideals. McRobbie uses the example of the girl as “good student” and girl as “free consumer” being particularly popular in arguments for girls “equal opportunity.” Girls then come online to express this newfound Girl Power they have been given. Kanai (2017) argues that girls express themselves online to be—“particular pleasing, upbeat and confident affective qualities associated with a rugged individuality” (p. 295). They are encouraged

to become consumers, as companies have increasingly begun to use social media to directly advertise to girls (and young women) modeling the idea that girls can simply “buy” their way into gendered equality and girl power (Caldeira, 2020).

Todd (2018) explores how girls online become assemblages for neoliberalism and girl power by analyzing how disabled girlhood promotes Ablenationalism—a central mechanism of neoliberalism. She reviews a self-identified deaf girl, Poynter, and her use of Vlogging via YouTube. She looks at the ways in which Poynter is “called forward” as an exceptional disabled girl within the comments under her videos. In one comment, Todd suggests Poynter is a “happiness object,” whereas she is, “accumulating value as social goods because of the ways in which they point neoliberal citizens toward the end promise of the good life” (p. 39). Poynter is used as a symbol of American exceptionalism, as a country of benevolence and tolerance (for difference—i.e., disability). Furthermore, “through the entangled logics of Postfeminism and Ablenationalism, disability is contained and objectified as a tool to guide able-bodied people on the path to good multicultural citizenship” (p. 43). In this instance, the girl becomes the object form which viewers can attach to construct their own identity and subjectivity as the “good” neoliberal modern citizen—in that they are “choosing” to be tolerant. The girl constructs herself as empowered, as authentic, as speaking for herself, yet this construction is used and viewed within more sinister and larger social processes of neoliberal function—thus contributing to the perpetuation of social inequalities. Even in her moment(s) of (feeling) empowerment, disability (and the disabled girl) is still constructed as “Other,” outside the notions of the neoliberal can-do girl. She is simultaneously trying to attach to normative notions of being and girlhood that actively rely on her abjection. Her disabled online body reproduces the notion that the online Girl is in fact, able-bodied.

Hill (2017) also explores this showing how disabled girls online become beacons within postfeminist Girl Power and neoliberal normalizing discourses. The Girl power narrative is produced as, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied, meaning it, “renders racial, classed, and disabled identities invisible” (p. 116) as disabled girlhood is erased from the postfeminist mediascape. Thus, when disabled girls self-represent online, they are working with and negotiating within cultural discourses from which they are largely absent. By looking at a self-identified blind girl named Hannah’s YouTube and Blog channel, Hill shows how disabled girls are already excluded from discourses of beauty as many people often comment asking how she does her make up if she can’t see. Even as she uses her platform to raise awareness, it is through “acceptable” forms of self-representation. Hannah cannot help but participate in what Harris (2004a) calls the “can-do” girl narrative or what Paule (2017) calls the “achieving girl”—both modern girl archetypes imbricated in neoliberal mythologies that have infiltrated the digital realm. Her Instagram feed is curated (coded) in a similar way to many lifestyle bloggers, i.e. properly filtered and posed photos (aesthetically acceptable). All of this being part of “neoliberal inclusionism,” where “any awareness raising is rendered acceptable when it is contained within the recognized aesthetics of girls’ self-representation practices because these visual codes work to make the intention behind the posts less apparent and the disabled body within them more normative” (p. 125). Like heteronormativity, this is but another discourse to which girls construct themselves through normalizing discourses that they cannot escape. In order to be intelligible, they have to participate in normalizing discourses while at the same time, these discourses position them as “Other.”

This idea of Girl Power is not constrained to North America either and has been an export for neo-colonialism and imperialism. What Shain (2013) calls the Girl Effect, is this idea that girls

from the Global South are ripe for the neoliberal market, as governments and organizations promote the “business case” for empowering girls from the Global South to become well behaved neoliberal global citizens. This functions as justification for Global North (this includes North America) countries and organizations to insert themselves into these countries. The neoliberal girl both locally and globally, continues to be a tool for justifying colonization and imperialism. This is significant in its relationship to social media, as Berents (2016) argues, that these narratives have been exponentially exported through social media campaigns. Through social media the Global South girl is positioned as both victim and savior from which Global North girls can then insert themselves as good neoliberal subjects, by participating in projects that “save” Global South girls or be tolerant and supportive of cultivating their own “girl power.” Girls come online and utilize these narratives to construct their own neoliberal girl identity, which will be different depending on her geographical location (Global North vs. Global South).

Finally, a central component to neoliberalism is postfeminism, as both concepts mutually reinforce each other. Although postfeminism is a contested concept, in the least, it is attempting to explore the modern “transformations of feminism” (Gill, 2007, p. 147). Angela McRobbie (204) offers an excellent definition of postfeminism that attunes to its reach and complexity.

It suggests that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of “young women,” feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant. Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must in more public venues stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition (p. 255).

McRobbie points to this “undoing of feminism” as originating in the 1990s, which saw valid and necessary critical reflections of second wave feminism through the newly emerging concept of feminist reflexivity. However, valid criticism of certain feminist theories became coopted by patriarchal, colonial, and racist machines in an attempt to dismantle feminism entirely. Popular

feminism, the idea of female success and Girl Power, were used as “evidence” that feminism had won. Ringrose et. al (2013) also offers an important definition of postfeminism.

The concept of ‘postfeminism’ helps unpack and critique a contemporary sensibility that positions society as ‘beyond’ feminism, where it is supposed that feminist goals of social and political equality have been met, making the need for feminism now obsolete (p. 306).

Gill (2007) also argues that the proliferation of postfeminism is its movement through culture as “sensibility.” Sensibility suggests a pattern of symbolic codes that govern interpersonal relations and individual navigations of the self. We “sense” what are the “right” ways to feel and act. Postfeminism blooms from neoliberalism in that these sensibilities involve but are not limited to concepts of self-discipline of the mind and body, individualism, empowerment, and girl/women sexual agency, and reterritorialization of the gender binary (Gill, 2007); concepts that all intersect with neoliberalism. In relation to online spaces and social media, the Digital Girl continues to exist with and through discourses of both neoliberalism and postfeminism.

In her review of social media content Browning Karasik (2024) uncovers a variety of girl subjectivities built on postfeminist sensibilities. For example, the “clean girl” has glossy lips, perfect nails, and doesn’t wear “too much” make up. Her existence is supposedly effortless however in reality, she requires a significant amount of beauty products and expensive clothes to achieve her “clean girl” look. Furthermore, “her embodiment of cleanliness is largely reliant upon her adherence to conventional, and predominantly white, beauty standards; the clean girl’s skin is supple and smooth, free of acne and blemishes, and her hair is kept natural, long, and straight (p. 4). This embodiment reinforces the narrative that non-white skin is “unclean” and imperfect” thus reifying the racism that postfeminist discourses rely on. The Digital, postfeminist Girl is “clean” and real girls have to contest with these visually produced definitions of the Girl and girlhood. Dobson and Kanai (2019) argue that postfeminist sensibilities require girls always remain

“positive” and “upbeat” where “girls and young women skillfully reformulate significant life obstacles and gendered insecurities into humorous memes” (p. 775), thus downplaying any “negative” emotions or experiences. Another example of a postfeminist online girl subjectivity explored by Chen and Zheng (2024) is that of the “girlboss” where girls can *become* an “entrepreneur, consumer, and hustler” (p. 274). They further explore the significance of the meme as a modern vehicle for representing, reproducing, and even subverting the girlboss subjectivity. These are just a few examples of how postfeminist digital subjectivities through the apparatus of neoliberalism produce Girl formations that real girls must contend with.

3.5 Girl-ed Bodies

One way in which neoliberal and can-do girl subjectivities have become manifest, is through the body. The Girl becomes known in our collective consciousness through a set of certain physical bodily expressions and functions as the body is a central mechanism for the production of gender (Butler, 2020; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). In online spaces, these becomes knowable through images and videos, even textual accompaniments. Through online spaces, we see the viewing of this “girl” body as digital image. Images are part of discourse, and a central part to how we as a human collective create social meanings—“bodies are not separate to images but rather are known, understood and experienced through images” (Gonick & Gannon, 2014, p. 160). There is a connection between the images of our bodies and the creation of meaning around certain notions of identity and the self. As bodies and images “fold into each other” (p. 172), the girl’s becoming occurs *through* images. Weber and Mitchell (2008) argue that use of images and texts online “constitute a form of embodiment” and that, “the posting of photographs extends [girls] bodies into cyberspace” (p. 30). Both the body and thus the identity of the Girl become constituted online. An integral part of the girl’s becoming is the image of the girl

represented via a physical “body” and how the girl experiences her body/other girl-ed¹¹ bodies through such images.

A more recent trend on social media in which the body is used to represent girlhood, womanhood, and femininity is within what is called “fitspiration” social media accounts. These accounts focus on modifying the body to be what we currently consider “fit” which is defined as lean, toned, and muscular. Although the type of skinny deemed socially desirable changes slightly over time, being skinny or thin has long been the desired feminine bodily form in the modern era (Donovan et al., 2020; Goodman & Lu, 2021). Through these fitspiration accounts girls can find “mediated feelings of connectedness (encouragement, support, motivation, inspiration)” as well as “feeling (strong, confident, empowered)” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021, p. 824). The authors argue that this places the body as a site from which girls can produce affectual responses from social media. It creates the connection between “happy” and “healthy” girlhood with “strong,” “able-bodied,” “athletic,” and most importantly “committed” to these physical goals. The sign of the happy healthy girl is that she works hard to maintain her body. In a neoliberal society, that values hard work and admonishes “laziness,” it is understandable that this commitment to hard work is valued through these types of accounts and posts. Being “fit” also signals actions of physical self-control and self-betterment which are other values that signify how we define the successful girl. The authors also argue that although there are many fitspiration accounts and posts which often push back against idealizations of the body, with women and girls sharing their imperfections defined as stretch marks, scars, fatness, and unedited photos, the presence of shame is still prevalent.

¹¹ I am using the term “girl-ed” bodies here to suggest a process in motion. Our bodies have little meaning outside of culture and social systems. A girl body is not found but constructed through collective meaning making. This word is a verb, signifying that the body is “being made girl” through an assemblage of metaphysical, social, and cultural processes.

While in fitspiration photos women make visible positive affects (pleasure, happiness, pride in bodywork and capacity), those unsettling or difficult feelings towards their bodies and exercise (shame, hate, failure) can nonetheless be felt and operate as affective forces that move bodies to act, even if they are not explicitly articulated through words or images. The register of positivity that circulates through body pride is enmeshed with social discourses of women's body inadequacy that, while never explicitly evoked, drives the desire for self betterment (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021, p. 833).

The affect of shame is prominent as even though girls and women might post that they are proud of their “imperfect” bodies, the narrative that they are working to change these bodies in some way, almost subverts their initial statement. This is often reinforced through before and after photos. It is also important to note that the most popular and famous fitspiration accounts are held by thin, athletic, white women (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). Kennedy (2020) also finds this ideal on TikTok, as the most followed accounts happen to be girls who are “normatively feminine, white, and wealthy (p. 1071) and particularly noteworthy is that “the most-followed TikTok star is a slim, white, normatively attractive teenage girl (with straight white teeth, long straightened hair and her feminine body frequently displayed via tight fitting crop tops)” (p. 1072). These are not fitspiration-based accounts, but ones that focus more on dance and lifestyle. Girls are not always the ones creating these types of accounts, but they do follow them (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019) and engage with the narratives of girlhood and womanhood presented therein. The rise of fitspiration, dance, and lifestyle accounts is nothing new, and they simply perpetuate age-old narratives of feminine body management, feminine bodily shame, and idealizations of the feminine body as white and thin.¹²

¹² It is important to give specific attention to the historical legacy that structures whiteness and thinness as ideal (which participates in race constituting gender and genres of the human). String (2019) reminds us that with the Atlantic slave trade, fat Black female/women bodies were positioned as immoral or unattractive. This symbolic order is maintained in its current manifestation, as beauty and morality continue to be represented through abjection of the Black female/woman body, and particularly the fat Black female/woman body. Fatness as immoral or unattractive is “made to mean” through the dehumanization and rejection the Black female/woman body in North American culture.

Girls also relate to their bodies online through photo editing apps and there have been a litany of studies that suggest these altered images can have negative effects on the viewers psychological well being (Suhag & Rauniyar, 2024). While media has long been edited by those producing it, magazine editors for example, the rise of social media has put this editing power in the hands of everyday users. This amplifies the social and cultural collection of images that reinforces an unachievable bodily ideal, for everyone, but particularly girls (and women). Even as girls are aware an image has been edited, and may even be critical of it, the affects are still felt to a varying degree, which can sometimes be negative (Vendemia & DeAndrea, 2018). Yau and Reich (2018) found that it is important for girls to appear attractive online, more so than compared to boys. They cited specifically that girls felt they needed to look “good,” “glamorous” or “at least presentable” (p. 202). In order to achieve these attractive photos, the girls in the study explained that they spent a lot of time and work on crafting these images. How they might have defined attractive is not as important as understanding that “girls were more likely to attempt to present themselves as attractive and spent time thoughtfully choosing and editing their photos” (p. 204). There is intention, energy, and affect infused into the girl-body online image, as it is edited to achieve some kind of ideal in the eye of the girl (and hopefully those who will view it). Terán et al. (2020) also found that girls who posted selfies invested an incredible amount of time and energy making sure they posted the perfect image. In another study of girls in Grade 7, McLean et al. (2015) found that the girls who participated the most in editing their photos were also more critical of their own bodies. The authors suggest that this could mean that the girls that are more involved in photo editing are ones who are already unhappy with their physical appearance. The alternative to this is a study by Burnette et al., (2017) that discovered a high degree of media literacy among girls in regard to photo editing apps and viewing of other girls/women’s bodies.

When participants did endorse celebrity comparisons, discussion of the artificial and retouched nature of celebrity images often ensued. When discussing peer comparisons, this sample showed the ability to reflection and appreciate the qualities of their friends without necessarily feeling jealous. Participants also drew on their own self-confidence and valuing of diversity. Finally, a sense of personal agency was common in these groups, with several participants explicitly mentioning they made a conscious effort to avoid material that might invoke appearance comparisons or image concerns (p. 123).

The girls in this study cited their parents and school programs that supported critical thinking in relation to edited photos they might encounter on social media. Even still, studies like the Burnette et al., and others on photo editing apps unfortunately do not consider other factors that might be affecting a girl's connection with her body, as they do not include an intersectional analysis that looks at how their results might differ depending on race, ability, or sexuality for example. What is clear is that photo editing apps are used by girls and there is no doubt complex outcomes occur, yet how this relates to larger sociopolitical or cultural forces remains unclear.

Moving past concrete definitions of the ideal physical girl body, a more abstract yet significant way that the girl experiences her body online is that it represents something she can choose. In this thought exercise the specifics of what counts as a girl body are less important—instead the focus here is on the *process of choosing* the girl body and what that means. As girls strategically take photos of themselves and place them in the digital realm through curated websites and profiles, her body becomes the *thing she chooses*. The visual representation is significant yes, but what is significant about the choice? In one ethnographic study, Rebekah Willet (2007) interviews girls on how they construct themselves online by choosing which items to consume or not to consume and then, how the girls construct these self-presentations online via dress. By making choices about what products to buy and put on their bodies, they know themselves through the action of choice. From these interviews, we can see that to be a girl, is to make the right choices for one's body. In this study this means making the choice to not dress “too

revealing” and to dress “appropriate.” To be a girl is also to make the right choices against a mediascape that she knows devalues her. The girls discuss how they know the media represents girls in unhealthy ways that lead to an unhealthy body image and psychological problems—thus constructing themselves through certain modern feminist discourse. Yet they do not suffer from this, “other” girls do. This gives the girls only two subjectivities to choose from—the girl who succumbs to media harm and thus, has bad body image or the girl who resists, and always feels good about her body. The girl has the ability, and the responsibility, to choose to feel good about her body and how it is presented to the world. The girls argue that they choose what to wear as some form of authentic individuality (and even responsibility). Thus, the Girl and doing girlhood via consumer culture becomes something that is the responsibility of the individual to choose and choose correctly. To not choose correctly is to not be the “right” kind of girl or citizen. Girls know themselves as responsible for making the “right” choices and express those correct choices through their bodies. Girlhood online thus becomes a space to show their peers, community (and maybe even the world), how they as Girls have the power to choose, and they have in fact chosen “right.” Within this process of choosing, the good girl/bad girl dichotomy becomes manifest, thus furthering the boundaries for what it means to be a girl within systems of power—whereas the bad girls get what they deserve and are thus, marginalized and forgotten via both physical and social death. The specific boundaries for what count as bad girl/good girl change and are frankly, arbitrary (yesterday the skirt must be at the ankles, now it must be just below the knee, tomorrow it will be slightly above the knee), but what is important is that the boundary exists, and its parameters are known to the girls. They know themselves as girls *through the act* of correctly choosing the “right” side of said boundary.

To be a girl online then, is then an experience of choice. Yet, what happens when this choice becomes constrained within normalizing discourses girls and girlhood? Social media platform designs are one of the ways in which conformity to normative ideals of girls and girlhood may become manifest. Cho (2015) explores how Facebook only allows users to sign up for a profile with their “real” identity, aka your government approved self. Facebook heavily policies “body verifiability,” meaning that at various points they check to make sure their users are “real.” This severely restricts anyone who does not embody, the normative Girl body, thus reifying normalizing discourses of the Girl and making many online spaces inevitably conforming—creating the conditions from which the girl must chose to present herself within the “right” kind of self presentation/identity. The choice of a non-normative girl body is thus, not made (easily) available in this highly popular SMS. Caldeira et al., (2018) also explore this potentiality for restriction and forced conformity of the girl body via Instagram. They argue that certain filters within the social media platform, restrict users so called freedom of expression. The authors describe the ubiquity of cultural filters, which are, “the social norms and expectations, rules and conventions that shape our photographic creations” (p. 28). Suggesting that girls, more often place images of their bodies into this digital space, as they fit within cultural expectation and expressions of the hegemonic Girl body. Even if a girl were to attempt to break from the norm, there are in are institutional filters that will hold her in line, enforced through Instagram’s Terms of Use. One example of this is the ban of female nipples on the platform, however male nipples are permitted (p. 29). This institutional gatekeeping reinforces gendered power dynamics, specifically in a sexualized manner, as female nipples are sexualized and therefore need to be regulated. This regulation can also happen through negative comments from other users, number of likes or number of followers. All which signal a girl’s body “acceptance” and intelligibility by the larger

culture. The female body becomes a space from which gendered hierarchies are re-inscribed through institutional gatekeepers. The authors discuss Instagram as a place for diversity and ability for expression of difference, yet the choices for this expression are often constrained. The girl body online, is then about making the “right” choices of how to present the body, while a girl choosing incorrectly, is often brought back in line by culture and institutional regulation/SMS design. Girls create ideas of themselves as girls via the presence of online bodily choice; yet we must think through how these choices are 1) constrained 2) work to further the binary of the good/bad girl 3) can (often) only exist within hegemonic norms. Girls themselves may feel ownership/freedom of their bodily online choices, even as they feel simultaneously constrained by said choices. As Orenstein (2016) demonstrates, girls, “talked about feeling both powerful and powerless while dressed in revealing clothing, using words like liberating, bold, boss bitch, and desirable, even as they expressed indignation over the constant public judgement of their bodies. They felt simultaneously that they actively chose a sexualized image—which was nobody’s damned business but their own—and that they had no choice” (p. 11).

3.6 Active Agents or Passive Dupes?

This debate around choice has dominated a significant portion of girlhood studies literature as girlhood studies research often explores whether girls can be defined as passive or active agents (Gonick, 2006a), in what some call the girl crisis discourses vs. the girl empowerment discourses. The legacy of these discourses has been translated into discussions of girl’s experiences in digital spaces as these are clearly evident in the literature presented in this review. As girlhood studies theorists attempt to “measure” whether girls are active or passive, liberated or oppressed online, in crisis or empowered, other theorists suggest putting these paradoxes into further contention—can girls be labeled definitively as one or the other? What are the limits of this binary?

Furthermore, how are we objectively determining what counts as passive or active and oppressive or liberatory practices for girls? Or is that question always already imbedded in our own situated research biases and thus, inevitably harmful? On the side of passivity, which is where much girlhood studies theory originated, the argument is that social spaces of concentrated power enact their “will” onto the girl—i.e., mainstream media and its texts/images, academic texts/spaces, institutional locations like the education system or governmental structures. They take the standpoint that girls are passively absorbing mainstream cultural images and internalizing them in an obvious one-way transmission (Anschut et al., 2012; Slater & Tiggermann, 2016). Girl’s online choices are not identified as free-floating moments of agency. They often happen at a level of unconsciousness that reinforce current notions of the “ideal.” David Buckingham (2008) suggests that in digital space, “who we perceive ourselves to be—is far from a matter of individual choice; on the contrary, it is the product of powerful and subtle forms of ‘governmentality’ that are characteristic of modern liberal democracies” (p. 10). Thus, girls passively accept dominant norms of girlhood and (re)reproduce them with little to no conscious choice or thought. They will continue to do this unless they are “saved” by well-meaning, feminist, or progressive adults (England & Cannella, 2018).

Conversely, current girlhood studies literature suggests a move away from overly conceptualizing girls within this normative feminine ideal of passivity. Much of this work stems from the lasting legacy of cultural studies in which theorists from the Birmingham School reformulated the arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer. Considered part of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that any form of culture (films, TV, art) produced through capitalism will only benefit the status quo. Furthermore, that the masses passively consume culture without critical thought. Although many find their arguments too reductive, their ideas went

against the current “populist approaches to media culture that downplay how media industries exert power over audiences and help produce thought and behavior that conforms to the existing society” (Kellner, 2013, p. 5). In light of this shift, prominent cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall and others from the Birmingham School added/shifted Adorno and Horkheimer to argue that although mass produced media does dictate culture and society in *some ways*, audiences can also have a more active participation with such media. For example, Hall’s seminal piece on encoding and decoding incorporates both positions. He suggests that there are specific dominant meanings (or “preferred readings” as he called them) are “encoded” into popular cultural media that audiences can “decode” in various ways that both reproduce and subvert the dominant encoded meanings (Hall, p. 34, 1980). Feminist and girlhood studies theorists have taken up this turn in cultural studies as well, suggesting we shift from assuming girls are always already passive media consumers.

Coleman (2008) argues that “the body/image, subject/object model often relies on and reinforces a relation of media effect. This ‘media effects’ model has been critiqued for its inability to measure ‘effect’ in any meaningful way” (p. 164). She argues that we cannot simply or easily know how the media and cultural images affect girls. There is a need to go deeper into the ways girls are “becoming” in any moment or context within which they live, molded by a variety of social cues from within which their exact physical or emotional result is not easily known. Henry Jenkins’ idea of “participatory culture” argues that we both consume and produce media. This, “is particularly important for thinking about girls’ use of new media technologies. Participatory culture complicates earlier conceptions of the media fan/audience as a passive receptor of culture” (Keller, 2012, p. 434). Zaslow (2009) argues that in her ethnographic research she found that although, “patriarchal ideologies dominate” girls’ lives, “girls are active [cultural] readers who do

not always blindly accept the dominant readings” (p. 43). Even through a limited set of choices, girls actively “play” with and negotiate the meanings themselves as, “the term ‘negotiation’ implies the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give and take... Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between completing frames of reference, motivation, and experience” (Walters, 1995, p. 114). If we follow Walters’ argument, cultural norms and ideas are not necessarily (at least obviously) passively absorbed by everyone in the exact same way, and we need to develop an analysis that includes exploration of this untethered flow of ideas from culture to girls and back again. This idea of play does not trap girls within the passive/active binary but reflects on the ways she can move and occupy both, often concurrently. Szücs (2013) discusses this play specifically as it relates to online, where she reviews girl’s online discussion of sex talk. In her study, she found that online spaces offer an “informal and inclusive context” that can empower these girls, “to speak for their desires and pleasures outside of the discourses of victimization and violence” (p. 123). In placing her body into digital space, is the girl understood as a cultural dupe or an active agent? Perhaps it is more nuanced than this, and the girl does in fact, occupy both subjectivities. Banet-Weiser’s (2011) study of young girls and their use of YouTube explores the website’s “double function” (p. 278), where girls reproduce mainstream consumer content and create their own media content simultaneously. She concludes that, “girls’ self-presentation online is a contradictory practice, one that does not demonstrate an unfettered freedom in crafting identity any more than it is completely controlled and determined by the media and cultural industries” (p. 280).

But reflecting on this even further, what if these debates are themselves problematic? What if by trapping girls in theoretical debates of the active/passive binary we are participating in a colonial racializing narrative? Gill-Peterson (2015) uses sexting to explore this very problem.

Within the dominant narratives of the sexing girl, she is passive in that she is unable to “resist” this patriarchal of sexual expression. Yet, a sexting girl “threatens to violate their prescribed symbolic role” (p.147) and in the act of sexting, counters the idea of the passive victim with girls then becoming locked between agency and passivity. However, the ability for girls to be active, to be able to change, is inherently imbedded in whiteness—agentic sexting girls are always already white. This goes beyond sexting as well, for the ability to “play” with discourses of girlhood, the girl must occupy the privileged position in whiteness (Gaunt, 2016). This means that girls come to know themselves online as agents or victims, often in relation to their raced (or non-raced) physical bodies. Gill-Peterson (2015) takes this debate further to argue that the adult debates over sexting and whether the girl is “oppressed” or “harmed” through such an act is simply a discussion that produces ideas of the ideal Girl identity through notions of whiteness. She ends by asking us whether we should even be debating if selfies or sexts are harmful for girls? In her argument, the debate on whether girls are active or passive, liberated or oppressed (in her example via sexting), “partakes in a certain understanding of girls’ plasticity that is the property of whiteness” (p. 153). This suggest current academic debates of girlhood as inherent products of colonizing narratives that continue to privilege ideas of the “healthy” or “ideal” girl as within notions of whiteness, even as those debates claim to be progressive of feminist in nature. It further suggests that as girlhood studies theorists, we need to re-think the way we “measure” how girls are counted as active or passive, liberated or oppressed, as those frameworks of measurement are inevitable products of the historical intellectual legacy of white supremacy.

Pushing back against a colonial understanding of agency, Garcia et al., (2020) wants to redefine agency for girls, to mean “one’s capacity to initiate and sustain collective or individual actions as forms of transformative resistance against oppressive social structures” (p. 346). Their

study explores the way Black girls navigate potentially racist experiences online while also using those same spaces to build community, support both professional and personal goals, as well as participate in political activism. In their study, they are not determining whether or not Black girls have no choice (and are thus “at-risk,” a now racially laden and racist term) or have complete agency, but how they are situated within the nuance of these experiences. Instead of highlighting an instance where one girl has no choice, it becomes about what constrained or mediated choice looks like and how might that moment blur with actions and affects of agency. It becomes an exploration of how Black girls are navigating moments of choice to *move* toward liberation. This is also explored through a study done by Watt et. al (2019) in their study of three Muslim girl Youtubers. In their review, they explore how the girls use “linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal” forms of video production to “speaks back to dominant understandings of Muslim females in the North American context” (p. 258). These Digital Girls are actively engaging with discourses and technological artistic expressions to “play” with their girlhood while moving within and beyond the cultural and political realities of the moment. The movement and the becoming, is what is significant here, as opposed to measuring whether or not girls have “arrived” at agency or liberation. This idea of *becoming agentic* operates outside colonialist frames of agency, which is an identity with static and bounded meaning.

3.7 Conclusion

It is important to end this chapter by suggesting that is it only a beginning. The discourses of the girl and some of her experiences discussed in this chapter encompass but a small cross section of the litany of knowledge that surrounds the girl from a mostly North American perspective. To be a girl in our modern world is a complex mass of contradictory and ever-changing notions and ideals. Yes, she is understood as feminine, heterosexual, a neoliberal subject,

in danger and white, but there are many other discourses and experiences that can and should be discussed. When discussing “girls” within digital media much of the dominant literature¹³ in North America does not partake in an intersectional analysis, and discussions of race, sexuality, ability, immigration status, religion to name a few, are rarely if ever mentioned. If they are mentioned, it is sometimes just to list demographics but then does not take them into consideration during the discussion. If there is thoughtful discussion, it is only when these identities are the focus of the study. This leads to an “othering” of non-dominant girlhoods as their experiences are sequestered as a subsection (i.e. lesser section) of the overall literature. Things are changing, but academia is still dominated by whiteness, leaving targeted studies underfunded or erased (Corrigan & Vats, 2020; Henry & Tator, 2009). This leaves much of girlhood studies literature as a vehicle for the status quo. When “girl” is the only signifier, readers may fill in the blanks and assume the girl is in the least, heterosexual and white. Since dominant identities are “unmarked” they are rendered invisible and thus become the (neutral) default assumptions for identity (Butler, 2000, p. 24).

For example, in the North American context, incarcerated girls are largely absent from dominant girlhood digital media texts. What is it like for incarcerated girls to construct themselves

¹³ By dominant literature I mean canonical texts or authors that continually cite each other creating a feedback loop. I also mean articles that come to the top of various search engines when qualifying words for marginalized identities are not used. That studies of marginalized girls and girlhood are less likely to end up in search results *unless* the identity is named is the central issue here. I say less likely here with caution as I have not conducted a formalized test for such a claim. This is mostly based on my observational experience while conducting this review of girlhood studies literature. However, I did a brief test on my own using “queer girls” as the example and these were my findings. Scholars Portal: 4 hits for “queer girls” and “Instagram”; 270 hits for “teenage girls” and “Instagram”; 670 hits for “adolescent girls” and “Instagram”; and 5000 for “girls” and “Instagram.” Google Scholar: 150 hits for “queer girls” and “Instagram”; 8,870 hits for “teenage girls” and “Instagram”; 17,600 hits for “adolescent girls” and “Instagram”; and 112,000 hits for “girls” and “Instagram.” JSTOR: 2 hits for “queer girls” and “Instagram”; 117 hits for “teenage girls” and “Instagram”; 59 hits for “adolescent girls” and “Instagram”; and 2,069 hits for “girls” and “Instagram.” EBSCOhost: 1 hit for “queer girls” and “Instagram”; 119 hits for “teenage girls” and “Instagram”; 71 hits for “adolescent girls” and “Instagram”; and 1,280 hits for “girls” and “Instagram.” Whether or not *all* of the hits are viable would be important for further inquiry into this issue however I did investigate many of the sources that resulted from “queer girls” and “Instagram” and there were only a few that actually focused on queer girls (and I included them in this literature review). It is also likely that queer girls are included in studies that use the signifiers “teenage” and “adolescent.” However, as I already mentioned, when we do not name marginalized identity, dominant identity is assumed. Furthermore, the difference in hits alone is significant.

online either before, after or during incarceration? Queer girlhood is another largely absent or sidelined subjectivity. As queerness is erased, how do queer girls find safe spaces for identity play? Younger girls were also largely absent from certain feminist informed girlhood studies literature. What is it like for 7-10-year-old girls as they explore online spaces and engage with digital/social media? What about displaced girls? How might immigrant or refugee girls construct themselves through digital media? What does it mean to be a girl online whilst straddling multiple national identities? Muslim girlhood (and other religions) is rarely mentioned within the oft cited girlhood texts that interrogates social media, suggesting that there needs to be more inclusion of these experiences. Indigenous girlhood has become synonymous with sexual and physical violence, and while these experiences are important for truth telling and reconciliation, they should not be reduced to such experiences. We need research that explores how Indigenous girls are existing online within and outside of these experiences. What is it like for an Indigenous girl to be segregated within certain limited online expressions/identities? Trans girls are also not often included in girlhood studies literature focused on social media. As anti-trans hate has a particular presence in online spaces, what does it mean for trans girls to experience joy, find community, and take up space for themselves on social media? To be clear, incarcerated girls, queer girls, Muslim girls, Indigenous girls, and trans girls' experiences with digital and social media exist, the point is that too many girlhood studies texts solely rely on the "girl" signifier alone, without qualifying varying experiences of girlhood. These studies are also far less frequent than studies that talk about "just girls." Finally, there are two overarching missing pieces in girlhood studies literature in general. First, a large portion of intersectional analysis on social media revolves around adult women, and girls are sidelined. Second, there needs to be more research focusing on Canadian girls that represent a variety of ideas and experiences.

These omissions do not mean that the knowledge gained from girlhood studies literature is useless, it simply means that it is incomplete. The research portion of this dissertation intends to try and take the girlhood studies discourse deeper and reflect on who is being left out and what we are “allowed” or empowered to say about girls. Although I will not be able to answer all the gaps in the literature it is important that we take notice. No theory or research study can account for all experiences at all times; however, it is clear that across girlhood studies literature, certain girlhoods are not always taken into consideration.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This dissertation explores the processes of the Girl identity formation online in order to explore its significance as it relates to overall social constructions of the Girl/girl-self and overarching social structures. By using feminist qualitative research methods and post-structuralist feminist theoretical frameworks the purpose of this research is to: (i) Explore the processes by which individuals identifying as ‘girls’, come to be “known” to themselves and to others as the Girl¹⁴ from within a digital context; and (ii) To explore the theoretical, societal, and material implications of the ‘*Digital Girl*’ to create a better understanding of girl’s daily lives and experiences of both on and offline girl selves. As a recap, the research questions guiding my project are:

1. How do girls use specific discourses, texts, affects, and moments to produce, construct, and create herself in digital space(s)?
2. How is the “Girl” identity used as an (in)direct tool for the maintenance and reproduction of inequitable distributions of power? As complex social processes of power take place on the level of both the abstract and (un)conscious, what kind of material realities are being produced for these girls?
3. At the intersection of power and reality, what kinds of material lives are being produced and what is the significance of this liminal space?

¹⁴ The girl is sometimes represented throughout this dissertation as Girl, capital “G.” This is a theoretical device derived from Sylvia Wynter as she employs the concept of the genre of Man capital “M” (Parker 2018). What this means is that Man, and in this case, Girl, are not biological or physical entities, but hegemonic ideas. Girl, capital “G” is the ultimate ideal, the narrative, the myth, the story. Specifically, we can understand Man and Girl as the “referent subject,” by which “Wynter means a shared sense, poetic in nature, that can nevertheless exclude many who are also expected to live it” (440).

Classic and newly emerging feminist texts, theories, and frameworks were taken into consideration as this methodology took shape. Reflecting on how girlhood studies theorists *use* feminist, decolonial, poststructural, and anti-racist methodologies was also part of how I structured this methodology. This reflection accounts for the ways in which certain theories are used for what I would consider, potential liberation or equity, and the ways in which these theories are used to perpetuate systems of oppression. For example, a significant part of girlhood studies research, specifically as it relates to digital media, is normative and normalizing. As I have already explored in Chapter 3, some of the research and subsequent analysis and recommendations feminists engage with, can be part and parcel of the very colonizing narratives that create “Othered” girl subjectivities, which reaffirm the Girl, capital G. Academic research and language is not immune from perpetuating the same forms of oppression and discourses that reproduce the ideals of the Girl. Gender is a tool of the colonizer (Lawrence 2003), and as such, the research questions we ask about girls and how we study girls, must be critically analyzed through historical legacies of colonization and oppression. There have been ample critiques of girlhood studies research’s focus on “saving” and or helping girls become “healthy.” This project calls into question the very parameters from which those definitions and research projects rest with an intentional methodology that was structured in an attempt to avoid those same linguistic and ontological traps.

4.2 Feminist Methodology

A question arises over which is the *real* feminist methodology. Is feminist methodology that which feminist researchers do or that which they aim for? We argue that, at least within the field of sociology, feminist methodology is in the process of becoming and is not yet a fully articulated stance. Attempts to impose premature closure on definitions of feminist methodology run the risk of limiting its possibilities by stipulating a “correct” set of techniques without adequate opportunity to examine a wide variety of other approaches for their feminist relevance (Cook and Fonow, 2019, p. 71, emphasis mine).

The feminist contribution is the developed practice of theoretically informed and experientially informed research that attends to power dynamics, boundaries, and the situatedness of the researcher (Ackerly and True, 2020, p. 154).

The best feminist research adapts each methodology to ensure that women (and other participants) are incorporated into every stage of the research process, from design of the research to its dissemination. This is because...researchers using a feminist approach believe research should begin from everyday experiences and that the voices of research participants should be heard (Harding, 2017, p. 144).

Feminism is a contested subject and as such, to claim a “true” feminist method is not entirely possible. Yet, if there are no boundaries, we find ourselves teetering on the edge of nihilism or solipsism—if we cannot “know” for sure what a feminist methodology is, then it must not exist. However, the meaningful utility of feminism is its ability to adapt and change to new ways of knowing. Although the boundaries of feminist methodology are malleable, there are still certain aspects we can attend to that suggest a feminist frame. Ackerly and True (2020) argue that we know a method is feminist when created through feminist theoretical reflection. Reflecting on the relational positionality of both participants and researcher are central to this project which, I would then suggest, make it inherently feminist. This reflection of researcher and participant positionality, and by default the intersectional aspects of power and privilege, has taken center stage in the development of the methodological framework presented here.

Another tenant of feminist methodology is that it is intentionally structured to elevate marginalized experiences while avoiding reinforcing disempowering, colonizing structures, and power dynamics. Furthermore, Ackerly and True argue that feminist methodologies follow a feminist research ethic which includes being attentive to, “the power of knowledge, and more profoundly of epistemology; boundaries, marginalization, silences, and intersections; relationships and their power differentials; [and] sociopolitical location (or situatedness)” (p. 20). By electing to use focus groups and interviews as the prime methods for this research, engaging in judgement

free active listening, while facilitating an intersectional group of study participants, and thus elevating marginalized voices; the feminist research ethic was adhered to. More specific methodological practices that align with this feminist ethic will be made clear throughout each section of this chapter.

My ontology is centered in the feminist legacy that the nature of reality is socially constructed and as such, we must think critically about how we do research. Are we reifying reality structured through power or are we altering reality as we know it? In creating multiple and varying branches of thought collectively with the girls, traditional power dynamics are intentionally minimized. I hope to learn as much from the girls as they may learn from me. Furthermore, a feminist epistemology, “includes the belief that knowledge (truth) is produced, not simply found, and that the conditions of its production should be studied” (Ackerly and True, 2020, p. 23). This research holds true to such an epistemology in that I am not looking to find the girl, but to produce what the girl means with girls themselves. This method is structured to create a space for investigating the ways in which the girl (as gendered truth) becomes produced, what the metaphysical and material conditions of this girl production might be, and the significance of this specific production to relations of power. In also following Donna Haraway (1988), my ontology leaves universalizing narratives and allows for the girls to be as they are, in partial yet complex moments of human existence.

I am arguing for a politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden (p. 589).

In rejecting the “god trick” my methodology promises humility and a commitment to the idea that knowledge is not “found” but made in the moment of becoming between the positionality of the

researcher and research participants. Finally, I would be remiss if I ignored that a feminist methodology is one that attunes to gender. Feminism has come to encompass an intersectional analysis, one that includes as Haraway suggests, the “location” and “positioning” of people. Yet the legacy of feminism is to ground itself in the positioning of gender. With the “Girl/girl as gender” as a central tenet of this research, my methodology is undoubtedly feminist.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and that their participation was entirely voluntary. The participants were provided with a letter of information and the option to ask me any questions prior to considering their participation. Following that they were asked to sign a consent form (see [Appendix B](#) for example) and the participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data collected. My plan to ensure confidentiality includes pseudonyms throughout the process, plus the utilization of password protection software for my email and transcribing software accounts.

A central ethos of feminist research centres around the dignity of the participant and the affirmation and validation of their lived experiences as described by the participants themselves. Girls are judged in all realms of society, and indeed this is exacerbated in online spaces (Bailey & Steeves, 2015). No form of judgement was levied upon these girls, who are real, who exist as full human beings, deserving of dignity, kindness, and care. Use of their voices and experiences is a situated analysis that intends to be free from judgement or shame. They are not ultimately responsible for normative (or even disruptive) notions of girlhood, but they are navigating, producing, and negotiating within the discourses of girlhood in which they live as agents in their own right. By invoking a situated analysis as central to attention to research ethics, I draw on the self-reflective feminist idea that the researcher brings their own situated biases and standpoint to

the “research table” (Harding, 2009). How I understood their words, experiences and voices were different than how another individual might have understood them. As a North American, white, cis-gendered, disabled, neurodivergent, mad, queer, non-religious, adult woman I have a place from which I am “reading” these experiences. Thus, the goal of this research was not to judge whether these girls are “doing” girlhood in the “right” or “wrong” ways as I might understand them. No form of correcting or guiding the girls into the right kind of girlhood was used. Girls’ identities and experiences were not used to further negative stereotypes. Central to this dissertation is understanding how the girl comes to be constructed and critical reflection on that process will take place so that “harmful” constructions do not become reproduced. Furthermore, within the focus groups, an ethics of care (Ackerly & True, 2020) was of the utmost importance as girls were encouraged to speak safely and freely with each other without hindering one another. I had prepared for instances where the girls might have discussed problematic violence or physical/emotional abuse, as I would have taken action, however this did not happen. Still all efforts were made to not ask triggering questions nor probe into areas not relevant to the intended project. The use of third-person questioning, whereby girls were asked to speak about girls in general versus about their own personal lives, was central to avoiding triggering participants in this study.¹⁵ For example, one of the questions I asked the girls—how do *girls* feel about photo editing apps?

4.4 Site of Inquiry

For this research social media sites (SMS) are the focal point from which the girl’s experiences were examined. These included, Instagram, Tiktok, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter,

¹⁵ Using third person questions resulted in third person responses. Meaning the girls did not often talk about their own individual experiences, but the experiences of girls in general. Where the girls did get specific about their individualized experience, I included that in the discussion and analysis as much as possible.

Reddit, Archive of Our Own (AO3), 2Toon, Discord, YouTube, Pinterest, and Facebook.¹⁶ The social media sites that girls themselves deemed important are the ones that were factored methodologically in this study. The socially media sites mentioned above are inclusive of all the SMS mentioned by the girls in the focus groups and interviews. This was part of the collaborative process by which the girls worked with me to construct the parameters of the research. I was open about this collaboration with my participants by asking them what they might consider social media and what sites or apps they frequently use to connect, create, share, and interact with people. The girls themselves often felt unsure around what apps or websites counted as social media signaling that a) this is a widely used term that people do not entirely understand or have alignment on; and b) it allows for the girls themselves to have the opportunity to define what it means to be them.

4.5 Participants

The total number of participants informing this study, inclusive of 1:1 interviews and focus groups was 23 girls between the ages of 15-18 who live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in Ontario, Canada. This includes the City of Toronto and the regional municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. In total, the region contains 25 urban, suburban, and rural municipalities. The GTA is a large urban area with a 2021 population of around 6.4 million. Through the recruitment process my flyer made it to a mother who had lived in the GTA for many years but recently moved to Eastern Canada. She and her daughter were extremely excited about the project and were keen on participating. For that reason, one girl who participated was from a rural area outside of the GTA and Ontario.

¹⁶ We can also understand these sites as accessed through apps or applications. Applications are software programs that are designed to perform a specific function directly for the user. SMS apps are often found on smart phones and are used outside traditional web browsers like Safari, Mozilla, Google Chrome, or Internet Explorer. However, these applications can also be accessed through web browsers.

With the goal of securing a diverse group of participants, what some coin a ‘representative sample’ (Davis & Lachlan, 2017), I wanted to make sure that these girls occupy a variety of intersecting identities—meaning I did not set out to secure a sample by looking for one Black girl, one Indigenous girl, one disabled girl etc. Instead, I included girls who were queer and Southeast Asian, Black, and Muslim, multiracial and an immigrant, or disabled and non-binary and a multitude of intersections therein. The goal was to recruit and collaborate with girls who hold a variety of identities and avoid tokenistic recruitment strategies resembling identity boxes. A subsequent goal was to make sure that not one single identity was overrepresented but more specifically making sure that dominant identities were not overrepresented, i.e., white, heterosexual, able-bodied etc., as this has been a common critique of some girlhood studies research (Brown, 2009; Halliday, 2019; Harris, 2004a; Hill, 2017). It is important to reiterate that no girl was (or is) reducible to any one identity: her experience is influenced by the intersections of these identities and further shaped through her specific situational and historical context.

The unifying factor, the constant “identity” across my diverse participant pool is that they all self-identified as girls or girls who were also non-binary (meaning the used she/they pronouns), but all other identities outside of that constant were intended to be as diverse as possible. This was accomplished by asking research participants to participate in a short self identification questionnaire before their participation commenced. There was a set of possible identities to choose from on the participation request form and a space to write in any identities not listed. Participants were chosen, again not to fill any specific identity quota, but based off unique combinations of intersecting identities specifically attending to non-dominant identities. In fact, the majority of girls held one or more non-dominant identity and were non-white. Some of the identities that girls who participated in this study voluntarily self-identified were, disabled

(invisible), immigrant, low-income, Christian, Mennonite, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, asexual, heterosexual, queer, questioning, lesbian, cisgender, genderqueer, non-binary, Asian, Black, white, Chinese, Jamaican, Filipino, Indian, Trinidadian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Sri Lankan, and multiracial. In a traditional sense, this could be understood as “maximum variation sampling” (Davis & Lachlan, 2017, p. 159). In a feminist sense, this means creating a research space that respects and works for a variety of experiences.

4.6 Recruitment

Participants were recruited by following the network sampling model which is, “using social or other networks to locate and recruit participants” (Davis & Lachlan, 2017, p. 152). I used my own social networks, university networks, and my professional networks to connect with girls. I reached out to individuals in my network who work with girls, used the Girls Studies Research Network at York, and used my Supervisor and Committee member networks. I also reached out to girls serving organization networks throughout the GTA. A snowball sampling effect was incorporated into the recruitment to mitigate the bias of the original non-random, judgemental sample. A digital flyer ([Appendix C](#)) designed with disability accommodations in mind and with a simple description of the project and was distributed via email through the various networks and girls serving organizations. The flyer and email also listed an Instagram account titled The Digital Girl Project (@thedigitalgirlproject). The thought process behind the Instagram account was to give girls the ability to contact me outside of email, since girls do not generally use email. Five girls contacted me via Instagram, and of those two participated in the project.

Once initial contact was made, I offered a welcome email to interested participants. This included further details about the project as well as a short questionnaire and the voluntary self-identity survey. Once enough participants had expressed interest the self-identity data was

reviewed, and participants were selected to ensure an intersectional sample following maximum variation sampling. There were 3 girls who were passionate about participating but did not wish to complete the voluntary self identification survey. Given this was optional, and while not optimal, in that I was then unaware any identities outside of their girlhood and age, I did not want to deny these girls this experience they so clearly wanted simply because they were uncomfortable disclosing their identities. Girls that were chosen to participate were then sent an email confirming their participation as well as consent form and parental consent forms as applicable. All recruitment documents were collected and confidentially saved digitally. Girls were provided with a \$25 honorarium (digital gift cards to the place of their choice), offered to the participants via a follow up email after the focus group or interview had commenced.

4.7 Data Gathering

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a shift in York University research ethics protocols, focus groups and interviews were conducted over Zoom except for one in-person focus group conducted at a centre for young girls in the GTA of southern Ontario. There is emerging data to suggest that “researchers who use synchronous, or real-time, exchanges commonly conclude that group interactions are characterized by dynamism and immediacy” (Fox et al., 2013, p. 540). As well, Barbour (2018) argues that “there is no definitive answer as to whether online methods are superior to traditional face-to-face approaches to generating data” (p. 44) Given the necessary shift to a primarily online data collection strategy, and this emerging research regarding its efficacy, I am confident in the credibility and rigor of online synchronous focus groups and interviews. Beyond that, there are also some benefits to conducting focus groups and interviews online. For example, I was able to get a larger group of girls to choose from, which strengthened my intersectional goals. It also helped girls who may have had accessibility issues, if they could not

physically make the trip to an in-person focus group. Virtual meeting may have helped parents, guardians, or caregivers feel more comfortable since the girls were able to participate from their own homes. This added level of safety and security may have brought in a larger variety of interested girls but more importantly it may have assisted girls with a variety of identities to participate (Hughes, 2012). Finally, since my project is on the digital girl and her experience of the internet and social media, it is indeed rather fitting to have done the interviews and focus groups through a digital platform.

The choice to do interviews and focus groups stems not only from rigor-based necessity but to give it greater depth. As Lambert and Loiselle (2008) suggest, “when performed rigorously, the integration of individual interview and focus group data is a productive strategy that leads to an enhanced description of the phenomenon’s structure and its essential characteristics” (p. 235). Both focus groups and interviews were based on feminist methodology principles in that they give value to individual experience as a place from which to produce knowledge (Collins, 2009), they have an intention to avoid an atmosphere of coercion (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008), and they aim to create space for research participants to be collaborators in the research process as “co-researchers” (Kitzinger, 1994). All three qualifications attend to a feminist research ethic. For example, every effort was made to ensure that participants and their parents or guardians knew that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at anytime (non-coercive). Another strategy to ensure these feminist methodology principles do in fact occur, was to engage in active listening (Kourmoussi et al., 2018). Although much of the theoretical work around this practice is based in psychology, counseling, and the health sciences (Jones et al., 2019), its application was an essential part of my method for a few reasons. It ensured that a) clear communication was

occurring; b) it created a space free from judgement and shame which ideally allowed the girls to speak more freely; and c) it promoted an anti-oppressive research space.

Active listening, as a key role for the qualitative researcher is important to touch upon here, including its related guidelines and actions. Psychologist Carl Rogers coined the term in 1957 and defined it as requiring a person to, “ask open-ended questions, reflect another’s feelings (show understanding for how they feel), clarify, and summarize what you hear” (Azarchi, 2020, p. 206). Within qualitative research, this can include what we call “reframing.” This is where I frequently repeated back what was said either to the group or to the individual. This helps clarify the meaning. As an adult, I may not always understand the girls’ terms, language, tone, or a certain subject matter. Assuming what someone means can lead to a corrupted data set. Another important practice of active listening is nonverbal cues. This can mean head nods and eye contact which, “signal involvement, attentiveness, and awareness” (Bodie et al., 2015, p. 153).

Although not reflected in the literature, I want to suggest that active listening also requires that we first take stock of and then actively and intentionally bracket our values, assumptions, biases, and beliefs¹⁷ so that the research participant can share their opinions unencumbered by shame or judgement. While challenging to do, a rigorous feminist researcher strives to do this.

¹⁷ In my introduction, I claim that objectivity is a myth and that we are all biased in some way. However, to have bias does not mean we are unaware of it. Not all bias is some unconscious current we have no control over, for example in claiming I have a feminist bias, I am aware of and control that bias to a varying degree (and this is what I mean when I talk about "leaning in" to my feminist bias). Meaning the goal during the research is to simply try my best to ensure that certain biases I might have, do not make the girls feel unsafe, judged, or shamed during the research process. For example, if a girl was sharing an experience around feeling empowered when she posts a picture of herself in a bikini, it would not be helpful for me to tell her that this is *not* empowerment (I do not believe this, it is simply an easy example of what I consider a harmful bias). Creating a feminist moment would be to ask further questions, thus fostering curiosity in the girl about herself, her own experience, thoughts, and feelings. For example, I could ask her what empowerment means to her? I can theorize about whether or not something is empowerment later (and lean into my own feminist bias), but not in the moment with the girl. In the *moment* I am attempting to avoid certain biases that are steeped in adultist assumptions about girls and girlhood. Asking questions with curiosity, and not making declarative statements based on my bias is what I mean by "bracket my bias." In this instance my "bias" leans toward curiosity and against biased judgements on the girls.

Listening from a place of open-heartedness, empathy, compassion, and care can help with ensuring that we are hearing and subsequently documenting our participants' views and feelings. This is an active and reflexive process that requires the capacity for emotional regulation of the researcher. As someone who attends therapy regularly, I have learned how to care for my triggers and when I might get activated. When we are emotionally activated it makes it impossible for us to listen and understand another person's perspective as we may become defensive or feel hurt. Thus, with my experience and practice in emotional regulation, I am confident I have been able to actively listen throughout the focus groups and interviews. I believe that by i) reframing what was said to establish clarity of meaning; ii) refraining from pre-disposed judgements/beliefs; and practicing emotional regulation, I created an anti-oppressive space where the interaction was not about the researcher, but all about the participants' views, needs, and perspectives.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are not without limitations. For example, focus groups can produce a lot of “noise” in that stories may be disjointed, out of order, and not always easy to follow (Barbour, 2018). Morgan (2019) also argues that “focus groups lack the naturalness of going into the field to encounter people interacting in their own settings” (p. 5). Focus groups, especially virtual ones, create a “staged” setting that may not exactly resemble what people experience in their regular lives. This also can lead logistical limitations whereby the participants who do not know each other may lack comfortability or compatibility. While there are some limitations to the use of focus groups, there are many theoretical justifications for the use of focus groups, more specifically, focus groups with children and youth. Focus groups offer the chance for a safer peer environment and can limit potential power imbalances that sometimes occur between adult and child in individual interviews (Adler et al., 2019; Walters, 2020). Although I also conducted interviews,

the focus groups allowed for a different kind of interaction with the girls. Focus group work with the girls is what we might call, “collective conscious work” that is, “part of the task of feminist work with girls to create a space in which they might express their own experiential knowledge” (Gonick, 2003, p. 52). Focus groups are important in that they help us explore how a particular group makes meaning together. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) remind us that they “can provide participants with a space in which they can define their own categories and labels and unmask ideas and opinions through dialogue and debate with others” (p. 104). They allow for “flexibility” as it offers the participants to respond in a variety of ways (Hansen & Machin, 2019). It also helped show how girls make meaning of themselves and girlhood in *relation to each other*. This exchange provided rich data for relational co-constructive knowledge production.

There were 5 focus groups via Zoom comprised of 3-4 girls and one in-person focus group comprised of 8 girls with a total of 23 participants. Each group met once for a synchronous 90-minute session via Zoom.¹⁸ The focus groups were semi-structured in that I guided the initial discussion while allowing for the girls to take control should they feel comfortable. There were 9 main questions and 5 reserve questions ([Appendix D](#)). I was vigilant at creating a safe and inclusive space within these focus groups. Before the focus group I asked the girls to confirm they had privacy and were in a comfortable and safe space. I introduced myself and set the tone for the focus group with a few welcoming words. I had the girls go around and introduce themselves, pseudonym only, and had them answer a few short introduction questions about themselves. For example, what is their favorite food, what to they do for fun etc. This helped set the tone for the girls to feel comfortable with each other. The girls seemed to enjoy this icebreaker activity and

¹⁸ Girls were grouped based on availability and scheduling. Doodle polls were used to find time slots that worked the best for everyone. Confirmation and reminder emails were sent as well as a google calendar event. Within the confirmation email and reminder email girls were asked if they have any accommodation or accessibility needs. I also sent the girls the focus group questions in the confirmation email for accessibility.

were more than happy to share parts of themselves with the group. Girls seemed a little nervous and apprehensive at the start, but the icebreaker questions helped ease the awkwardness slightly. Some girls joked and laughed and got into telling the group a lot about themselves. I connected with them by repeating back what they said while also sharing how I might relate to that experience. For example, one girl said she played piano, and I shared that I used to play piano when I was younger as well and that I enjoyed it very much. Another girl said she enjoyed music. I asked her what she was listening to that week, to which she responded, “the new Kendrick Lamar album.” I had also been listening to this album and shared that with the group. These types of connections I think created a welcoming environment and (hopefully) supported the girls to feel safe(r) with me.

Interviews

Individual interviews allowed for different insights into how each girl experiences her digital self through SMSs. There were 9 individual interviews, making sure that there was a wide variety of intersecting identities within the 9 participants. Following a girl’s participation in a focus group, an invitation to participate in a follow up interview was sent via email and accompanied by a separate consent and letter of information. Semi-structured interviews were held over zoom for approximately one hour. Semi-structured interviews were important for this research because they, “can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogue by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee, and the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself” (Brinkman, 2018, p. 570). Semi-structured interviews are an important part of a feminist methodological legacy, that push back against positivist, patriarchal research frames (Porter 2018). Semi-structured interviews “allow a comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms

and allow for in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon. The aim is to understand phenomena through meanings that people assign to them” (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 69).

The one-to-one semi-structured interviews with my participants fostered the sharing of lived experience – giving way to a process where we co-constructed knowledge together, with the girl’s truths at the forefront. Co-construction came from the individual girl expressing her experiences in her own words and my contextualization of said experiences within larger social theories and phenomena when I moved the data forward to analysis and discussion. Using feminist methodologies these interviews were non-hierarchical and non-coercive to, “emphasize the importance of a mutually meaningful relationship between researchers and participants in the cocreation of knowledge” (Yost & Chmielewski, 2013, p. 246). To support a semi-structured interview, I drew from a set of guiding questions similar to the ones presented in the focus groups, while at the same time enabled the conversation to flow somewhat freely in the direction that the girls wanted to go. I would deviate from the main interview questions to follow up on something that was said or to engage in deeper explanation and context of a certain comment or idea. Each interview transpired on a case-by-case basis. For example, some girls required more structured interviews and others took more control in leading the conversation. Interviews were audio recorded with the written consent of my participants through two formats a) transcribing software; and b) an audio recording device. After data was transcribed and analyzed the audio files were deleted.

4.8 Collaborative Instagram Project

As the third component of my project, all girls who participated in the focus groups and interviews were asked to voluntarily participate in creating a collaborative Instagram account “for girls by girls.” *The intention of this part of the project was not to collect data.* The rationale for

this third leg of the study, ties back to my commitment to feminist research principles and methods. An important aspect of feminist research is that the research should be beneficial to the participants as well as meet the goals of the researcher. In the interviews and focus groups, girls can share their experiences and talk about ideas that they are often either not allowed to talk about or not offered the safe space to do so. In this leg of the study this opportunity is further developed while the feminist commitment to feminist political and social action is mobilized. Through co-creation of an Instagram account, led by the girls, they can potentially ameliorate some of the contradictory or oppressive issues brought up by them in the focus groups and interviews. By contradictory I mean issues that they themselves are still working through. A feminist consciousness is constantly in motion, growing, changing, and becoming. Just like adult feminists, young feminists are finding their own ways to understand and practice their feminism (even if they don't call it feminism themselves). Creating a space to work through these contradictions is part of my feminist commitment to supporting girls to reflect and think through their own feminist ideas.

After the interviews and focus groups commenced, I reconnected with the girls to see if they wanted to participate in this next phase of my research. Using various online digital tools, the girls created content that was interesting, creative, colorful, and a delight to review. After all of the content was created, we had a "launch party" that included a rich discussion about the content and their experience with the project. Following the launch party, I emailed every girl that had participated in my study, not just those who participated in the Instagram project and sent them the login credentials for the Instagram page and the email attached to it. Over the next few months, I uploaded the content the girls had already created, a new post every 1-2 weeks. After all initial content had been uploaded, I deleted the account from my phone, and it became totally in the girl's control. The Instagram account and content can be seen [@thedigitalgirl](#).

4.9 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was employed as the method to explore and analyze the rich data stemming from the interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis offers rich interpretations.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data.... The aim of TA is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297).

Although the literature around thematic analysis is not as established as other forms of analysis, Nowell et al. (2017) argue that there are practices that can instill "trustworthiness" within the TA process. There are six phases of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2021b). They are: "(1) dataset familiarization; (2) data coding; (3) initial theme generation; (4) theme development and review; (5) theme refining, defining, and naming; and (6) writing up" (p. 8).

I looked at the focus groups and interviews as parallel datasets, which "allows the researcher to capitalize on the comparative potential of various datasets, rather than being caught up in attempts to establish a hierarchy of evidence" (Barbour, 2018, p. 46). I took that even further and not only looked at the differences within the focus groups and interviews, but also the similarities.

According to Saldaña (2009) "a *code* in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 15). While coding as a verb "is the process by which raw data (e.g., transcripts from interviews and focus groups or field notes from observations) are gradually converted into usable data through the identification of themes, concepts, or ideas that have some connection with each other" (Austin & Sutton, 2014, p. 439). Coding is the essence of thematic analysis in that a "theme is an *outcome* of coding" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 24). There is a difference between the code(s), categories, and themes:

Categories are groupings of these codes that represent some segment of your data that is relatively discrete (a variable, if you will). As you begin to see patterns, you interpret meaning and construct themes. A theme is a declarative phrase or sentence describing a process, a connection, or an insight. Think of a theme as an abstraction that explains the pattern you see in or across categories. In a theme, you often state an argument regarding your interpretation (Rossman, 2017, p. 241).

From the codes, categories are created, that then inform the themes. These ideas are scaffolded onto each other for the ultimate final result of a theme with its interpretation.

The act of coding, however, is not an exact science as different people may code the same dataset differently. Which codes are used will depend on the researcher and whatever lens they chose to use interpret the data. This ties back to theoretical frameworks that underpin this study and why they have been made explicit and transparent in this journey of discovery. For example, in my analysis I used a feminist lens, that reflects on the gendered meanings that exist within the data. Yet a feminist lens is more than just gender, as my feminism represents a critical frame that concurrently looks at gendered meanings as they intersect with other identities and the significance of that within relations of power and the boundaries of knowledge. Through this lens, I used my “classification reasoning, plus [my] tacit and intuitive senses to determine which data ‘look alike’ and ‘feel alike’ when grouping them together” (Saldaña, 2009 p. 20). In this way I let the data “speak” for itself, in that I am not coming at the data with pre-existing codes, but “sensing” groups of text that might fit together and then aptly coding those groups of text. An individual grouping of text may have had multiple codes that I assigned to it as I used a felt sense to determine which code best suited it or if the grouping of text could be shared amongst more than one code.

To further keep the thematic analysis feminist, in addition to identifying codes and themes through a gendered intersectional lens, I held them in relation to the context in which the girl’s words sit. I looked past what is simply being “said” by the girls to understand their words from within the whole context of their subject-position and my subject-position in relation to them. This

is what Braun and Clarke (2021a) call “reflexive thematic analysis.” From their words I began to describe the significance in their entirety. What is the context from which the words exist (location, geography, emotional state)? Who exactly is saying those words? How often do they get to say them? What is the historical significance of such words? Are they privileged? Historically excluded? Have these words been said before? If so where, when, and how often? As Clarke and Braun (2017) also argue, thematic analysis can operate within a critical framework by which one can, “interrogate patterns within personal or social meaning around a topic, and to ask questions about the implications of these” (p. 297).

4.10 Rigor

The term qualitative rigor itself is an oxymoron, considering that qualitative research is a journey of explanation and discovery that does not lend to stiff boundaries (Cypress, 2017, p. 254).

Many of the accepted frameworks for a “rigorous” and even credible research study continue to be influenced by positivism as the “concern about the demonstration of rigour is due to a struggle for legitimacy in a discipline that is dominated historically by the positivist paradigm.” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390). The problem is, positivism has “no place for the reflexive subject” (Giddens, 1977, p. 42) as it is rooted in empiricism, pragmatism, and objectivity. As I have already made clear, the feminist epistemology guiding this research is rooted in opposing these supposedly revered scientific traits while finding a balance to ensure that I have worked towards rigor. Much of my epistemology is based in poststructural theories, which suggest that objectivity is a myth. People do not exist in a vacuum. Their beliefs and their behaviors, their ideas, conclusions, and decisions are born out of their situational context. My epistemology is based in the belief that, multiple truths can exist simultaneously. As such, finding some “ultimate truth” is categorically impossible. What does it mean then, to do credible qualitative research in a post-positivist, poststructuralist world? Furthermore, my epistemology is also centered on the idea that what

counts or is valued as knowledge, is often dominant knowledge(s), the very knowledge(s) that acts as a technology for the maintenance of systemic power inequity. Who gets to determine what counts as credible or rigorous research, exists within valuation and accreditation systems built through colonial and oppressive knowledge(s) and logic(s). What does it mean then, to do rigorous and therefore credible qualitative research from within a potentially incredible system?

We can build upon what has already been done, and mould it to fit within the leading feminist ways of doing things. The consensus on what constitutes credibility and rigor in qualitative research outside a positivist paradigm is far from certain. There are, however, qualitative researchers and theorists who offer suggestions of what this might entail. I have assessed which strategies for credibility and rigor fit within a feminist paradigm. As will become clear, feminist theory and praxis are often already situated within some of the important concepts of rigor and credibility.

Credibility is a central tenet of any feminist qualitative research. Credibility “refers to the study process, that is, to establish how the data and the analysis procedures are carried out and to ensure that no relevant data have been excluded” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 13). Thomas and Magilvy (2011) suggest that reflexivity—the act of being able to examine one’s own feelings, reactions, and motives and how these determine their thoughts or actions in a given situation—is part of credibility and that the researcher understand their subject position in relation to the participants and the research. Another strategy for credibility is member checking or informant feedback. Member checking can mean “the researcher should make a conscious effort to follow, rather than lead, the direction of the interviews by asking the participants for clarification of definitions, slang words, and metaphors” (p. 154). I have done this as standard practice throughout the interviews and focus groups. Member checking also involves engaging the participants in meaning making

and comprehension. This can take many forms, for example, asking girls who participated in the interviews the opportunity to review their transcripts for clarity. Although this was a desired goal, it unfortunately did not take place. Even still, credibility exists in this research as these are not all or nothing guidelines.

Dependability is understood within rigor as the “employment of overlapping methods; and In-depth methodological description to allow study to be repeated” (Chowdhury, 2015, p. 154). This can happen through the use of extensive auditing, commonly referred to as an audit trail, and allows for others to examine the project with access to documentation related to the data, methods, and decisions. According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011, p. 153) an audit trail is achieved by:

- describing the specific purpose of the study;
- discussing how and why the participants were selected for the study;
- describing how the data were collected and how long the data collection lasted;
- explaining how the data were reduced or transformed for analysis;
- discussing the interpretation and presentation of the research findings; and
- communicating the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data.

Tobin and Begley (2004) suggest that reflexivity is also an important part of the audit trail, specifically that the researcher, “keep a self-critical account of the research process, including their internal and external dialogue” (p. 392). As should be evident, I have successfully included a detailed audit trail.

Triangulation means using more than one research method to assess “the validity and reliability of data gather methods in the social and behavioural sciences” (Pelto, 2017, p. 242). Triangulation offers a sense of completeness for a project as “it allows for recognition of multiple realities. Inquirers are thus not using triangulation as a means of confirming existing data, but as a

means of enlarging the landscape of their inquiry, offering a deeper and more comprehensive picture” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 393). To get this comprehensive picture, triangulation is about using multiple methods to explore the same phenomenon (Carter et. al, 2014). Morse (2009) has also suggested these mixed qualitative methods as a way for expanded perspectives. Triangulation ensures multiple data collection methods in order to yield multiple perspectives. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) offer a few guidelines for triangulation in that the researcher needs to reflect and identify. These include the:

- rationale underpinning the combination of methods
- epistemological assumptions of each method
- compatibility of methods
- relative weight of each data set (e.g. hierarchical, equal value)
- added-value of the combination

These guidelines that have been met as outlined in previous sections of this chapter. Furthermore, by using a short demographic and identity questionnaire, 1:1 interviews and focus groups, as well as an art based collaborative project,¹⁹ my study meets the requirements of rigorous triangulation.

Credibility, dependability, and triangulation are three important actions for qualitative rigor that fit within a post-positivist feminist ethic in that they focus on reflexivity in that they require the researcher to think deeply about how they are structuring their study and why. This creates the opportunity for deep critical reflection at multiple junctions within the study. Strategies like “reframing” and “member checking” also help elevate the voices, ideas, perspectives, and experiences of the research participants, which in this case reflects individuals and a community

¹⁹ Even though I did not use the Instagram project as data, it exists for anyone to witness and thus acts as an extension of this project in terms of collective knowledge creation and meaning making.

experiencing marginalization, namely girls. Finally, that triangulation offers “multiple realities” is inherently post-positivist in that the aim is not to find some ultimate truth but the *multiple truths* that can exist simultaneously with each other and therefore considering what that means.

4.11 Limitations to Proposed Study

As in any study, there are limitations, and the most salient ones are outlined here. Firstly, given that the location of this study is within a North American context, in Canada, mostly in one province, and generally one area within that province suggests that this is a more localized study and cannot be extrapolated to define the experiences of girls all over the world. Although this is an impossible task, claiming it is a limitation is redundant in poststructural theory however it bears repeating. Another limitation stems from the consideration of what social structures are in place that reward, make safe, block, or force girls to choose online spaces or social media? Who did not come forward and why? Inequities in Wi-Fi access is one such contributing factor impeding some girls from using social media while enabling other girls. There were only 23 girls who participated in the study. More participants would have undoubtedly added to the depth of the data, offering more codes or even strengthening/solidifying popular codes. Although the sample was quite diverse, as the girls had multiple intersecting identities, since the sample was small it was difficult to do an intersectional analysis. Standard practice to protect participant identity requires $n=5$. For example, if there were 5 girls in my study who were queer, I could have done an intersectional analysis around queer girls. Since almost no identity category contained a minimum of 5 girls, it was difficult to speak directly about certain identities. The one category I was able to discuss was racialized girls. The girls in my study were Black, East Asian, and South East Asian. To be clear these racialized categories experience racialization and racism differently, meaning the analysis was limited, even as it offers some level of insight. Protecting the girls’ identities was the first

priority. Although some of the girls might have been physically disabled, none of them disclosed this to me, suggesting this may be a limitation in the research. This is a fairly large gap, as analysis around the intersection between disability and girlhood is a growing point of inquiry form within girlhood studies.

There were a small number of participants but there was also only one researcher, me. It would have added an interesting layer to the research if there were multiple researchers reviewing the data. These researchers would have brought their own positionality, histories and identities, to the analysis process. It would have been interesting to see which codes they developed, if they were different or similar to my own, as well as how they might have developed the themes. Since my epistemology does not rely on some essential truth being “found” this is not to say that my research missed some deeper truth, it is simply missing different perspectives that could offer further thoughtful reflections.

Another limitation is the limited contact and research-participant relationship building yielded by virtue of using an online platform to conduct interviews and focus groups. The girls might not have been immediately comfortable with me, since we moved into the study in a relatively short period of time after an icebreaker. This is different than other research projects that spend upwards of a year to a few years with their research participants. Creating trust with these girls was hard and its difficult to know a) what level of trust they actually reached with me; and b) how the lack of trust or presence of trust effected their answers. It is also unclear whether or not Zoom was a study limitation. In each of the first three focus groups, there was one girl who did not have her camera on. In the fourth focus group, all three girls had their cameras off. Is this a limitation and if so, was it created by the invasiveness of zoom? Conversely, in not requiring the physical presence of participants, could zoom itself increased feelings of safety and honesty within

the interviews and focus groups? Further with the focus groups being 90 minutes, it might have limited their closeness and connection, thus stiling their responses. Zoom did not allow for a lot of cross talk between the girls as they awkwardly took turns raising their digital “hands” to answer a question. In one focus group we got into a rhythm where the girls went in the same order answering every question. There were a few moments where one girl would ask another girl a question, but this was minimal. It is hard to get into the “flow” of a conversation on Zoom, without body language and often a lag in audio. This may have helped me manage each girl having enough time to speak, ensuring that one girl does not dominate the conversation.

The girls were also offered an honorarium, however small. Since I offered the honorarium after the fact, this might have altered their responses in that they did not want to “offend” me or upset me in anyway, lest I deny them the honorarium. Since the honorarium was a small amount of money, they are not relying on the honorarium for access to safety or basic necessities, and it is simply a fun reward, it might not have had much effect on their responses. If the honorarium altered their responses, it is likely minimal but not completely absent. Another way their responses might have been altered is the fact that all the girls in my study were racialized with other intersecting identities that I do not necessarily share with them (at least visibly) as a non-religious, older, white woman. There are power imbalances involved that cannot be ignored. It is possible that the girls did not share certain experiences with me because they were unsure if I would understand due to my positionality. This does not mean my data is useless, it simply means that it is incomplete, but as I have argued already, understanding the Girl and girls is never a “complete” picture.

Finally, any study that revolves around technology is inevitably dated the moment the data is collected. Technology, and more specifically, social networking sites/social media, are

changing rapidly. The social media sites mentioned in this research will likely be out of favour in the next few years, or in the least, their function or the ways they are used will be different. Since this study is more focused on the meanings shared *through* social media, and less about the actual vehicles transporting them, there is less limitation, but it still exists.

4.12 Conclusion

By grounding the methodology for this inquiry in feminist theory, feminist research ethics, feminist epistemology, and rigor techniques aligned with feminist values for qualitative research, the aim of this project was to explore how girls come to know themselves as the Girl through social media. Methods were chosen based on previous research that suggests focus groups and interviews offer some of the best ways to elevate marginalized voices and experiences. The most important parts of this methodology though, are that intersectionality is embedded into its structure, as well as feminist research practices for participant knowledge co-creation. These two aspects emerge as the most salient for a robust feminist methodology. While I have already indicated that feminist methodology does not exist within a rigid boundary, this does not mean that researchers cannot set parameters within their methodology at the outset. Feminism and its theory and praxis will simply mean different things to different people. I can accept that it is open for growth, change, and interpretation while at the same time remaining confident in defining my current feminist values, intents, and methodologies as have been laid out in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Gendered Subjectivity and (Dis)Connection

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three analysis and discussion chapters that explores the overall six themes that were developed through thematic analysis of the data. First, this chapter outlines how the themes were created through thematic analysis. Next the chapter documents, analyzes, and discusses the first two themes; modern world (dis)connections and neoliberal and postfeminist (digital) subject formations. The theme *Neoliberal and postfeminist (digital) subject formations* represents the ways in which the girls in my study construct these subjectivities online, furthering the existing girlhood studies research on the relationships between girlhood, girl identity, neoliberalism, and postfeminism. The theme of *Modern world (dis)connections* represents the ways the girls connect and disconnect with other girls and people from within social media spaces. Throughout these themes, the research questions are revisited as I reflect on what the themes tell us in terms of defining the “girl” as she is in this moment, by the girls themselves and society at large; as well as thinking through how these meanings act in service to oppressive systems.

Process: Thematic Analysis

The themes were created through the process of thematic analysis. I followed Vaismoradi et al. (2019) phases of analysis, namely initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. Initialization is the coding phase in which I read through the transcripts three times and identified “meaning units”—or codes. Codes were both implicit and explicit. For example, anytime the word friends came up, I coded it as "friends" (explicit). Other times I offered a more subjective reading of the text and placed it accordingly (implicit). For example: "I think it's nice to see women speaking, like amplifying their voices." I coded that as "being seen." Yet I also coded the previous

sentence with “women” and “voice” (explicit). Once the codes were established, I moved into the construction phase. In this phase I created “code clusters” that became themes—“the basic premise of classifying codes is ‘typification.’ It is the process of grouping a large range of codes under a ‘typical’ similarity that can be generalized to them all despite their variety of details and subtleties” (p. 105). In order to manage an incredible amount of data, codes, and themes, I decided to use the digital whiteboard tool [Miro](#), which allowed me to create digital “sticky notes.” I re-read through each code, wrote up a short description and attached 2-4 quotes to further exemplify the code (see [Appendix E](#) for an example of what this looked like). I used these individual code descriptions and their corresponding quotes to help construct the themes. Sometimes code clusters became their own subtheme within a theme, where other times, larger or more prominent codes became their own subtheme within a theme. For example, the process of “typification” for the Neoliberal and Postfeminist Subjectivities theme happened organically as I was organizing my codes in Miro. From my own knowledge around neoliberalism and postfeminism, there were obvious codes that fit within these concepts—namely the codes, addiction, self-betterment, being productive, responsibility, self-control, self-criticism, money/wealth, promoting/advertising, school, and guilt. Although not obvious at first, once these codes began to form the theme, I determined that the code “time” also fit nicely as well, since it added an interesting depth and layer to the theme (not necessarily obvious to me at first). This was a similar process to the “typification” for my other themes. As I organized the themes in Miro, I noticed codes that had similarities in terms of conceptualization/ideas and they would slowly build upon each other as I went through reviewing each code. Sometimes I would check “code compatibility” by using the NVIVO to find code “intersections.” This function would offer a cross tab to see which quotes/text would overlap across

two codes. This would sometimes give me a suggestion with respect to two codes that might go together.

During the rectification phase, I started to flesh out each theme and connect it to girlhood studies literature. From the themes and the literature, my narrative story emerged. In the finalization phase I looked at the themes in each chapter to ensure my story flowed logically between and through the themes as both individual units unto themselves and a whole.

It is suggested that researchers ultimately link their story line to the literature around which the content of themes in the study revolves to show how the study phenomenon has been advanced and also facilitate fuller understanding of the phenomenon for readers. Researchers recognize the story line developed based on themes as a strategy of ‘meaning’ making, not ‘truth’ making. If the story line is coherent and logical, readers are able to travel easily through the worlds of themes’ developers and decide for themselves whether themes are legitimate research endeavours (p. 107).

I agree with Vaismoradi et al. that the story I tell through the themes is not about uncovering some “ultimate truth” but more about trying to make meaning of the girls’ words through a liberatory and feminist lens. For a further detailed outline of how I developed each theme as well as quotes from each code/code cluster/theme that are not necessarily included in the “story” presented below, please see [Appendix A: Findings](#).

5.2 Neoliberal and Postfeminist (Digital) Subject Formations

According to Gonick (2003), “subjectivity’s boundaries and in particular gendered subjectivity are constantly open to renegotiation” (p. 14). Social media is a place from which this (re)negotiation can and does occur. Through meaningful engagement with girls and young women, the data I collected reveals that our modern (re)negotiations of the girl continue to exist at the intersection of neoliberal and postfeminist narratives, as was explored in the literature review. Feminist scholars have argued that postfeminist discourse is “deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism” particularly around the way our culture puts an “emphasis on individualism, choice,

and agency” (Gill, 2016, p. 613) which includes “self-management” and “self-betterment” (Martinussen et. al 2020). These neoliberal concepts merge with the important feminist concepts of female capacity and empowerment (Lamberg, 2021) to leave girls and women believing that if they work hard enough, they can “have it all.” Postfeminism also posits that girls are destined for success, the lucky inheritors of a supposed post-sexism world, they have nothing getting in the way of their achievements. Of course, neoliberal and postfeminist discourse ignore the realities of inequity and oppression that make their proposed Edens all but impossible, particularly along lines of further marginalized identity like race, class, disability, and more (Cossens & Jackson, 2021). Yet these discourses are so pervasive, few can resist them entirely. The girls in my study emulate the classic and emerging motifs of the “good” neoliberal/postfeminist girl as reflections of their social media use are rife with talk of responsibilities and self-betterment; while simultaneously feeling guilty when they do not perform or work toward these neoliberal/postfeminist ends.

Being Productive

The girls encapsulate the postfeminist requirement of self-betterment within their regular use of the word “productivity,” and define this as doing schoolwork, preparing for the future, and personal growth—spiritual, creative, physical, intellectual. Productivity is a staple in neoliberal subjectivity, specifically that to be unproductive is coded as undesirable and suggests a lack of self-discipline (Guardino, 2018). The girls talk about social media and specifically how they use it through the lens of productivity where there is almost always a negative association between social media use and a sense of “not being productive” as articulated by Claire.

The first thing I check is my phone, which is not good because, I think the first two hours of the moment you wake up is really crucial. It's like you should do something more productive.

To be productive is to “do something” and Harris (2004) argues that girls are positioned as either “can-do” or “at-risk.” Although written almost twenty years ago, Harris’s work is a key text in girlhood studies and her can-do/at-risk binary is still relevant and continues to be cited by girlhood scholars. While representing a lose-lose scenario for girls, the notion of the can-do girl aligns within the postfeminist girl subjectivity (even if it was not labeled as such at the time). Jamila shows this as she expresses how girls desire to be one of the “doers” within the Harris binary.

[I follow these accounts for] the motivation that they give, like Inaya said, sometimes when you hear those people's stories, you get motivated to, you know, change your life, and do something.

Harris also argues that these subject positions are racialized and classed; to be a “can-do” girl is coded as white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and so on (for dominant identities). This means that girls who do not hold dominant identities have an entirely different development of the can-do and postfeminist subjectivity. While all the girls referenced “productivity” in some form or another, it is worth noting that this comment appeared among the Muslim, racialized, immigrant girls. That the girls in my study focused on productivity and self-betterment suggests their attempts to fit within dominant notions of an acceptable/respectable subjectivity to then fit within the assimilated immigrant/racial subject position; which means they are non-threatening and assimilated to the dominant (white) culture (Guo, 2015; Taft, 2014); further ensuring they don’t “contaminate” the nation (Razack, 2004). These subject positions also intersect with Global North, anti-Islamic narratives that portray Muslim women and girls as uncivilized and in need of “saving” from their backward culture (Bullock & Jafri, 2002; Khokhar, 2022). Achieving can-do girl status satisfies at least one of the acceptable immigrant requirements, while also disproving the myth of the oppressed Muslim girl/woman in need of saving. While at the same time, the immigrant racialized girl can be cast into the at-risk category at a moment’s notice and she will be blamed for

her downfall, as neoliberalism “assumes people are free and choiceful, failure is located in the self, rather than understanding inequalities emerging from social structures” (Evans, 2023, p. 2). This “failure” is doubly levied on marginalized communities, as the at-risk girl narrative can become a tool for (cultural) racism and classism. Should the Muslim girls not achieve success, it is a failing of their race or culture and not the material and structural realities that shape their lives as, “the state of at-risk is depicted as a set of personal limitations that can be overcome through sufficient effort” (Harris, 2004a, p. 27). For the girls in my study, they are focused on ensuring they demonstrate “sufficient effort” through “being productive.” The Muslim, racialized, immigrant girls fear falling into the “at-risk” category, which may happen if they spend what they consider as “too much time” on social media. The girls appear to have a noticeable level of anxiety, worry, and guilt around failing to uphold the good neoliberal, good immigrant, and good girl citizen mantel. These anxieties are just as much theirs as they are adult’s anxieties around the “fallen girl,” which is particularly strong for peoples from non-dominant groups (Irwin & Chesney-Lind, 2013; McQueeney & Girgenti-Malone, 2018). Should they fall, they have a much smaller social safety net and will experience a far worse form of social death than their dominant counterpart. Social media use then becomes a dangerous space that can precipitate this fall, as to be online means sacrificing “being productive” as suggest by the girls below.

Sanvi *Sometimes when I use Tik Tok I might feel guilty [and] I guess shame because I could be using that to do something more productive. Actually, I also feel stressed while using Tik Tok because I'm using Tik Tok to procrastinate. In my mind, I'm also trying to stress over the fact that I have homework to be done. So using Tik Tok is a little bit stressful to me as well.*

Miriam *There is a part of it that's fun. If you find content that you like or you like talking to your friends on social media, then it can be really fun. But, just in my personal experience, I'll go on Tumblr or something because I'm bored. Even though I have a lot of stuff to do. I'll have chores or homework to do. But I don't want to do it and so I'll be bored. Because there's nothing to do that I feel like doing. So I'll go on Tumblr or something. Also, it's like,*

it's fun. But then if there's a lot of posts to look at, because on Tumblr you can get to the bottom of your dash where you're caught up with all the new content that you missed and if there's a lot of posts then it can be exhausting to be on there for so long. It's kind of stressful because it's not just with social media, if I'm doing anything when I know that I have assignments to do, then it's a little bit stressful, even if I'm doing something I enjoy. Because it's like I could be doing something productive.

Enjoying social media (and even other forms of joy) inevitably produce feelings of guilt since joy in this case becomes coded as non-productive and another signifier of failing to live up to the neoliberal subjectivity, particularly for girls and women. In her 18-month study, Lambert (2019) notices that the young women participants experience, “anxieties around postfeminist pressures to have it all” (p. 333). The postfeminist pressure to have it all, be successful, and be productive is very real. Therefore, to be a girl online is to always be productive and working on the self.

The Language of Addiction

Neoliberal and postfeminist ideals also proposit the ability for self-control or self-discipline, particularly for women and girls or what we might call a “postfeminist sensibility”—in which girl/woman empowerment comes from the ability to choose self-discipline in the name of feminist choice (Gill, 2007). This is further exemplified in the girl’s negative associations with social media through the frequent participant use of the word “addicting,” which stood out to me in the data. Sanvi expresses a sense of worry around how addicting social media is.

The reasons behind it, honestly Tik Tok is very addicting. Because of how short the video clips are, it's really easy to like, if you don't like the video, you just scroll past it, and you'll find a video that you like. It's really easy to use as well, so it's very, very addicting. I am really afraid of the amount of time I spend on that app. [It] is really concerning to me.

The girls rely on the language of addiction in their descriptions of guilt relating to their social media use. Discussions of bargaining with themselves and calling for “cheat days” resemble narratives of governmentality (Kuusisto et. al, 2023; Palm, 2021) in that it is their responsibility

to ensure they embody the good neoliberal citizen, who does not fall prey to indulgences by “constantly self-polic[ing] their behaviors and desires” (Iacobucci & Frieh, 2018, p. 84). This language also fits squarely within fatphobic and sizeist narratives that demonize people who supposedly cannot control themselves, particularly in relation to food; fat people are disqualified entirely from the good neoliberal subjectivity since they are labelled as lacking self-control, self-betterment, and self-care (Spratt, 2023; Zisser, 2020). In fact, in North America fatphobia and sizeism are steeped in colonial, gendered, and racializing narratives as the gendered racialized body is fat and therefore should be rejected (Bahra, 2018; Lewis, 2019), meaning that racialized girls have increased pressure to ensure self-control in all areas of their lives, including but not limited to their social media use. The regulation and self-governance of the racialized body is not limited to physical fitness and fatness but also extends onto her (digital) body/self. In one focus group, Prisha states that, “*it's like when you're eating chips you are like okay, this is the last one. It's the same thing with Tik Tok.*” By using food as an analogy, social media has become a surrogate/additional measurement mechanism for judging how well women and girls “self-manage” their lives and bodies. Isabel also utilizes this addiction language.

I set [the timer] for an hour because I was like, my screen time was going to skyrocket if I don't...The way I have it set up you can have like, give me one more minute, so I'll finish watching the videos, I'm like, Okay, you need to stop doing this. Or sometimes I just give up on weekends. I'll just call it my cheat day or something, like okay, whatever. It's okay, I can stay up an extra couple of hours just to watch this Tik Tok.

It is interesting to note, Isabel suggests that succumbing to the indulgence is “giving up” and with the signifier of “on weekends” she is suggesting that she *should* be practicing good neoliberal girlhood 24/7; there is no time for rest as to rest is to be lazy and thus lack discipline. To give up is a moral failing and she is “cheating” herself out of the postfeminist utopia she was promised,

which is of course, her fault. To be a girl online is to be responsible for always exercising self-control and self-discipline.

Perfectionism

Another enduring neoliberal and postfeminist output is the concept of perfectionism, which becomes particularly salient for girls who feel they “will never be quite good enough” (Keddie, 2016, p. 117). Curran and Hill (2019) argue that “increasing levels of perfectionism might be considered symptomatic of how young people are coping—to feel safe, connected, and of worth—in neoliberalism’s new culture of competitive individualism” (p. 413). More importantly, they argue that social media is a significant factor that has increased perfectionism. In Aesha’s quote below, the ideal of perfectionism is illustrated through her hesitancy to post any content because she “didn’t have enough skills,” which emulates the idea that she is “not quite good enough.” She cannot post anything unless it will be done without mistakes—anything less than perfection makes her unworthy of her own time as well as other people’s time. To be a worthy girl online is to practice perfectionism.

Aesha *I actually have a YouTube channel. But it's been a long time.*

Eleni *Were you uploading like videos on there and stuff?*

Aesha *Yeah, I did.*

Eleni *What types of videos were they?*

Aesha *It's just spiritual videos to motivate others. It's been a long time, I forgot about it until you brought it up.*

Eleni *It's funny sometimes a question will spark your memory. No judgment, but is there a reason why you stopped posting? I'm just curious.*

Aesha *I actually got busy with school [and] I don't have any idea of what to do, because I don't... you know if it wasn't something, as I said earlier, like changing the world and posting something really unique. I don't want to post anything that someone already did and it's going to take a lot of time.*

I don't want to just post something people already see. I want to do something unique that will help me too, not just the person watching it.

Eleni *Gotcha. So you got busy with school and then it seems like you weren't exactly sure what you wanted to post about, right?*

Aeesha *I was just posting, for example, I posted something I made because I gained some skills in grade 10 and it was making videos. I took media art. I was taught how to make videos, editing, and adding features in it. I used to have skills to kind of make the video I did. So that kind of helped me. I think if I have more skills, I'll be able to post more, maybe.*

What is also illustrated in this exchange is the myth of the child redeemer (Grumet, 1986), the idea that children, especially girls, and even more so especially immigrant and Global South girls (called the “girl effect”) can save the world (Hickel, 2014). The child redeemer and the “girl effect” are also neoliberal/postfeminist lies that shifts attention away from neoliberal economic and political systems—which are the real reasons that girls live in precarious/disempowered situations in the first place (Shain, 2013). The twin child redeemer/“girl effect” myths intersects with neoliberal and postfeminist myths to create and assemblage of the girl who can save us if she only works hard enough (and if she doesn’t, the destruction of herself and ultimately the world is her fault). The presence of Greta Thornberg on social media (Mede & Schroeder, 2024) has also contributed to this assemblage of the girl as savior. Thornberg is in and of herself a global wide manifestation of the girlchild redeemer. This is not a question of whether or not girls can or cannot save the world (they certainly have the capacity) or whether or not there is anything valuable in doing humanitarian or compassionate work—the issue is that it becomes solely their responsibility—as adults shirk their own responsibilities and instead give themselves permission to simply wait for the next generation to fix things (child redeemer). This is nothing but a tool for maintaining the status quo—we can keep wealth inequity, environmental degradation, racism, and violence in place for now, because salvation is just around the corner. Furthermore, the

postfeminist narrative of “Girl Power” has fueled narratives of social media humanitarianism to create a new form of girlhood subjectivity (Koffman et. al, 2015). Aesha thinks that anything worth sharing in public must be related to making the world a better place and thus exercising her humanitarian informed Girl Power. Social media for her is a place where she can and should fulfill her duty as the child redeemer and save the world (and do so “perfectly”) as opposed to it simply being a place for unashamed self-expression, creativity, and joy. To be a girl online is to fulfill to their role as the child redeemer/girl saviour/girl humanitarian.

Concepts of Time

Neoliberal and postfeminist norms also have a particular conceptualization of time that works in service of capital and colonialism. Time works in service to colonization, for example the way in which history is written as linear timeline where “progress” is only measured in temporal frames. Time is used as a mechanism for defining what is civilized versus uncivilized, i.e. what came from the undesirable time before.

Within discourses of progress and civilisation, *time* acts as a principle that arbitrates and ranks both knowledge and being (i.e., who counts as human). Non-European epistemologies and ontologies are translated into universalised European epistemological parameters as inferior, less evolved, primitive, erroneous or eccentric ‘culturally tainted’ derivatives. This movement of subalternisation and normalisation is generally referred to as the ‘epistemic violence’ of colonialism (emphasis mine) (Andreotti, 2011, p. 385).

Time is presented as linear, singular, finite, and most importantly, our time on Earth *only has meaning* in relation to how much we produce or how “successful” we are—which is perfectly exemplified by the ubiquitous cultural phrase “time is money”—coined by Max Weber in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Ghosh, 2014). This phrase, which permeates our collective social consciousness, deeply inscribes how society defines time as only existing within a capitalism logic. In our competitive and individualistic world, when we “waste time” we risk losing the capitalism game (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020). The girls bring this fear of “wasting

time” to social media spaces. As mentioned earlier, social media risks the loss of productivity, and one needs “time” to be productive. This morality of time is articulated below.

Isabel *Although, it does come to a problem with the reels, because if you touch one, then you're just in it forever. Which I also have a Tik Tok, which I feel like it's pretty common. And I had to put a time limit on it. Because, you know, again, once you open it, you're just there forever.*

Aeesha *I have something on my YouTube that it's mostly you know like, Oprah, like some kind of motivational things like that. And basically, when I watch it once and I keep watching it, like basically, automatically, it kind of calms down my scrolling thing. And it's very easy for me not to waste my time scrolling.*

Aeesha has come up with a creative way to ensure she only uses social media for productive ends, and she must be intentional about it, lest she fall into the subject position of “time waster.” Furthermore, in a society where time is a moral and precious commodity it cannot be free since, nothing in life is free (another ubiquitous phrase). We can understand that wasting time is never acceptable from the way in which the girls tell themselves they are not allowed to be on social media even when they have “free time” because free time should be used for doing something productive, in this case schoolwork (exams), as explained by Emma.

Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat. But I would say that those definitely kind of when they have free, when we have free time. That's one of the first things that we go to. Yeah, which is why I deleted them for when I'm studying for my exams. I found when you have too much free time you just endlessly scrolling.

The idea of time and how we waste it is a pervasive, capitalist, colonial, neoliberal mentality that works to maintain the status quo. This is particularly salient for women and girls in that they are paid less than their male counterparts, are overwhelmingly regulated to lower paid industries, and excluded from the higher paying ones (Bartnik et al., 2022; Quadlin et al., 2023), while the ones that do manage to break the glass ceiling are then overwhelmingly white, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Williams, 2013). This means that girls and racialized girls are doubly not allowed to

waste time, since they know they must work extra hard to even come close to their promised postfeminist utopia. What is interesting is the way in which social media sets the stage for the reproduction of colonial and neoliberal logics of productivity and time. Social media is both a promising place to successfully carry out their postfeminist/neoliberal subjectivity but also a place girls can fail to achieve it. To be a girl online is to not waste time.

Money/Wealth

Yet the girls will not acquiesce to neoliberal myths without some reflection, and there are certainly moments of rupture in their navigation of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals. According to Harris (2004b) youth gain identity and social capital through the ability to purchase goods (as opposed to civil engagement and community development). Specifically, that, “girls have become the emblem of this consumer citizen via a problematic knitting together of feminist and neoliberal ideology about power and opportunities” (p. 165) and “for many young women this conflation of power with consumption is experienced as deeply problematic” (p. 167). However, the girls in my study seemed more annoyed and even a little scared by consumerism or extreme wealth more than anything and they do appear to be fairly critical of our economic systems. They believe that social media makes the milieu of problems in our current economies and society much worse. For example, they are not particularly impressed and quite judgemental of people who come on to social media with the sole purpose to do whatever it takes to become rich and famous (especially if that means being fake, misrepresenting themselves, or lying). There are a lot of people online uncritically reproducing capitalist myths around “hard work”, which the girls see as harmful, as exemplified by Emma.

There's [people] that are supposed to be inspirational or motivational, while they're just downplaying your emotions and your feelings, like no more sad stuff boss up, you can do anything if you have enough money, or it's like, they're really downplaying the mental

and social structure that's already set in place that you have to overcome first before most people can achieve what they're talking about.

The girls are also aware that social media is run by people whose main goal is to make a profit and therefore, may not necessarily have the users' interests or well being in mind. They don't always necessarily name it directly, but the girls talk about how money specifically manifests in real ways of disempowerment, as Quinn suggests.

The problem with social media, is the corporation's running it, being entirely focused on profit, because that's what corporations are for. They're designed to keep you online for as long as possible and that's dangerous and manipulative and toxic.

Quinn is referencing prominent critical social theory of the Internet, which suggests the Internet in essence works in the name of capital in order to produce neoliberal ideologies. One of the Internet's main goals is "total commodification of human creativity" as "much of the time spent online produces profit for large corporations like Google" (Fuchs, 2009, p. 82). The girls are somewhat critical of advertisements too, at least in the way they show up on social media. Their lack of patience with advertisements and critical reflection on "who owns social media" appears to somewhat reject this idea that the girl can (and should) buy/consume her way into girlhood, as further expressed by Sara.

I literally will sometimes just watch one video and then all of a sudden there will be so many ads like 'watch it now, buy it now, buy the box set.' And I'm like, what? That's really weird. That makes me feel kind of strange because I just showed a passing interest in this one thing and then all of a sudden, I'm getting bombarded with ads for it and like... that just makes me a little bit uncomfortable.

The girls are aware that a lot of content on social media is geared toward promoting and advertising to them from a place of greed. They understand social media is about people "branding" themselves to promote some kind of idea or identity. To gain social capital or monetary capital, certain identities, ideas, and perspectives, are privileged and they aren't too happy with that. Therefore, to

be a girl online is to be critical of consumerism and greed. Of course, nothing is a complete rupture from what came before. Even as they are critical of consumerism there is still a sense of “jealousy” should someone be able to access the type of girlhood/life they want simply by purchasing it, as expressed by Claire.

Some people are flexing new clothes, new everything, like consumerism, I'm like girl why? Like sometimes it... Yeah, it kind of makes me jealous sometimes. Specifically, when I see people, they have this lifestyle that I want but I know that I'm not there yet in achieving it. Sometimes. I don't know, maybe I should have a different mindset. Maybe I should use that as inspiration. But I'm like, it makes you jealous at times.

Two things can be true at once, girls can be critical of social media and the systems that influence it, while also being enticed by what fantasies it may offer. To be a girl online is to sometimes want the very things she is critical of.

According to Gill (2008), “rather than seeing the subject as formed once and for all in infancy, [Stuart Hall] offers a way of understanding how subjectivities can be made and remade” (p. 439). Gill is also particularly interested in studying the ways in which neoliberal and postfeminist narratives are involved in this “remaking” of the subject and subjectivity. While Currie et. al (2009) suggests that the girl is in a constant state of “becoming.” The data in my study suggests that girls both internalize and are critical of neoliberal and postfeminist narratives to (re)make themselves online, in a process of continually becoming the Girl in digital space. To be a girl online is to be productive and working on the self, to be responsible for exercising self-control and self-discipline, to practice perfectionism, to fulfill their role as the child redeemer/girl saviour/girl humanitarian, to not waste time, to be critical of consumerism, and to sometimes desire the very things she is critical of.

5.3 Modern World (Dis)connections

In discussing social media with the girls, a central reflection for them is thinking about why they use it. One of the more prominent ideas referenced by the girls and a main reason they choose to use social media is *connection*. The girls talk of social media connection in a utilitarian, technical sense—they believe social media makes connection easier and view it as a tool. Connection can be direct or indirect, for example the girls directly talk to someone (via direct message or in the comments), or they indirectly see content they relate to, or someone likes their post. They view connection as a primarily positive experience and a main feature of social media—it is the possibility and opportunity for connection that keeps them coming back. Of course, the connection they treasure most is the connection with their friends. In conjunction with connection through friendship, connection for the girls can also be experienced through building online communities and engaging with content that shares new knowledge(s) and interests. These connections work to materialize the girls experience, as social media is at its essence a relational space, where individuals are continually made and remade in a constant social collective becoming. Since girls are some of the most prominent and avid social media users, their relational connections to friends and others, is undoubtedly a central space for the construction of the Girl and their girl selves.

Ease and Accessibility

On a practical level the girls find social media accessible and useful for fostering connection, and they greatly appreciate this. There is a low barrier for access and the girls name this as a selling point. It is easy to talk with friends, to connect with friends or new people, record their lives, see other people's lives, build community, and learn new things. Social media is undoubtedly user friendly, and with the click of a button, they can access so much. One of the

reasons the girls find social media so useful and easy for communication and connection is that it bridges physical barriers as expressed by the girls below.

- Aeesha *I just like how convenient it is, [how] we could communicate with each other and just see how people [are] living. For example, if I haven't communicated with you in a long time. I now know if you're doing great, instead of me coming all the way to your house.*
- Emma *I used to use Instagram mostly because I had a friend [in another province] and she said her mom took away her phone. All she had was Instagram to talk so when I got Instagram I was like, hey I have it now we can follow each other.*
- Sanvi *I do think that social media can be enjoyable, especially if you're able to connect with your friends, especially, because you're not always with your friends, you're sometimes at home and they're some other places. So it's really easy to connect with your friends like that.*

In reference to minimizing physical barriers to connection, all three girls allude to the well-known girl/youth reality that their movement and access to physical public space is often restricted by adults, making connecting with friends and the outside world somewhat difficult. Child geographers and youth researchers have long theorized about the restrictive “spatial control” placed on youth and children by adults, in which children and youth are not welcome in public space (Ansell, 2009; Boyd, 2014; Evans, 2008; Leander et al., 2010; Travlou, 2007;). Furthermore, “the control of spatiality is part of the process of defining the social category of ‘youth’ itself” (Massey, 1998, p. 128); which I would agree is further extrapolated by gender (and other marginalized identities). Girls, racialized girls (Browne, 2015), and disabled girls (Safford et al., 2022), to name a few, are more restricted when it comes to public space as compared to boys or other dominant counterparts due to intersecting forces of oppression. Therefore, one way we define girls, the Girl, and girlhood is *through* how we restrict their access to public space. To be a girl is to be a body restricted. Yet at the same time, children and youth have always challenged adult restrictions, for example by “hanging around on street corners” (Valentine, 2004) and engaging in

the creation of “counterpublics” (Keller, 2012). In this way social media allows girls to further the inherited legacy of youth resistance via the alternative options of (digital) “movement” that work to challenge traditional proxies of child/adult identity demarcation. The girls here can be understood as hanging around the digital street corner as a form of resistance to adult power. The simple act of connecting with a friend who is not in the same physical space is an example of this. As in the quote above, Emma describes this directly when her friend is actively removed from digital public space by her mother who takes away her phone (the girls main access point to the digital “street corner”) but reclaims this by connecting with her friends via social media, likely through a web browser on a desktop. Harris (2015) also argues for the importance of social media as a modern tool of resistance for girls.

Social media are therefore an important way for young women in particular to participate in an alternative public sphere and build their own communities. They enable young women to take up virtual public space at a time when physical public space for young people is diminishing, increasingly privatised and regulated (p. 155).

This digital public space can be understood as including the private messages between friends. Digital public space does not always have to be “on display,” it does not need hundreds or thousands of views or likes. Just like a group of youths gathering on a dimly lit street corner, the privacy of the direct message is still an act of creating a public space (even if it is quite small, and girls do also create group chats). We can thus understand modern girlhood not solely through public space restrictions, but also as the ability to create new public spaces (counterpublics²⁰) through the act of making/retaining peer relational connections via digital technologies (in this case social media). This was even more evident during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Wilf and Wray-Lake (2024) argue that the physical restrictions of the pandemic encouraged youth

²⁰ Nancy Fraser (1990) defines “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67).

experiencing intersecting forms of marginalization, to turn to social media and online spaces as a way to challenge dominant narratives, build community, practice allyship, find emotional support, participate in political action, and engage in storytelling. As all of these actions are generally restricted by youth in public space, the COVID-19 pandemic further solidified the transformative space of social media for girl (and youth) connection and counterpublic constructions. The girls in my study are still creating their own internal girl counterpublics, yet their social media accounts are on private. The girls are still generally restricted from public space, but social media has allowed them to create their own public-private space. I would suggest that the “girl as restricted” and the “girl as resistor” represent hegemonic/counter-hegemonic notions of girlhood (as available subjectivities) that the girls themselves move in and out of (through social media) depending on the moment and their social location (privilege, oppression, identities).

(In)direct Communication

Girls are also keen to stay connected with friends on social media simply because if they didn't have it, this connection would likely be lost altogether, not necessarily because of adult restriction, but because this has become the primary communication tool for youth, as expressed by two of the girls.

Miriam *I think that the reason a lot of people would initially get it, would be because everyone else is doing it. I know that I got Instagram pretty recently just because I know that all my friends were using it. It's easier to talk to people on an app that everyone else is using.*

Emma *So [I use it for] communication, in the sense that I'm able to talk to a lot of people at once. I'm able to connect with a lot of people because everyone is using social media at this time.*

The girls highlight the realities of peer pressure, another typical girl/youth experience. Yet for the exhaustive literature on peer pressure that focuses specifically on harmful peer pressures, I would suggest it does not necessarily have to be negative (Lebedina-Manzoni & Ricijas, 2013) or in this

case solely a youth experience. We are all relatively coerced into accessing certain technological tools that shape our modern world. For example, it is quite difficult to exist in our modern world, from access to services, jobs, school, and housing, if you do not have a cell phone or use the Internet. The girls are aware that if they left social media, they would certainly lose connection with many of their friends. This connection is practical, but it is also psychosocial, as to lose connection to certain cultural artifacts (in this case social media) is to lose not only personal connection but social capital, which may lead to abjection, rejection, and social death. So, while Miriam and Emma are citing a potential loss of control (they have no choice but to use social media) to remain a viable/intelligible human (and girl) subject, conversely Aeesha, Emma, and Sanvi (above, p. 105) highlight how social media can circumvent adult restrictions for peer connection and thus, foster a form of control in their lives. The counterpublics formed on social media by youth as a form of resistance require the “masters tools” to be able to exist in the first place. In this way both freedom and control are intersecting and occurring simultaneously as girls log on to social media looking for connection.

Whether Aeesha, Sanvi, Emma, and Mirium all come on social media to resist adult control or they are forced to due to social or peer pressure, the reason buttressing all of this is that social media specifically makes it easier to connect with their friends. While some social scientists might name the hegemonic and counter hegemonic narratives that surround the Girl experience, there are actual material realities of joy happening for the girls themselves that we do not want to ignore. Peer relationships for youth and girls can be a central component to their identity, sense of self, sense of worth, and can be experienced as a meaningful, positive part of their lives (Day & Erdley, 2016; Maunder & Monks, 2019). The girls experience a lot of enjoyment and pleasure on social media because they can connect with their friends by communicating through direct messages.

Three of the girls describe how they experience directly connecting and talking to friends through the medium of images or text.

- Claire *I usually just take a picture of the ceiling and then send it to my friends. But then I think on the receiving end, I kind of like seeing what my friends are doing. Or sometimes there would be like an occasion, they would send an interesting picture and then they would, then it would like, spark a conversation.*
- Papina *You don't have to actually talk to people on Snapchat. Who I know, I don't really talk to them, but like, I snap back to them. You could send a picture and then they snap back, and so forth. It just kind of continues. And it's like, you know, I'm not actually talking to you but I'm still connecting with you in a way because I'm just sending a picture or whatnot.*
- Sofia *With some of my friends, we do send memes and that's how the conversation starts. You start reflecting on the meme that I just sent or what she just sent, but there's times when we just want to check up on each other. Maybe I had a bad day at school and my friends notice and they'll be like hey, what happened to at school?*

The girls talk with their friends about their day, homework, their interests, how they feel, their experiences, the world, and generally just anything they cannot talk about with adults. As the girls describe, this can be in the form of language text or images (which can also be understood as a cultural text). This can be content they themselves or others create, like memes, or pictures they take of themselves representing their life. In this way connection is often made outside of language—through images and sharing content the girls participate in a deeper layer of connection. This deeper connection can occur at the site of the meme as mentioned by Sofia. Schwartz (2022) argues that memes are part of the new “bedroom culture,” a concept originally articulated by McRobbie and Garber ([1975] 2006) that describes the otherwise erased subcultures of girls (in this case that took place in the physical bedroom). In Schwartz’s analysis, modern bedroom culture has come to entail feminized digital spaces (subcultures) where girls and marginalized peoples can make and share content/media that subverts the dominant order. Chen & Zheng (2024) reiterate

this as well, arguing that memes transmit certain knowledges that only those embedded within a specific subculture will be “invited to engage in a pleasurable sense of shared knowing” (p. 273). It is not important what subculture Sofia is referring to, the content of her meme does not matter, only that the meme itself creates a sense of connection between herself and her friend as a way of creating intimate “pleasurable knowing.”

Girls are then *becoming* online through the images and texts they share privately, and sometimes publicly with their friends (although the girls in my study did not make many public posts). By becoming I refer to “transformations—not of forms transforming into another or different form but of constantly processual, constantly transforming relations” (Coleman, 2008, p. 168). Throughout the data, what types of discourses appear in these images and texts is not always clear or at least, that could be an analysis project for another time. What I explore here, as linked to the study’s aim, is the *process* of subjective identity formation that occurs when girls connect with each other via messages to their friends on social media. Some media theory suggests that media is, “1) a reflection of dominant social values, that is, media images as symbolic manifestation of prevailing social norms and ideals; and 2) a primary, or even the primary, socializing agent for all Americans, but mostly particularly with children, that is, the mass media as a teacher, a transmitter of messages and meanings” (Walters, 1995, p. 32). Walters later argues that the simplistic notion that children passively receive cultural media messaging is limiting and not the whole story. Instead, children can and do “play” with these cultural messages, and that “subject positions are not wholly determined by the signifying apparatus, but are contested and struggled over by actual women [and girls] in the process of reading/viewing/consuming” (p. 105). With the advent of social media, the opportunity for play and subject contestation is highly volatile, as “these media provide a mechanism for teens to constitute (and re-constitute) themselves in teen

discourse – to see and be seen” (Charteris et al., 2018, p. 205). Girls have access to a litany of media images that have been created by average people, including themselves. For example, they can send a photo of themselves to their friends in any number of life situations—hanging out with family and friends, when they are at school, in their room, or traveling around the city—and they can send images of their surroundings and scenery. These pictures that they share privately amongst their friends are not necessarily edited either and have opportunity for representing a form of affective “authenticity” (a quality the girls deeply desire, which will be discussed further in chapter 7). Yet even if they are edited, this in and of itself is a form of play. If the girls and their friends know they are playing with filters, can we really measure to what degree this wholly reinforces dominant ideals of girls’ bodies? What girls have then is the opportunity to make and interact with media, from within their own girl counterpublics, that work *both against and with* dominant media representations of the girls to produce new becomings of girlhood in the moment. Kearney’s (2006) study of girl-made media includes an exploration of mostly public media, from zines to blogs, videos and websites. She lauds the girl’s creativity and ability to play with and innovate media while arguing for the need that mainstream culture recognize (and fairly compensate) girls for their media productions. These are important reflections as girls in my study have been and continue to “make media.” However, I would add Kearney by suggesting that the media they share through their direct messages (that is the private-publics girls now exist within), is an important addition to how girls make media online. If a girl shares a picture of her ceiling with her friend, or a meme to spark a conversation, the girls are participating in thousands of micro-moments of media production. These moments are also highly invisible to mainstream society and the adults in their lives (although not entirely invisible to the government and non-government entities trying to constantly track/hack our personal data), yet the girls “see and are seen” through

these invisible moments of connection. The invisibility of these private-publics can also offer potential moments for collective joy and further play outside of the watchful eye of an adult dominant society. These private publics also offer a potential place for resistance, as argued by Krogh et al. (2024). In their study of girls “shitposting”²¹ privately to each other on Snapchat, they are “creating a gendered cultural space where flaws, imperfections, amusement, ugliness, randomness, and nonsense are not just allowed, but also something that solidifies a sense of collectivity and support among the girls” (p. 16). Thus, social media’s direct message function has become a highly productive space for girls to play with cultural texts as they (de)construct their girlhood subjectivities. Even still, what this means for girls is not entirely clear, especially because the nature of social media is so volatile. Should these spaces for such private-publics exist even within the next couple years is uncertain or if they do, how they might shift in their functionality. Since these are private spaces, it is difficult for adults or researchers to “observe” the girls in their identity construction, thus making it difficult to co-create knowledge on this experience as of this writing. Even within the data for this project, what is exactly happening within the private-public of the direct message is not always obvious. Even if the girls were to give an adult permission, the simple act of making these moments “public” to the adult eye changes their meaning entirely. In any case, since deeper extrapolation of meaning within the direct message was not the specific focus of the interviews and focus groups, I would not dare to interpret for myself what meanings the girls are making through the media they share with each other, since how they use, interpret, and play with such media will depend on the individual, as Carah (2014) argues.

This assembly of media technologies is distinctive not only for the way it uses public social space, but also for the way social interactions and messages are contained within niche social networks. These flows of images are difficult to observe and account for as part of public processes of deliberation and understanding...Each user is positioned at a different

²¹ Shitposting is defined as “online posting of low-quality, out-of-context content” (Krogh et al., 2024, p. 2). It is mostly associated with masculine online culture.

vantage point in flows of content with access to a different array of public and private content. Each of those different vantage points is created out of a unique combination of analytics, user inputs and location in cultural space and time (p. 141).

Furthermore, how girls interpret content they interact with, which will be different depending on their social location, adds to this complexity of making meaning of direct message content (Walkerdine, 1998). What I would suggest is that currently from within social media spaces, these girls are forming their girl subjectivity through this connection and relation to their friends/peers specifically through images and texts that they have created themselves and/or through existing images and texts that they find meaningful enough to send. One way the girl identity might form is, in part, from peer image/text-based connection forged through the site of the direct message.

Building Community, Sharing Interests

Sending images or texts to friends via direct messaging is not the only way the girls foster connection (and becoming) through social media. The girls also connect with people by building different communities and sharing knowledge or interests with a variety of people. The girls understand social media as a place to build new community and also maintain "offline" community. They value community as an important part of social life and human existence. They value the human connection and belonging that comes with these communities. Being part of a community can offer a significant amount of emotional, spiritual, educational, and professional support for the girls. Social media also bridges the physical divides that separate people when trying to build communities, as shared by Papina.

I think [having a community on social media] is a positive because social media can be used everywhere you go and it can be there anytime. Let's be honest, sometimes if you're feeling down or you're not [in] such a positive space—having that community on social media, you know, it's not that far. But if it was a physical community, it will be hard to always reach out to that community or be in that community, whereas if it's a social media community it's always there, you can always go to it.

These communities the girls belong to were both reflective of mainstream ideas and subject positions as well as those often considered more marginal. For example, Claire described a gaming community:

There's so much emphasis on community on Discord. It makes me feel like I'm part of something. I love it because you use it when you're gaming with friends, so it's nice. It's super fun.

The gaming world has been documented as exclusionary and hostile to women and girls (Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018), so for Claire to find a place online where she can feel included is certainly gendered subversion. Another disruptive possibility is the way girls can build community around social issues centred on social change, as expressed by Sanvi.

On Instagram, just some of my clubs and stuff that I'm part of at school, we would have to connect in some ways and the most convenient way to connect is through Instagram because everyone uses it. So the groups that I'm currently in like, female empowerment club or equity or stuff like that.

Sanvi references the possibilities of a feminist consciousness that becomes a viable and potential girlhood subjectivity cultivated through social media. In Sanvi's case, social media can be used as a tool to further feminist goals in her offline (school) reality. Social media itself has somewhat restrictive properties on what content gets favored or filtered through the algorithm, but Sanvi and her classmates have bypassed this slightly as they use social media in this instance mainly for the communication aspect of it. Since "everyone uses it" it becomes the default connection tool for building community (as the baseline) than then helps Sanvi and others go further in developing their feminist consciousness (whatever that may be, who knows what type of discourses are being shared within the club). Whatever their reasoning, the girls come on social media to build community and its' accessibility and ubiquity make this a possibility. To be a girl is to be part of community and that community inevitably utilizes the tool that is social media.

The girls also proffer connection online through knowledge sharing and engaging with content and people who share similar interests to them. This is a highly productive space for the girls as well, as their interests constitute part of who they are as individuals and as girls. Engaging with various forms of knowledge also constitutes them within and against dominant narratives, beliefs, values, and ways of being. Some of the girls talk about their interests and different forms of knowledge they can connect with on social media.

- Isabel *I also think that I know a lot of my friends they'll follow mostly the same things that I do. Some of them will follow different things, but it's mostly based on interest and things like that. I know a lot of my friends watch anime, so we'll go and follow anime fan pages.*
- Prisha *It showed the model they created for this new city. It's a very futuristic society. I think [social media] is a place to spread information and make things popular.*
- Emma *I used to be really interested in making clay models. I've seen a couple of those when I was younger. And they make their own characters from games and stuff. And then they make them into clay figures. It's really impressive actually.*
- Kalani *There's a personal aspect to it where she talks about gender issues and her journey to being comfortable with being single and stuff like that. Her channel is actually pretty big. Another person I subscribe to is Edward Avila. He's a makeup artist but he always collabs with K-pop groups, because I'm also into K-pop.*
- Jamila *Personally, I follow, tourists, who go around the world and try different types of food and also pictures like landscapes or nice scenery. I also follow some anime pages, so they just post anime updates, recommendations, just random scenes that you might find adorable.*
- Sofia *I think nowadays I'm trying to get into makeup and hair. So most of my content is around beauty, nails, makeup, hair, how to start your own wardrobe, [and] how to start doing your own hair.*

Social media becomes a place where the girls can engage with different forms of knowledge in a variety of ways. They make and remake themselves as girls through their interaction with these knowledge(s). Isabel is an anime girl, Prisha is a girl from a “futuristic society,” Emma is a clay

artist, Kalani is a K-pop girl, Jamila is a travel girl, and Sofia is a fashion and beauty girl. All of these interests become part of their subjective selves to which they connect with online, play with, and use to construct their girl-ness. What we witness here is a varied girlhood. What social media has done is offer the possibility of an expanded girl self. Their interests are not dictated *solely* by what girl magazines or TV shows offer them, even if mainstream texts still dominate their world. If a girl is interested in gaming, STEM, sports, pottery, organization, architecture, urban design, travel, dance, house renovations, animals, and even traditional “girly” things such as beauty and fashion, to name but a few, it is all there for her; and in the privacy of her own feed, she can curate her algorithm (mostly) to engage with any type of content that interests her. Social media has opened up the possibility for a more expansive array of girl subjectivities because of the sheer amount of knowledge and varied content being shared. While a significant amount of the knowledge may be construed as harmful or misinformation, no place or space is always 100% safe, the salient point here is that the vast number of available knowledges expands the lived or envisioned material reality of girlhood. Indeed, this is something that needs to be studied further. Much of the research being done at the intersection of girls, content, social media, self, and subjectivity revolves around typical girlhood foci including sexualization, the body, beauty ideals, feminist activism, and sexuality. A continued dearth in the literature remains regarding the material outcomes that result from girls connecting, interacting, and engaging with a variety of social media content.

Isabel *I'll get a lot of ducklings and puppies and kittens and sometimes all three of them together which you know, it's obviously the best one and sometimes seals but it's typically from like animal-based accounts.*

How might Isabel’s engagement with “duckling content” on social media rupture the heterosexual matrix, hegemonic gendered identity, dominant discourse, and the very structures of power? What

would it mean for us to look at content that does not fall under typical girl interests to reflect on how that might generate new imaginings of girlhood? More importantly, that these imaginings are happening by and through the girls themselves—the (re)makers of their own girl self as they connect with potentially limitless knowledges online.

Online connection for the girls is not only a positive experience for them but happens to be a particularly generative act for their subjective self. They know themselves through these acts of connection and communication, specifically within the private-publics they have created with their friends. Those on the outside cannot fully know what is being generated at this moment, but it is likely significant as one of the girls' primary attractions to social media is those moments of connection with friends through the direct message space. Social media is an accessible tool for them to build community and explore new knowledges and interests. These knowledges allow for the expansion of what we “know” the girl to be, in almost unpredictable ways. What is happening in these moments of connection is not entirely a rupture from what came before, but it is certainly a new path that has the potential for new imaginings of gender.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored a variety of ways in which girls come online to play with their girl subjectivities while also thinking through what this play means for their intersecting identities and their material realities. *Neoliberal and postfeminist (digital) subject formations* argued that to be a girl online is to be productive and working on the self, to be responsible for exercising self-control and self-discipline, to practice perfectionism, to fulfill their role as the child redeemer/girl saviour/girl humanitarian, to not waste time, to be critical of consumerism, and to sometimes desire the very things they are critical of. *Modern world (dis)connections* shows us that girls not only find joy in connecting with others, but particularly their friends, and

that this act of connection is a productive site for knowing the girl self. Social media undoubtedly reproduces dominant myths and norms, yet neither is it some subversive utopia that will radically change the world. What it is for these girls is a space from which old norms are both made and remade, played with, contested, challenged, but also inevitable. They navigate social media in functional but also psychosocial ways to result in a material reality for girls that is inevitably spliced with a digital self.

Chapter 6: Desiring Control and Navigating Harm

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is the second of three analysis and discussion chapters that explores the overall six themes that were developed through thematic analysis of the data. The chapter documents, analyzes, and discusses the third and fourth themes; desiring control in a chaotic world and navigating (digital) harms. The theme of *Desiring control in a chaotic world* represents the ways in which girls work toward controlling their experience on social media, while acknowledging that “true” control is hard to achieve. The theme of *Navigating (digital) harms* represents the social media harms that the girls have named themselves and the ways they experience, understand, and ultimately try to manage them. Throughout these two themes, the research questions are revisited as I reflect on what the themes tell us in terms of defining the “girl” as she is in this moment, by the girls themselves and society at large; as well as thinking through how these meanings act in service to oppressive systems.

6.2 Desiring Control in a Chaotic World

In the sample, the girls do not always feel a sense of control when using social media. This stems from many factors such as being monitored by the adults in their lives, being skeptical of how social media algorithms work, how their personal data is collected and used, concerns around privacy, and concerns around safety; as a certain level of fear and worry among the girls is evident. Through it all, they think about what control online means to them and talk of strategies to bring themselves back into control in an otherwise unruly social media landscape. These reflective tactics create opportunities for the girls to feel safe so that they can pave the way for moments of joy and inspiration.

Adult Restrictions

The girls experience various levels of restrictions on their social media use from the adults in their lives, mostly parents. Quinn expresses this through outright restriction and Emma through a modified restriction.

Quinn *When I was younger, my mom was always very anti social media. I didn't get any form of social media until grade nine, when she let me get Instagram, because my school posted updates there.*

Emma *When I first started, I was really apprehensive because me and my mom share my Facebook account, so whatever I do on Facebook, she can see it.*

The girls are not particularly upset with these restrictions and sometimes they even appreciate that their parents are trying to protect them. Especially when they talk of how “younger” girls/children who are vulnerable to the harms of social media need to be protected, sometimes even from their own parents, as reflected by Papina.

I think I kind of agree with Julia's perspective on the age restriction. Grade 7 and 8 is a good age to have social media because you're supposed to go to high school and some of your friends may be leaving so you want to stay in touch with them. That's a good age to have such restrictions. But despite the restrictions you still can't be like, 'Okay, are you sure you're this age?' You know what I mean? There are 5-year-olds, their parents make accounts for them. I think there should also be a restriction for if you can make an account for your children or not, cause they're babies and you want to make an account for them, because you can profit off of it for making money. But how about when they grow up? How sad, because it's not like everybody wants their childhood to be publicized.

The girls themselves believe that a certain level of surveillance and control is necessary to protect girls and children from the dangers of the world. Sara also wants to see more parental/adult control when it comes to social media, particularly in relation to sexualizing young children/girls.

Something I've noticed is that younger kids, even prepubescent, they're kind of sexualizing themselves, whether they realize it or not, and it's really weird that they're just putting out publicly, like a 10-year-old twerking. I don't know, I feel like it's not even their fault necessarily. It's like, what is the world or what are their parents telling them? Where does it come from? Because I feel like it is the internet but it's also people in their lives who tell them it's okay if you do this or they can put more control over like, 'oh, I don't want you going on Tik Tok this young because I don't think it's good for you.' Or 'I don't want you

posting on Tik Tok because I don't want people to see you dancing and such a weird way, like provocative.'

Both Papina and Sara are referencing deeply engrained beliefs around adult control over the movement and expression of girls and children. In this way the girls themselves partially buy into the entrenched dominant narratives that girls/children should be “protected” through controlling their access to certain public spaces (Valentine, 2004), —which has undoubtedly jumped from “the street” to digital space. The problem is that although harm is certainly real at times, these moral panics of girl/child safety and protection run the risk of completely immobilizing their expression of self and sexuality in safe and affirming ways. Similar to the “girl effect” narrative, it also acts as a distraction from the more complex conversations around why children are disempowered in the first place. Renold, Egan, and Ringrose (2015) argue that our culture is inscribed within the innocent/sexually knowing child binary—operating as a barometer for social decay/progress and desires for a nostalgic past and hopeful future; all of which are only possible under an adult knowledge and control of the child. The girls conclude that parents and adults are right to control children/girls because adults (either the parents or the owners of social media apps) should have the knowledge to do what is best. Yet controlling the knowing child and their sexuality is often about adult fears than any real ethic of care for the child. As Egan (2013) states, there is a culture of “disgust, anxiety, and desire regarding children’s eroticism” (p. 17). While Walkerdine (2001) also argues this when she explains that adults want to “protect” the child not in the name of the child but in the name of protecting the adult.

The little seductress is a complex phenomenon that carries adult sexual desire, but also hooks into the equally complex fantasies carried out by the little girl herself. The idea of a sanitized natural childhood in which such things are kept at bay. Having no place in childhood becomes not the guarantor of the safety of children from the perversity of adult desires for them, but a huge defense against the acknowledgment of dangerous desires and the part of adults in this analysis, Child Protection begins to look more like adult protection (p. 29).

Instead of a fear of the existence of a childhood sexuality, the fear is around adults' inability to control their own behaviors and desires. Sara emanates these adult fears in her defamation of "twerking." Furthermore, it is of critical importance to pay closer attention to this defamation since "twerking" is a dance move originating in the Black community (Pérez, 2016). In this way, the gendered girl emerges through Weheliye's (2014) concept of racializing assemblages—the definition of the girl comes through the abjection of her deviant other, in this case the "twerking Black girl." To be a girl is to denounce a certain sexuality, a sexuality made known through the behaviors of the racialized other. Social media becomes yet another space from which girls come to know themselves or other girls/children as "innocent" and "good" through the symbolic codes set through our systems of racialization and racism.

Although the girls come online and sometimes replicate dominant narratives of adult control in the name of safety, they do take back some control when and where they can. One girl who shared how she was initially restricted in her use of social media (above), found ways to access the spaces she did feel safe on her own, even if her mother might not find them safe.

My mom, she doesn't like social media. I didn't ask her, and she doesn't know but I have a Tumblr account that I use a lot. That's what I use more than anything. I don't have any other social media, but I just have my little Tumblr account that I use.

Throughout the interview this girl expressed a deep sense of joy in using Tumblr. In this way, although her mother may not view it as safe, it brings a lot of meaning to her life, particularly as someone who is queer and racialized. Cho (2017) has argued that youth often find themselves more adequately represented on non-dominant social media sites such as Tumblr, as opposed to Facebook and Instagram. Girls do have the ability and the capacity to find social media spaces that offer them a sense of safety and meaning, despite disproportionate and unrealistic adult fears and anxieties discussed in the literature review's commentary on moral panics. Her decision also

exemplifies what Boyd (2014) has argued in that teens do want online privacy from adults and that they will work to achieve this in creative ways. Sometimes this can mean creating their own digital language that adults cannot understand, or as in this case, it meant using a lesser-known social media website where it is unlikely her mother would be present.

Social Media Algorithms

The idea of being both in and out of control, had an interesting connection to the girls' discussion and reflections on social media algorithms.²² Although there is work being done on youth in general, I could not find many articles that looks at the specific relationship between girls, girlhood, and social media algorithms, certainly not through the voices of girls themselves. For the girls, it is a highly contradictory space with both positive and negative reflections. They do like that if done correctly, they can use the algorithm to curate their feed/content the way they want and receive a more individualized experience, as expressed by Isabel.

There's also a way to tune your feed based on algorithms and what posts you like and who you follow, that can make it a more positive experience for you.

Currie (2015) argues that “texts” brings the Girl into being and she is made and (re)made through culture and cultural texts (understanding that text is images, language, but more importantly, the body is a text). While commercial media gives girls a lot of texts to “play”²³ with as they “do” girlhood, mainstream media is not a determinant of social reality even as it does offer up certain naturalized mythologies. Importantly though, commercial texts orchestrate what is “sayable” for

²² Social media algorithms are a set of complex mathematical rules that rank content based on an individual person's interests. Algorithms collect data on a social media user and will show them content they will likely engage in based on that data.

²³ This idea of “play” refers to Walters (1995) work and was addressed in the literature review. This idea is about girls “playing” with hegemonic/non-hegemonic scripts. It's about them being less like “passive dupes” and more active participants in the (re)development of cultural meanings. For example, the identity of the “good girl.” They can “play” with that identity by working with and against dominant notions of what we (as society) define as the good girl. In doing so they are both reinforcing and breaking the hegemonic definition of this subject position. The idea of “play” suggests that the girl identity is both the Girl (dominant notions) and also a “girl becoming” as she continuously makes and (re)makes herself in the moment through this active play.

girls. As girls are consuming a lot of “content” and therefore “cultural texts” through social media, the algorithm becomes another decider as to what is “sayable” and “doable” for girls. However, social media content is also created by the average person. Content creators do not have to have a large following either to end up on a person’s “for you page” (FYP). What this means is that the algorithm will sometimes show the girls content that represents non-dominant ways of being, that then expands what girls are allowed to “say” and “do” as girls. Emma explores this when she discusses how she curates her algorithm with “body positivity” content.

I found a lot of body positive accounts because I myself am a bit of a chubby girl. I find that I feel better when on my feed I don't see people expressing unhealthy ways of living.

Although her engagement with this type of content is still embedded in an intense cultural machine that privileges certain types of bodies (to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7), we cannot deny this moment of rupture and “play” as meaningful to her. In using the algorithm to curate her content, she is (re)making what it means to be a girl for her, outside dominant (in this case sizeist) norms. Emma reclaims her chubby-ness and (re)makes it as an acceptable girlhood subjectivity. This would have been less possible a decade ago as chubby girl “texts” were quite inaccessible to the average girl. Social media has given girls some access to create their own content and interact with content made by everyday people that potentially challenges dominant norms, which then offers them more expanded control over how they structure the girl self. In this way, through social media girls are able to further operationalize the dream of Walters (1995), in that girls can “play” with dominant texts in their creation of the self. Instead of only having access to mostly hegemonic texts, through the algorithm the girls are now offered a wider variety of texts from which to play. Even still, where hegemonic informed content ends and non-hegemonic content begins is not always easy to determine. The girls know this as well, for while they may claim *some* control, they are rightly skeptical of who the algorithm actually “works for.” They don’t always feel in control

of the content that the algorithm presents to them, as shown through the discussion in one of the focus groups.

Claire *Yea, I feel on Instagram, I'm a bit biased and not a big fan of Instagram. Because, I mean, [its] basically the same for each platform. I feel like the Instagram algorithm makes it worse. So for Instagram, I think I read some research paper that the algorithm makes you feel worse or have some negative emotion related to it, then they'll make you hooked.*

Emma *When Claire was talking about an algorithm. I also noticed that and it's a super good point, because Instagram is also run by the people who run Facebook. They both have the algorithm of things you watch, posts you like, or people you follow. They recommend you things based on the things that you have shown interest into because you involuntary sign up for it and they're just giving you all the stuff that they think you would like. It's really annoying.*

There is no question, social media and the algorithm are overwhelmingly controlled by mainstream corporate interests, as Emma calls out Facebook. Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok have become an addition to the modern girl's "magazine." Although magazines do still exist, Coulter and Moruzi (2022) argue that the heyday of print media is long gone and that it is important to acknowledge how girls' interaction with online magazines has shifted their engagement with cultural texts. Social media both replicates and breaks from past and current technologies of girl magazines. Since about the late 19th century, "girls' periodical press [eg. magazines] has always been interested in defining the ideal girl" (p. 766). These periodicals were the main source of cultural texts offered to girls and there was tightly controlled input from girls themselves on the type of content that was released. When girls' voices were included, they were "constrained by expectations about [dominant] girlhood and femininity" (p. 769). Even still, there were moments where real girls' voices and experiences were included in these magazines in ways that broke from dominant discourses (for example Riot Gurrll and *Sassy* magazine). Girls also participated in development of their own periodicals and zines, however these were also often sidelined as "as

manufactured products were increasingly positioned as superior to...girls' own cultural artifacts, like scrapbooks and newsletters" (Kearney, 2006, p. 38). As girl magazines have moved online, they continue this erasure while also creating space for real girls to share their experiences outside constructions of ideal girlhood. Thus, girls' interactions with both past/present magazines and social media create yet another contradictory experience for girls as they both make and break ideal girlhood. The difference with social media, is the additional chaos of the scale, level, and veracity that dominant/subversive texts are distributed. Girls are interacting with content on a level that cannot necessarily be tracked. Social scientists had the capacity to collect hard data on how many magazines were sold, thus accessing their reach and could conclude that this was one of the main ways girls were accessing culture. Social media has created an almost limitless distribution of cultural texts where for profit companies, governments, social justice organizations, average people, and girls themselves are creating and pushing content through the algorithm on multiple social media platforms. Claire and Emma touch on the "involuntary" and "chaotic" nature of the algorithm, which is reinforced in the literature as "the fear exists that algorithmic filtering causes unpredictable and invisible boundaries between people and might result in unwanted and unperceived forms of selection and segregation" while also trapping us in our "echo chambers" (de Groot et. al., 2023, p. 702). Which "side" of Tik Tok or Instagram a person may end up on can be somewhat involuntary. Quinn further explores this and gives an even deeper sociopolitical analysis around this lack of control and "unwanted selection" girls experience in relation to the algorithm and what content they might see.

I don't use Tik Tok, but I do know that the algorithm specifically is tailored to show people who are conventionally attractive and conventionally attractive includes white or whiter features. Even on people of color they are going to show people with color who have more white features. That skews your perception of what people look like, because it's always going to be, you know, that sort of thing.

Quinn is referencing a significant amount of research on the harmful bias of algorithms (Noble, 2018) and how they favor dominant identities, bodies, and ways of being (Literat & Brough, 2019). For example, in their study of Black content creators, Harris et al., (2023) found the popular social media app TikTok “appears to suppress, review more closely, or frequently remove content from the Black creators” (p. 11). With this algorithmic reality, Quinn aptly points out that the girls may not have control of the social consciousness being built around them as they exist online. While Emma is working to (re)make her own “chubby” girlhood, Quinn points out there is likely a limit to this. Since the girls do not always have control of the algorithm, they do not always have control of the ways they are *allowed* to see themselves as girls, reaffirming Foucauldian notions of power in what is “sayable” and “doable.” If they are bombarded with attractive white girls and women, they may begin to internalize that this is the definition of girlhood/womanhood (among other dominant identity factors with which they are presented). This is not something new in our society, however the privileging of certain bodies has become hard written into our technological code. Dominant racializing narratives of gender are difficult to control (avoid) for the girls in social media spaces. This relates to theoretical questions both inside and outside girlhood studies around how much “control” any of us really have in our modern world in relation to identity and formation of the self. As Dobson (2015) argues, it is quite difficult (if even impossible) to deem any kind of representation “real” or “authentic” since it is always already being mediated through system of power. Thus, further suggesting that control over how individuals form their sense of self is mediated through the culture that surrounds them, and Quinn has pointed out an important mediation feature—the privileging of whiteness through technological codification. It is important to note however that Quinn does take some control in what images/content mediates her life and sense of self. She does not use Tik Tok, Instagram, or Snapchat and instead finds place on Tumblr.

Despite Tumblr's historical place as a queer haven (Cho, 2015), which has since been somewhat lost due to a recent scandal (Bronstein, 2020), some argue it still retains its potentially transformative nature as girls and youth are able to interact with content that explores many nondominant feelings, experiences, and ideas (Kanai, 2019a). Quinns affinity toward Tumblr shows it still holds significance for certain non-dominant communities and thus operates as another option for girls to "play" and gain a sense of control outside the dominant algorithms of major social media sites.

It is clear, the level of control the girls have online (as understood through the lens of the algorithm) is a never-ending contradiction. They do not feel totally helpless, but if they want to participate in social media, there is some level of control they must give up to our social media corporate overlords. Sometimes they acknowledge the contradiction outright and work through the dilemma in real time, as expressed by Isabel.

I know, a lot of things went around with thin-spiration and stuff. It's still going around, but not on my feed anymore, so we moved on from that one. You can get a lot of really negative things. But there's also a way to tune your feed based on algorithms and what posts you like and who you follow, that can make it a more positive experience for you.

Her feed was inundated with "thin-spiration" content, which she eventually was able to avoid, but she knows another potential trend is around the corner because "you can get a lot of really negative things." While she simultaneously enjoys some control in the moment, it is a fleeting sense of control. Yet this is not a particularly unique experience for girls or anyone on social media. Just like the rest of us (meaning adults) we go out into the world each day and accept a certain level of risk and lack of control. In relation to the algorithm, the girls in my study at least, do not appear to be measurably any more "at-risk" than adults, some of whom may have less awareness around the functionality of social media. In fact, children and youth, sometimes called "digital natives" may have an even better level of media literacy than adults (Jimenez et. al, 2021), making them less

susceptible to the whims of the algorithm. This then puts into contention the idea that adults *always* need to protect girls/children and reverses the teacher/student role from which girls can teach adults how to gain control in a chaotic media landscape. One of the prominent feminist and anti-adultist arguments is that children and youth do have an incredible amount of knowledge to share with adults (Hall, 2020). Although I would argue that we (adults) want to acknowledge that their position as children and as girls creates a different experience in relation to social media algorithms, it is limiting to assume that they are somehow incapable of managing a level of control as compared to adults, who may be using those same systems. One cannot assume they are more at risk if their voices and experiences are not included in conversations around risk, as De Leyn et. al. (2022) states, “the voices of [youth] who are the target population of media literacy policy and research are seldom heard” (p. 221) and that in fact, the erasure of these voices limits deeper discussion. If adults honour and pay attention to the knowledge of girls, children, and youth, we may develop creative and transformative solutions that offer more meaningful online social interactions for everyone.

Privacy

Beyond the semi-control of their social media use by adults to the semi-control over the content via the algorithm, the girls in my study find some semblance of control in the boundaries they set for themselves, most notably through privacy settings—another place where youth might have more aptitude compared to adults. The girls' desire for these boundaries aligns with a study of girls in Ontario done by Heath (2015), in which she found that instead of worrying about “stranger danger,” the girls “were primarily concerned about the security of their personal information (p. 367). As I argued in my literature review, fears of a “predator around every corner” often miss the actual experiences of youth online and what their top concerns might be. This then

fuels policies and strategies that acquiesce to adult fears, are used as justification for further disempowering children and youth, and in the end do not change systems at the root. For the girls in my study, one of their rationales for engaging in the strict privacy rules that they set for themselves, was due to concerns about their personal data. The girls are very aware of how much of their personal data exists online and how it might be used for nefarious ends. They do not like this and are proud to be taking the necessary precautions to protect their personal data. They associate sharing too much personal data with a lack of safety which can be physical or digital. They are confident that protection of their personal data is their responsibility and a standard of practice for any literate social media user, as exemplified below.

Sofia *There's always the awareness that there are people out there that will use social media for their own advantage, and that may cause you to leak your own personal information. I think you should be cautious, regardless of if you are on social media or if you're not social media.*

Luna *I feel personally, if you do the right things to make sure your identity is hidden online, then it's a bit safer for you.*

Although it is certainly the reality that girls need to take responsibility for their own safety what is missing from girl responsibility discourse is an analysis of the social structures that put them in these situations in the first place (similar to other narratives of girlhood responsibility mentioned earlier). Girls being responsible for their privacy is just another item on their long list of their responsibilities. Claire reflects on how so much of this responsibility falls onto her/girls.

With social media platforms, I kind of wish that they were, more upfront about what they're doing with our data because basically we are the product, our data is a product, with Facebook, Instagram, because they're selling it to companies. I kind of wish that they are more upfront about it because they're being cunning about getting our data. You have to dig into stuff in order to turn it off.

Claire is exhausted by all the chaos she needs to navigate and dreams of a more transparent world. Even still, regardless of “stranger danger,” creeps, or scammers trying to steal their data, the girls

value their privacy online for another important reason. Privacy means they are more able to be themselves. Although they must work very hard to maintain privacy, the ways in which it brings them closer to their friends and feelings of free expression seem worth it, as expressed by Emma.

I made my accounts on private. You know who [is] following you and what they know about you. I feel you're more safe to post the things about you like, if you post a joke or a meme or a picture of yourself or something. It's not going to be received as negatively because people who you let follow you are your friends.

In this sense, enacting security and privacy measures helps the girls feel empowered as for teenagers living in networked publics, “being able to achieve privacy is an expression of agency” (Boyd, 2014, p. 76). It also allows them to feel sufficiently comfortable to be creative and explore some of the more meaningful aspects of social media. When they exercise their right to privacy, they empower themselves to feel worthy of moments of independent joy, expression, and connection with their friends—experiences that can often be in short supply for girls, who otherwise have their lives heavily dictated by adults. This aligns with what Willet (2007) suggests in that the internet is a public/private “border space” in which girls can feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings outside the normal surveillance they experience in daily life (p. 58).

Although the girls are both in control and out of control on social media, they almost always desire to achieve *some* form of control. In an out-of-control world, this makes a lot of sense. Yet they do not seem like “passive dupes,” at least no more or no less than the rest of us, who also have to navigate a cacophony of hegemonic discourses and oppressive structures, particularly from within social media spaces. We want to acknowledge that girls undoubtedly experience disempowerment, but we do not want to fall so deep into the saviour complex that we forget they are critical thinking, self-reflecting, intentional, emotionally alive beings in their own right. They want to experience any form of self-determination they can get their hands on, and it is clear they are working toward making that a reality in the ways they know how.

6.3 Navigating (Digital) Harms

Although the girls seem to want a sense of control online in response to a variety of safety concerns there is a particular form of control in relation to psychological safety that was quite pervasive—that of extreme negativity, harassment, and “haters.” The girls describe the various ways in which social media can not only be harmful to girls but to everyone. The girls believe harm comes from social media's misrepresentation of bodies (to be further discussed in Chapter 7), as well as boys and men—through their harassment and hateful content. The girls also experience harm through peer cyberbullying. They further suggest that these psychological harms are difficult to prevent because social media does not have mechanisms for accountability. The girls are aware of the potential harms circulating on the internet even if they do not experience it themselves, as it seems particularly hard for them to witness it or hear stories of this happening to other girls, women, and people in general. In reaction to psychological harm, they similarly work to gain some semblance of control in their online experience and are keen on being media literate in this regard.

Men and Boys: Harassment

An unfortunate and striking finding from the data showed that every single time and without fail, when boys or men are mentioned, it is in relation to a negative online (and even offline) experience. There was not one single statement the girls made about men or boys that was in relation to a positive online experience. This ranges from how boys and men treat the girls themselves and their friends, to witnessing girls/women experiencing harassment from boys/men, to the content they see men and boys creating; it is all negative. The girls and their friends/siblings are experiencing online sexual harassment from men—they think it is creepy and may even make them a little scared, as exemplified by the girls below.

Sanvi I do have a friend who likes to post pictures of herself when she's at parties and stuff like that on social media, because like, why not? A lot of the times she would get these creepy messages from old men asking her if she can be [their] sugar baby. It's really disgusting and really scary knowing that older men are having these views of a 16-year-old girl.

Claire If you're a girl, you're so prone to weirdos messaging you, like really weird messages, unusual messages. I have sisters, all of my siblings are girls. We kind of gloss it over and [don't] really talk about these types of things, but I think that people should talk more about how social media is affecting them. But based on [my] observation, they get messages from grown men and they're both minors.

There is nothing particularly new about this information, since in the patriarchal male dominant world, men and boys believe that they are entitled to the bodies of women and girls, for their sexual, emotional, and domestic labour. This experience of girls being sexually harassed online is well document in girlhood and youth studies literature (Mishna et al., 2023; Van Royen et al., 2015). Even still, much of this literature focuses on peer-on-peer harassment, around “dick pics,” solicitation for nudes, and non-consensual image sharing, while their experiences with harassment from adults are less studied. Although, in one study done with girls in Toronto, they too described unsolicited messages from adult strangers as “creepy,” “disgusting,” and “scary” (Ringrose et al., 2022). Again, this is not surprising, however Claire makes an interesting reflection when she points out the inevitability of the reality that leads girls to brush off these types of experiences as she says, “we kind of gloss it over.” One reason that the girls might minimize these experiences is that postfeminist consciousness has made it difficult and even “uncool” to fully name sexist behavior as argued by Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2016).

The ascendancy of postfeminist discourse had, they contended, made sexism hard to identify. Many have shown how sexist practices evade critique through being couched as ‘retro’, ‘ironic’ or ‘enlightened.’ The hegemonic, common-sense status of postfeminist discourse appeared to leave few openings for naming and challenging sexism, prompting feminist critics to express concern that sexism had become ‘unspeakable’” (p. 1).

The girls may not want to or know how to directly name this behavior as sexism if they exist within the postfeminist girlhood subjectivity. This practice of de-emphasizing sexism could also be the result of seeing women and girls being silenced in the media about their experiences of sexism and even in their own schools or personal lives. Long before and even post #MeToo, girls and women continue to be shamed and silenced for coming forward, often publicly (Barbour, 2021; Mantilla, 2015). The prospect of real justice and accountability remains disturbingly low while it comes at a high price to the victim/survivor. When girls witness adult women suffer incredible social, psychological, and emotional repercussions for coming forward with experiences of sexism/harassment, the culture of silencing only continues. Whether a postfeminist consciousness or not, girls have often been told to tone down, ignore, erase, minimize, or silence sharing/naming their inequitable gendered experiences, which is even more salient for racialized and further marginalized girls (Brown, 2009; Gonick, 2006b; Krieg, 2016). The girls know these online situations are uncomfortable and “weird” but in the end they still brush them off, as further exemplified by Grace who shares an experience of getting harassed by an older man while she and other girls in the focus group deal with it by simply laughing about it.

- Grace *Me and my friend got texted by this guy who was like, I'm looking for a sugar baby. [Everyone laughs].*
- Prisha *Oh god.*
- Grace *Like your reward is... I don't know why it's funny to me. Maybe that's like, I don't know, it shouldn't be funny. But he's like, your reward is this every week, I will give you rewards you will be spoiled. All my friends got this. I got a text on Instagram.*
- Eleni *So it was on Instagram?*
- Grace *Yeah, random men.*

Sofia also expresses this ambivalence when a guy asked her for nudes. She seemed to brush it off by blocking him, not giving it much more thought. She does express discomfort, however she never mentioned feeling unsafe at any point.

Sofia *I remember from one instance, this one guy, he texted me, and he was asking for nudes. And he said that he would send me money if I sent him the nudes.*

Emma *Oh my gosh*

Sofia *I remember feeling uncomfortable. I reported his account and blocked him right away.*

Eleni *What platform was this on was this on? Instagram, Snapchat...*

Sofia *It was Instagram.*

Eleni *Yeah, that sucks. So, you did report him and he did get blocked? Did it stop after that?*

Sofia *Yeah, it stopped.*

De-emphasizing these experiences also shows that the girls are normalizing of this type of harassment from men. However, Gillett (2018) argues this normalization comes at a cost. She is referring to women who experience harassment on online dating apps but this situation certainly applies to the girls who are experiencing harassment from men online through other apps as well.

Gendered forms of abuse and harassment are not rare crimes. They are experienced by the majority of women and are therefore ‘ordinary’, rather than ‘aberrant’; ‘ordinary’ experiences of abuse have cumulative effects that can be as important as physical violence; and the focus on the extreme forms of physical violence that are recognised as ‘aberrant’ distracts us from addressing mainstream cultural values that effectively normalise abuse (p. 213).

It is important to note that while they were sharing their stories Grace and Sofia did not appear overly traumatized or harmed by these incidents. During the two different focus groups from which these statements came, their tone and body language did not suggest any serious form of distress, which means we do not want to draw much deeper conclusions on the psychological and emotional

effects on the girls at this time. Especially because we want to avoid infantilizing girls and their capacity for emotional intelligence/awareness. We also do not want to suggest these experiences as wholly oppressive or wholly emancipatory, as in experiences like these, “scholars observe that reactions to online abuse like receiving dick pics spans the spectrum of offence through to arousal” (Rosewarne, 2021, p. 137). However, what we can suggest from Calder-Dawe and Gavey and Gillett, is that normalizing this type of gendered behavior is harmful because it then *limits how we might want to speak about it*, as certain things become “normalized” and “unspeakable.” If something is normal, ordinary, unexceptional, and an everyday occurrence, we will feel less power to “name” it. Normalizing and erasing these experiences keep sex/gender hierarchies intact, untouched, and unchallenged. Even in a post #MeToo world, access to language and critical reflections on gendered behaviour are not always accessible to girls (and even women) as these behaviors continue to be normalized. This further relates to Foucault’s notion of power in the way it also creates to parameters for what is “allowed” to be said on a particular topic (Foucault, 1976). When the girls either fear or are unsure about what they can say around this topic, they become disempowered in the effects, further entrenching them within the sex/gender system.

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse (p. 27).

The girls’ laughter about being harassed by men online is but one of the “many silences” around this issue. Even when Sanvi calls the experience “disgusting” or “scary,” these are prescribed narratives around this issue, as they represent the dominant language within the discourse around what girls are “authorized” to say. Even in their critical reflection, prescriptions on what is sable and knowable abound. That does not mean the experiences are not actually scary or disgusting,

but they have not been given permission to go further in their own analysis or understanding of such experiences. Foucault reminds us of the limits of language when discussing a particular issue—it is extremely difficult to describe something outside of the dominant discourses. Online spaces become a place from which gendered and sexist behaviour is normalized to the point of limiting what girls are allowed to say, and therefore think and feel, about their experiences. This would be a much larger discussion but this is a prime example of support for arguments around image, arts-based forms of communication, expression, and research, which can potentially expand what is “sayable.”

What Sanvi, Claire, Grace, and Sophia’s contributions suggest is that the way some adult men ‘do’ online masculinity (i.e., sexually desiring girls) creates an effect for which girls then ‘do’ online girlhood (i.e., deflecting that desire) which exemplifies Butler’s heterosexual matrix.

I use the term heterosexual matrix...to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized...a hegemonic discursive, epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, p. 151).

One way the girls come to normalize and know themselves through these “real” expressions of gender is as the receivers of unwanted attention from men to which *they need to deflect*. This is a classic heteronormative behavior pattern and Claire even restates this later when she says that it’s normally the “girl that’s being pursued.” Gender only “makes sense” when girls and women are on the “defensive” which is part of Butler’s hierarchical, oppositional positioning of binary gender. Furthermore, what becomes intelligible as gender works in service of power. Putting girls as always on the defensive becomes a standard tool in the oppressive sex/gender system that makes women and girls responsible for rejecting men and boy’s advances—sexual or otherwise (Hust et al., 2008; Ramirez et al., 2020; Weiss, 2009)—as opposed to demanding men and boys to change

their often violent behavior (think of the highly offensive yet pervasive cultural phrase “boys will be boys”). Holding girls responsible for the sexuality of men and boys is also a staple in the Madonna/whore (slut/prude) dichotomy and sexual double standard. Women and girls are demonized for being both “sluts” and “prudes” (Farvid et al., 2017; Japko, 2023; Lippman & Campbell, 2014)—a narrative that continues to be maintained through postfeminist discourse (Ringrose et al., 2013). Properly navigating the sexual desires and behaviors of men is always already on them, and it is always already a trap. The girls know this dilemma exists, yet they are not necessarily sure how to escape it as expressed by Emma.

I noticed a lot how some girls dress on social media, they get kind of, I don't know if it's offensive language, [get] slut shamed. You understand why people are doing that, but you don't understand. You understand what they're seeing and why they're saying what they're saying; but like, you don't. Like, don't say it to people like that. That's mean. But also, it's weird when people want people to dress like that but then they get offended when they do.

The slut/prude dichotomy, the double standard, and the enduring notions of neoliberal/postfeminist responsibility that buttress them, are particularly salient for racialized girls, and it is important to note that Sofia (quote above, p. 133) is a Black girl. The Madonna/whore dichotomy is doubly levied upon Black, Indigenous and racialized girls. Brown (2009) argues that “black girls and women are often objects of desire and scorn” (p. 136) while de Finney (2015) tells us that in Canada “the most persistent stereotypes of Indigenous girlhood...[are] ‘slut’, ‘drunk’, ‘squaw’, ‘chug’, ‘raped’, ‘Indian savage’, ‘no good’, ‘welfare ho’” (p. 173). This is another example of Weheliye’s (2014) concept of racializing assemblages as racialized girls themselves become the baseline reference point that enables the creation of the heterosexual matrix and Madonna/whore dichotomy. Even as girls have to navigate the slut/prude subjectivities, these subjectivities exist in our collective consciousness because of the symbolic order that presents sluts/whores as racialized girls and women, and prudes/Madonnas as white girls and women. Racialized girls are always

already seen as hypersexual as witnessed through Sofia being asked by a random man for nudes. So although these unoriginal social narratives, beliefs, and mores continue to be replicated online through social media and experienced by girls, there is a particular experience occurring for racialized girls. The weight of historical narratives that buttress the Madonna/whore dichotomy through racialization create a particular experience for Black girls online as they unwillingly become the site for (re)production of these oppressive beliefs. Social media has become a place through which direct messages (DMs) are yet another site for us to “make sense” of and experience intelligibility of the girl gender.

This belief that girls are always supposed to be on the defensive also reinforces the active/passive binary and as such, limits girls from being *active* in their own online (and offline) desires and pleasures, particularly in relation to sexual, romantic, or friendly relationships. Girls online are constantly on the defensive as opposed to actively pursuing what they want. In fact, expressions of any type of active desire during the focus groups and interviews was somewhat muted. This is also not surprising as girlhood studies scholars have explored the “missing discourses” of desire for girls (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006); and that furthermore, this awareness of missing discourses post-Fine has not necessarily led to radical changes in how we support girls to express/understand/embody their desires, sexual or otherwise (Rasmussen, 2012; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015); much of which we can blame on postfeminist narratives (Tappin et al., 2023). Without viable discourses of desire, girls are unsure of what they are allowed to “say” in terms of expressing any desire. Their social media experience becomes just another space for recreating dominant girlhood, i.e., desire is muted/unclear and their identity/subjecthood/focus becomes about how they understand themselves in relation to boys and men through deflection of masculine behavior. What is further exacerbated with social media is that this harassment can

happen to the girls anywhere at anytime and prevention is difficult. Depending on the social media platform, not all privacy settings are the same and unsolicited messages are not always avoidable. The ever-changing landscape of online spaces and rapid advancements in technology can also make it laborious for girls to keep up with any new tactics for men's harassment and any new privacy settings they might need to turn on to avoid such attention/harassment. This is itself, a mental load that girls must carry when they come online. Extra mental load is a mechanism for oppression as girls cannot focus on other things in their lives that spark joy and meaning. Girls become default receptacles for men and boy's behavior due to the structure and function of social media applications. An absence of "acceptable" desire discourses for girls, coupled with the responsibility that they are supposed to deflect men and boys' attention, while witnessing example upon example of girls and women who speak up being silenced; leaves the girls with few options but to "brush off" any inappropriate (read gender reconstituting) or harassing behavior from men and boys online.

Men and Boys: Haters and Sexist Content

Men also happen to be the ones most likely involved in the production of hateful and sexist content that the girls see online. This does not have to be "hard content"²⁴ but can also appear in the comment sections of posts. A few of the girls reflect on this.

Sofia *I think the negatives are, there are haters out there and there are people that are posting that influence the wrong age groups. I think there's this guy named Andrew Tate, and his whole persona is revolving around using women as slaves, abusing women, basically radicalizing the younger generation of men to abuse women in their daily lives.*

Julia *Whenever I see any sexist comments, which do come up every now and then where people will think lower of girls. Like recently, I think Andrew Tate was under fire for saying some controversial things.*

²⁴ By "hard content" I mean content that is presented in official posts and stories, as opposed to direct messages (DMs) or the comment section.

- Isabel *But there's even like, those really strange podcasts, which are run by men with a bunch of women in the room, and then the men will be like, oh, yeah, well, I only like women when they can only cook, like that type of thing.*
- Papina *[Social media] becomes really negative, especially for girls. Because often, let's be honest, a lot of things that are posted on social media are geared towards girls. Even if it's not, like, consciously or intentionally, it still becomes more so a woman's problem I guess I should put it. For example, it's a really long while ago but the whole... I don't know if you've heard of the Megan Thee Stallions shooting? That's the thing I can think of off the top of my head. [In] the comments...there will be women that are supporting her, but the comments are also men just belittling her, sexualizing her all that kind of stuff.*

This online misogyny represents Eve Sedwick's "homosociality" which is "a set of strategies boys and men use to maintain the gender order and uphold male privileges" as well as "a mechanism that supports and reinforces or extends 'hegemonic masculinity' and practices of othering and objectifying women and girls and the feminine" (Renold et al., 2022, p. 245). Homosociality has undoubtedly been transplanted online, evidenced by the girls naming many examples of dominant discourses of the devaluation and dehumanization of girls and women. The girls are explaining the real experience of "homosociality" and "everyday sexism" that they must witness, endure, and navigate online. As much as they might be able to curate their algorithm, this type of hate is seemingly inescapable as noted by Papina. Even when girls are following an account they deem "safe," haters and harassment can flood the comment section. This is a phenomenon particular to social media, which exacerbates harmful and violent misogynistic viewpoints, circulated through the "manosphere." The manosphere is a dark side of the internet where one can find content focusing on men's rights groups, anti-feminism, misandry claims, and the dehumanization of women; while death threats, doxing, revenge porn, and cyberbullying are aimed at women and girls who dare speak back against our sexist systems (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). The dearth of hateful content, harassment, and violence emanating from the manosphere is difficult for even

adult women to navigate as it makes its way to social media content on Instagram and Tik Tok. Already existing inequitable gender based social systems (patriarchy, heteronormativity), coupled with intersecting oppressive systems (political, economic, education, medical), fuel the manosphere and make fighting against the manosphere, its content, and its contributors incredibly difficult. As previously explored, even supposed “safer” spaces like Tumblr are not immune from men’s abuse. In Bimm’s (2018) study of a viral post on Tumblr, she explores the ways in which the current gendered hierarchy become easily and quickly reinforced. This particular Tumblr text post from a girl herself, questioned the behavior of a prominent online, male celebrity figure and his relationship with his teen girl fans. What followed was a swift repudiation of this girl’s expression of “dissent or discomfort” (p. 217) with online male behavior. Posts in support of this particular man (inexplicitly) labeled the original poster as a “feminist killjoy.” When girls and women call out men’s behavior, they are dismissed, “belittle[d] and delegitimize[d]” by arguing that they are “taking away other people’s nice things,” thus suggesting they “do not deserve to be heard” (p. 225). These suggestions are made not just by men, but adult women as well. What is interesting and important about this case study is that it is actually, a rather mundane, every day, moment. This then signals to the pervasiveness from which men and boys violence becomes unavoidable and difficult to challenge. In fact, adult women with some level of fame and power have been destroyed for challenging it, with gamer Anita Sarkeesian serving as a prime example (Ferguson & Glasgow, 2021). Although content focused on resistance to this intense misogyny does exist, the girls did not name any of these options outright. This could suggest that this type of material is being suppressed by social media functionality (algorithm/shadow banning) or that the girls may have limited research skills or mentors who could guide them toward this counter-hegemonic/alternative media. This leaves girls with little choice but to endure and manage by

sticking to the “different sides” of social media through algorithm manipulation. Even still, this does not fully inoculate them from this heinous content.

Peer Harassment

Although random adult men participate in much of the online harassment and harmful content, the girls do experience some of this from their friends and classmates; what some call “cyberbullying” i.e., “the intentional and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices” (Chisholm, 2006, p. 78). Sofia explains such a situation through what she called an “expose page.”

Sofia *We actually had this whole expose page on my school. People exposed their friends. There [were] lots of negative things being said about students at my school.*

Eleni *An expose page? Could you explain that to me?*

Sofia *Say that you're having drama with somebody at my school, you can [post] them on the exposed page, and the person that owns the page will post it. So basically, the whole school can see what's happening.*

Eleni *It'll be an explanation of the drama? Like this person did this to me and it'll be just like, an explanation of the drama that's happening?*

Sofia *Yeah, it can be negative, it can be pretty nasty...since the majority of the population at my school has social media. There were lots of pictures going around, lots of nasty words being thrown out. People were definitely getting exposed more. It makes you feel like they can't really trust their own friends at that period of time.*

Julia has a similar experience, although she did not explicitly call it an “expose page” the function of it was largely the same and she did use the word “expose.”

Julia *Someone decided to open some mask fishing account and I think that was something that a lot of people feared because like, what if they get exposed for being a mask fish. Are you familiar?*

Eleni *No, what's mask fishing?*

Julia *So mask fishing is you put on... when you're wearing a mask, you look different than without a mask, right?*

Eleni *Oh, yes like a COVID mask. I was thinking like a mask when you go to a ball or something. Okay yes, so I know what mask fishing is, please continue.*

Julia *They were exposing people who were mask fishing and I think that made a lot of people feel quite unsafe, because what if they get exposed next? What if people leave bad comments on it? That account got shut down pretty quickly but still, that was one time where I was kinda unsafe, you know, I felt a bit scared.*

Here, Sofia and Julia name a real vulnerability in that simply being online *creates the possibility for public judgement and shaming*. While boys, girls, and gender queer students alike could get judged/shamed on either of these pages, as public shaming online has become an alarmingly pervasive practice (Billingham & Parr, 2020), it's critical that I explore the ways in which public shaming of girls holds a significant place in our histories and the construction of the girl identity. Over 100 years ago women (and girls) were judged for wearing "bloomers" (Kinsey, 2011), while today girls (and women) online are judged for taking selfies of themselves in bathing suites (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). In all social arenas (school, work, and online), girls have and continue to experience constant public judgement over their bodies (Orenstein, 2016; Steeves, 2015), behaviors (Brown, 2003; Carlile, 2013; Miller, 2022), and desires (Armstrong et al., 2014; Reeves & Ingraham, 2019; Tolman, 2005). Being "exposed" online becomes yet another site/opportunity from which girls can be publicly judged and shamed. This sits squarely within certain cyberfeminist, feminist, and digital debates over whether the Internet offers opportunity for emancipation, resistance, and re(territorialization) of gender, or if it has become just another place/space from which the same tired old social narratives and behaviors continue to operate (Daniels, 2009; Janak et al., 2023; Steeves & Bailey, 2013). The girl's experience here does not negate the potentially liberatory possibilities of the Internet, only that they may exist alongside and

intersect with hegemonic scripts, narratives, myths, discourses. We want to think about what it means when girls can experience a rupture of gender online, for example seeing representations of the #cubbygirl subjectivity, while simultaneously being called back into the hegemonic gendered body, potentially through “expose” pages as described above. In Julia’s experience the girls will likely have their bodies, more particularly their faces judged and shamed. That girls (and women) must endure never-ending judgement of their bodies is an understatement. This expose page simply reinforces an already incredibly palpable mechanism for hegemonic gender reconstitution (i.e., weaponizing the imagined ideal body).

In Sofia’s experience, girls would be shamed and judged for their behavior through whatever “drama” they happened to be involved in that was shared on that page. Girls are often judged as more dramatic, emotional, conniving, or “nasty” when involved in interpersonal relationships and are often moments away from being positioned as the “mean girl” (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Crooks, 2017). The mean girl trope itself is used as a tool to police girls and women’s behavior. Being labeled a mean girl becomes a mechanism to erase or delegitimize girls/women’s anger or any type of legitimate response to an interpersonal or social situation. Sofia’s expose page acts as a tool to ensure girls behave in “respectable” ways through the looming spectre of the “mean girl” label. This will be particularly acute for girls with other intersecting marginalized identities. For example, a racialized girl or a queer girl will likely be judged or shamed more harshly or have those identities brought into the narrative of judgement as opposed to white or heterosexual girls, since those identities are rendered the invisible, dominant default (McQueeney & Girgenti-Malone, 2018). Marginalized girls then face an increase in stress and threat as their intersecting identities cause further potential for negative exposure, or as Sofia puts it, the potential for others to “leave bad comments.” This also furthers critical thought in relation

to the liberation/oppression debate. Certain digital feminists argue that the Internet as an “emancipatory space” is actually “rooted in an ‘Anglo-American hegemony which emphasizes the importance of modern science and technology for individual empowerment’ that universalizes the experiences of white, middle-class girls” (Bailey et al., 2013, p. 94). If the internet is a place for girl power and empowerment, *which girls* benefit from this? If girls are able to avoid an expose page unscathed, which girls have the capacity to do this? Which girls can stick to the “positive” side of the internet and which girls are unwittingly dragged onto pages that police, judge, and shame them? These “expose” pages on social media become nothing more than a mechanism to police girls and further police girls with intersecting marginalized identities. These “expose” pages are also microcosms of the large-scale shaming and judgement that happens to celebrity girls and women on social media, which is abhorrently rampant (Ouvrein, 2023). From the average girl to the celebrity girl/woman, the spectre and potentiality of public shaming online is always just around the corner.

Both expose pages have the potentiality to be “gender reinforcers” in that they demand girls participate in hegemonic scripts of gender lest they get publicly shamed for doing otherwise. Regan and Sweet (2015) exemplify this in their study with girls in Ontario where they found girls used online “drama” to police other girls as a process of “norm setting” that then set the stage for self-identity formation along dominant ideas. Anyone at anytime can create an “expose page” to call the girls back into their Girl-ness with limited possibility for resistance. To be a girl online then is to be a girl exposed. If the girls move from one page of liberation (subversive identity representation, #cubbygirl) to another page of gender reconstitution (expose pages), it is difficult to say where one “wins out” over the other or how exactly they intersect to supply the girls with

their modern girl/Girl subjectivity. These expose pages show us that the ever murky liberated-oppressed girl continuum is inevitable online.

Harassment from boys and men, sexist content, and peer cyberbullying are just but a few digital harms the girls must navigate. As the girls move through social media and online spaces, this act of navigation becomes itself a site for the reproduction and making of gender. These realities demonstrate that they are far more complex than the mainstream adult moral panics would have us believe. In bringing these realities to light, the goal is to avoid using them to justify the further marginalization of girls via surveillance and silence, and instead understand how these experiences work to reconstitute gender so that we can then challenge gender and the ways in which it works in service to larger oppressive systems. Due to a lack of accessible discourses or the power to describe their experiences, the girls downplay and normalize unwanted attention from men, thus inadvertently reaffirming certain masculine/feminine “truths.” They come online and know themselves as responsible for deflecting the attention of men/boys which positions them as passive instead of active in their own online/offline desires. Through the fear of online public shaming the girls are denied the ability to know themselves outside dominant notions of gender, as the spectre of shame limits them from playing with anything outside the anointed intelligible gender.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored a variety of ways in which girls come online to “play” with their girl subjectivities while also thinking through what this play means for their intersecting identities and their material realities. *Desiring control in a chaotic world* shows that girls can be both in and out of control on social media, suggesting they are far from the “passive dupes” that mainstream narratives would have us believe. While *Navigating (digital) harms* shows that the

girls are often specifically gendered online in their experiences of harassment from boys and men, sexist content, and peer cyberbullying. It is the presence of these harms that (re)constitute gender in old (yet new) ways. Social media undoubtedly reproduces dominant myths and norms, yet neither is it some subversive utopia that will radically change the world. What it is for these girls is a space from which old norms are both made and remade, played with, contested, challenged, but also inevitable.

Chapter 7: (Digital) Bodies, (Digital) Lives

7.1 Introduction

As the third and final discussion and analysis chapter, this chapter documents, analyzes, and discusses the final two themes—the becoming of (digital) girl bodies and witnessing (digital) life. *The Becoming of (Digital) Girl Bodies* reflects on the ways in which the girls experience their own bodies and interpret the bodies of others through the images shared on social media. As the body is a central place to produce gender, and social media is a prominent place from which bodies are shared through images, social media becomes a significant place where girls make meaning of their bodies. In *Witnessing (Digital) Life*, I explore the ways in which the girls are seen on social media and how they see others through the discourses they play with and moments they create together. (Digital) life is made and experienced through the complex histories and emotional lives the girls bring online. Throughout these two themes, the research questions are revisited as I reflect on what the themes tell us in terms of defining the “girl” as she is in this moment, by the girls themselves and society at large; as well as thinking through how these meanings act in service to oppressive systems.

7.2 The Becoming of (Digital) Girl Bodies

As discussed in the literature review, a prominent way the Girl and girls become knowable is through the physical body as it is a central mechanism for the production of gender (Butler, 2020; Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). Social media happens to be inherently about sharing images of the body, which makes it a significant space/place through which the digital girl comes to be known *through* the body. Images are part of discourse and a central part to how we as a human collective create social meanings—“images are made to mean through the constant referential work of language and the performance of media to associate images (or events)

with particular words and ideas” (Halliday, 2018, p. 70). According to Gonick and Gannon (2014) “bodies are not separate to images but rather are known, understood, and experienced through images” (p. 160). There is a connection between the images of bodies and the creation of meaning around certain notions of gender, identity, and the self. As bodies and images “fold into each other” (p. 172) the girl’s becoming occurs *through* these images. Weber and Mitchell (2008) argue that use of images and texts online “constitute a form of embodiment” and that, “the posting of photographs extends [girls] bodies into cyberspace” (p. 30). And finally, Coleman (2008) suggests that “images do not reflect or represent bodies but produce the ways in which it is possible for bodies to become” (p. 94). An integral part of the girl’s becoming is the image of the girl represented via a physical “body” and how the girl experiences her body/other girl-ed²⁵ bodies through such images. Furthermore, the processes that are identified by Halliday, Gonick and Gannon, Weber and Mitchell, and Coleman, all rest on the assumption that the becoming Girl/girl requires the human inter-relational dance of meaning making, which one of the girls, Kalani, aptly describes.

I think the posts just represent a part of themselves. In terms of posting a picture of themselves, I think it's almost like saying, 'I don't know if they'll like my personality, but I hope they'll like how I look like.' Because what we're seeing through these posts, we're letting the viewers interpret their definition of who this person is.

Kalani is naming the fact that one of the ways we know ourselves and know others is through the way we interpret and understand the digital images of bodies. She is suggesting that the way in which we understand or “interpret” other people is a process that often takes place on and through

²⁵ It is important to note that “girl-ed” bodies can include the bodies of adult women as the line between girl/woman is often blurred, particularly in identity making, as girls look to older feminine identifying people for the scripts of what it means to be girl/woman/feminine. Not to mention the fact that in our society adult women are actively “girl-ed” by themselves and society, as they are often called girls as well as treated like girls, often referred to as the infantilization of women (Quaye 2011; Spino & Aubrey, 2018). Throughout the data the girls themselves use experiences or accounts of adult women to describe the girl experience. The line between girl/woman can often be blurred, especially in relation to the body.

the body—as the body “defines” who we are. When Kalani sees a post of another girl’s body, she interprets who that girl is through the cultural narratives and discourses she has access to, and she knows that others are participating in the same process. Social media is a highly generative space from which girls (and others) can and do gaze upon images of bodies, to make meaning of said bodies, through an encoding/decoding of the image(s) by using the dominant/non-dominant discourses that (de)attach to the body. This happens in the moment, as a collection of histories, identities, emotions, experiences, and discourses converge to create the Girl and the girls. This experience of girlhood identity and subjectivity formation and cultural/social meaning making through digital images was largely present in the data. Throughout the data there were significant connections between the body and images as the girl’s discuss/share ideas around the perfect/ideal body, beauty, gender, shame, self-esteem, and confidence. Throughout the girl’s discussions of the girl body and how it exists/becomes through images, we are given an intimate look at the (girlhood) discourses that shape digital life and/or “real life” (offline lived experience) of girls.

The Perfect Body and Beauty

No discussion of girls and girlhood would be complete without exploring ideas like the “perfect” body and beauty. Feminists, girlhood studies scholars, and social scientists alike have studied, debated, and explored the connection between the female/feminine identity of girls and women in relation to the perfect/ideal body and beauty (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006; Doria & Numer, 2022; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Rice et al., 2016; Striegel-Moore & Cachelin, 1999). Or as Jackson and Vares (2015a) put it, there is “relentless attention on women's bodies coupled with requirements to conform to ‘impossible’ standards of beauty...as the contemporary normative body aesthetic [is] slim, white, and young (p. 348). What is defined as beautiful, is defined as perfect, and thus ideal. These notions have been used and reused to reinscribe inequitable

stratifications of power through the mutually reinforcing systems of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, racism, ableism, and all the other “isms” that exist/have existed in the current world. Even still, where dominant ideas and discourses exist, so do non-dominant ones and the push and pull of how we define beauty sits at the precipice of the continuously evolving cultural and social consciousness. Indeed, it is not always possible to tell where hegemonic discourses end and non-hegemonic discourses begin, as these can and do in fact, fold into each other. More importantly, from within girlhood studies these explorations into the ideal body have often focused on girl’s media consumption as a main culprit—media that is prolific online (Blackburn & Hogg, 2024; Burnette et al., 2017; McGladrey, 2014; Rodgers & Melioli, 2016). Francombe (2010) suggests that “corporeal technologies normalize girls toward the idealized cultural body” (p. 355). Girls on social media are then participating in this collective cultural construction of making meaning around “beauty” as they interpret, digest, and make media. As the girls play with these meanings, they experience it in real time as beauty is a felt and embodied practice. Ideals around the body and beauty are particularly manifest in visual images and social media is thus a place/space ripe for the proliferation, manipulation, and generation of idealized bodies and beauty imagery.

The process of “making things mean” is not solely about concrete definitions. In my discussions with the girls, they don’t necessarily define exactly what beauty and perfection mean, and at times it seemed as if we were all already supposed to know the agreed upon definitions of pretty/beautiful. There are some instances when they do offer direct examples. Below, Sofia defines beauty/ideal body as having a fuller, larger, or lifted butt (Brazilian butt lift or BBL), Jamila defines beauty as being “skinny,” and Julia defines beauty as being good with make up and wearing the right clothing.

Sofia

I think for girls when it comes to body standards we are supposed to look a certain way and that's really detrimental to kids who are 10, 11, 12 on social

media. Are they thinking, 'oh for me to be beautiful I have to get plastic surgery or BBLs to be presentable in society.'

Jamila *Maybe girls will look at all the celebrities and look at their bodies and think 'oh, they're so skinny, but why can't I be like that' and they might feel hurt. That can lead to disappointment or embarrassment because they don't feel happy about their body. So body image is important.*

Julia *I actually have a friend who always sends me posts of girls that she finds really pretty. She'll send me them and be like, 'Wow, she looks so good with this makeup. Oh my god, her outfit looks so good'. I think she definitely does try to recreate those looks and try to fit into it. Which can be good in a way because it's inspirational, like, 'wow this fit looks really nice.' But at the same time, it can be kind of damaging to your self esteem seeing all these perfect photos, where only the rich can really afford all these procedures and makeup and professional editing. So, you'll basically never be able to get there, which may be very upsetting.*

These are not surprising as current beauty standards for girls and women include but are not limited to, being skinny and/or fit (Bozsik et al., 2018), having clear skin, and tidy hair, while aligning with notions of whiteness and the white body (Harper & Choma, 2019). These definitions of beauty are common knowledge at this point, have been written about extensively, and the girls do not need to share these with me for us to know they are aware of and influenced by them. Girls will also have different definitions of beauty and the ideal body depending on their race, culture, or other important identities. For example, Black girls may strive for a “thick/curvy” body and reject the dominant model of thinness (Keigan et al., 2024). This is to say that exact definitions of beauty will come and go and be context and culture specific. What is significant for this discussion is the ways in which idea of beauty as a meaning making tool are used in the *process* of making the Girl assemblage through it's (dis)empowering effects. For example, Sofia's reference to the Brazilian Butt Lift signals a recent cultural turn in which features of Black and racialized bodies are figuratively and literally surgically removed and replicated on white bodies. Patton and Snyder-Yuly (2024) calls this phenomenon “Blackfishing” (p. 482) in which white celebrities and

influencers take on physical characteristics of Black bodies in order to increase their fame and wealth, specifically on social media. The psychic and material effects of such a practice are significant for Black and racialized girls as their non-white bodies continue to be demonized and policed while the hybrid white bodies of their peers, community members, and celebrities are allowed to capitalize upon this appropriation. This communicates many things, but it specifically reinforces that Black girls' and women's bodies are only valuable in the ways in which white culture can use them for economic gain. This is the legacy of Saartje (Sarah) Baartman²⁶ and a disturbing reminder that Black women and girls' bodies continue to be dominated in similar ways 200 years later. Social media continues this legacy with incredible speed as Black women and girls' bodies are picked apart by anyone with photo editing software. It also reinforces that Black girls and women's bodies are the subject of both distain and desire. Sofia is using feminist narratives that are critical of body modifications in the name of feminine beauty, while at the same time she is using narratives that demonize specific bodily traits mostly held by Black female bodies. The girlhood assemblage online can be understood as a merging of feminist/racist discourses, of which it is unclear which one we are being served in the moment. These oppressive/liberatory narratives stick to the body simultaneously without a clear delineation. This makes the girl assemblage "messy" in terms of determining whether or not she is being oppressed/oppressing or liberated/liberating and if both are happening simultaneously, what that means exactly.

Sofia, Jamila, and Julia are also reflecting on how ideas of beauty create moments of control in the lives of girls. The girls touch on the prominent "can-do," neoliberal, girl power

²⁶ Saartje (Sarah) Baartman, "a Khoekhoe woman who in 1810 was transported from the Cape Colony in South Africa and exhibited to the public at Piccadilly Circus in London as the "Hottentot Venus," (Lloyd, 2013, p. 213) was meant to be a symbol of desire and distain for British society. Her body was put on display both in life and death (her body parts were preserved for future viewing/use).

identity when they reference “self-esteem” and “body-image.” Girlhood studies theorists and people who work with girls have written, researched, posted, or commented extensively about girls, self-esteem, and body image (Golan et al., 2013; Martin & Okleshen Peters, 2005; Norwood et al., 2011; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Walters et al., 2023). This focus has inevitably shifted to include discussions of girls’ self-esteem on social media (Kiefner-Burmeister & Musher-Eizenman, 2018; Markey & Daniels, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Trekels et al., 2018; Veldhuis et al., 2014). That the girls are bringing these discourses into their discussion of online experiences simply suggests the power they have in shaping how the girls see themselves as girls. To be a girl/Girl is to have low self-esteem taken away by the patriarchy and to be a modern can-do girl living in the postfeminist utopia, they are aware of this while being empowered, required, and responsible for getting it back. At any point it can be snatched away from them, in this case social media represents another place from which their self-esteem is vulnerable. Since girls feeling bad about their bodies is already an established fact in girlhood studies, there are two ways we want to advance exploration of this topic. First, it is that the *discussion* (act of discussing) of social media images of the perfect/ideal feminine body as always already creating low self-esteem in girls, has become *itself* a technology of the girl assemblage. To be a modern girl/Girl is to be aware of the spectre of low-self-esteem. The girl becomes through her knowledge and discussion of self-esteem: a topic that was not documented as prominent for girls before the 1990s and the advent of girlhood studies, further signalling the fact that girlhood studies theorists and theories are integral to the (digital) girl assemblage. Whether or not the girls actually have low self-esteem and/or are engaging in practices that might result in high self-esteem, is not present in the data but it is also not the point (What is self-esteem for girls? How might we measure it? Who sets the parameters?). Instead, we are thinking through both academic and non-

academic discourses that have bloomed from the legacy of Pipher and others to create a Girl identity that is aware of her potential lack of self-esteem and thus her feminist destiny to be critical and proactive in rejecting such patriarchal effects. Second, this then (re)inscribes another Pipher legacy, the subject position of the (digital) “girl in (psychic) danger” and “in need of saving” of which the girls themselves are participating in. To be clear, the variety of research shows that girls undoubtedly feel bad about their bodies and there is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting girls to feel better about themselves by supporting them in that endeavor. However, what I liked about Sofia, Jamila, and Julia’s reflections is that they are attempting to live slightly outside these narratives by holding those in power accountable. They are not suggesting that other girls are the problem and the solution, but instead it is celebrities and the rich, i.e. adults with money and power. It is not adults who need to save girls, but adults who need to take responsibility for their own actions and behaviors. This breaks from the functioning of such technologies of the self as it shifts focus toward systemic structures instead of placing all responsibility for society’s ills on the (marginalized) individual. The girls are still participating in the dominant discourse, arguing that they are aware girls inevitably have low self-esteem because of social media but they are gently shifting by suggesting that embedded social systems cause such effect, and thus creating a new discourse/knowledge for girls, the Girl, and girlhood.

Insecurity and Confidence

The girls don’t always use the phrase “low self-esteem” to talk about ways they feel bad in their bodies, in fact they notably use the word “insecure” instead. This is itself an interesting turn in language. In shifting away from the discussion above around how the specific discourse of self-esteem is used to create the Girl assemblage in some abstract way, here we want to look at the lived material realities of girls—in this case material affect. Within the data, it is evident that

images of (girl-ed) and female/feminine bodies on social media can lead to the girls feeling insecure.

- Grace *I might feel insecure if it's someone who didn't edit it and who naturally looks that way. That's where you could feel more insecure because editing you know that's not how they look.*
- Luna *So something to keep in mind, whenever I use social media, is this thing I heard a long time ago, that Instagram is something that you want your life to be like, you show where you want your life to be. I feel a lot of people, if they see somebody showing their best life or somebody who's gorgeous and has something that they can't achieve; a lot of girls might feel so insecure about it. Social media can really put them down.*
- Aeesha *It's also not a good place. I think now with social media, everyone is focusing on what other people think and not on themselves. So mostly girls, and I know most of the girls and including me, we feel very insecure about ourselves.*

That girls feel insecure or bad about their bodies because they are not “naturally beautiful” on social media is nothing new. These experiences shared by the girls simply reinforces a significant amount of work done on girls and their bodies (see sources above about self-esteem). Keeping women and girls in a constant state of bodily hate and self-improvement efforts shifts their energy from engaging in more affirming and thus revolutionary actions, which simply maintains the dominant order of gendered hierarchy, as well as political and economic systems (again, Foucault’s governmentality) (Lemke, 2001). Although everything discussed in this theme represents embodiment, we can think further through the girl’s embodiment in relation to “insecurity.”

Wilde (1999) described embodiment as, “how we live in and experience the world through our bodies, especially through perception, emotion, language, movement in space, time, and sexuality... Embodiment is a form of experiencing and understanding the world through the body in lived experiences”... [while] Young (1992) referred to embodiment as the way in which the self, “is experienced in and through the body”... [and] Piran and Teall (2012) described embodiment as the “lived experience of engagement of the body with the world” (Piran et al., 2020, p. 117)

The word insecure literally means “not firmly fixed” or “liable to break” and insecurity means “the quality or state of being insecure (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When girls see bodies of other girls (and women) that they consider beautiful, this leads to a “break” with their own body since they do not have “firm” attachments to their own bodies—or a state of brokenness. We can think of social media as a place from which girl “bodies break apart” from the self and from each other. Social media is structured in a way that keeps users “plugged in” and coming back for more. For girls this means when they use social media, they are experiencing ongoing micro-breaks with their bodies as they consume images over and over. They are not fully engaging in the world through their body since they are not wholly fixed to it. In this instance, I likely cannot pinpoint exactly what this means for the psychic life of girls, but what I can suggest is that embodiment for girls on social media results in a material state of breakage between themselves and their bodies.

Self-esteem, body image, and body insecurity are all subsumed under the current “confidence” discourse—a (re)new(ed) way for women and girls to govern and better their bodies. In their original article, Gill and Orgad (2015) outline what they mean by “confidence cult(ure).”

By confidence we mean a set of internally focussed discursive formations and individualised strategies of psychic labour geared towards the production of self-belief in girls and women. The coalescing of these discourses and strategies systematically re-signifies feminist accounts, by turning away from structural inequalities and collectivist critiques of male domination into heightened modes of self-regulation, and by repudiating the injuries inflicted by the structures of inequality (p. 330).

Confidence culture intersects with Girl Power culture as both are based on the idea that it is girls, the inheritors of feminism, who are responsible (empowered) to save themselves from the patriarchy. Banet-Weiser (2018) has also argued similarly, as “confidence is positioned as the primary, if not the only, resolution to gendered inequalities, and it is a resolution that depends on individual men and women, not on social and cultural structure. A key component of popular feminism has been confidence campaigns for girls and women” (p. 93). Confidence and not

systems change, is what will save girls (and women). Gill and Orgad continue this discussion in their book (2022) in which they further explore confidence culture and how it relates to the body, specifically Love You Body Discourses. Body positivity initially emerged from feminist and other social justice spaces, as peoples whose bodies had historically been demonized and erased by dominant systems, began reclaiming said bodies in the name of love and confidence. Gender equity organizations often include body confidence at the heart of their missions. Governments have even deemed body confidence a health issue. However, in typical hegemony fashion, what may have started as a genuine point of resistance has been co-opted by big business to create the “body confidence complex” (p. 34) in which discourses of body confidence are used to sell products by companies that aren’t actually invested in real systems level change. Their profit is still the bottom line, and they will attach to any culture trend to achieve that.

These body confidence messages, while ostensibly warm, defiant, and positive, work to instill a new layer of discipline for women: a focus on making over subjectivity to become an upgraded confident subject. This task becomes a new responsibility, requiring an extensive array of psychological techniques and labor on the self (p. 55).

For both genuine concerns for body confidence and confidence as a technology for the hegemonic self (and used to sell products), social media has exacerbated body confidence culture. It is unfortunate that girls feeling bad about their bodies keeps them too occupied to participate in revolutionary acts, while the same technology works when girls are feeling confident and good about themselves. The girls participate in this as they discuss why a girl would extend her body into cyberspace.

Eleni	<i>If a girl posts a Tik Tok of her dancing. What do you think she hopes people will think about her?</i>
Grace	<i>Maybe she's confident because it's hard to just dance and post it.</i>
Eleni	<i>OK, so to think that she's confident. Yeah, I see some nodding.</i>

Sofia	<i>Some girls they post makeup videos, some girls they post workout videos, other girls, like basically whatever that you feel comfortable with is what they want to post. So I feel it all depends on the content you're trying to bring on your platform.</i>
Eleni	<i>What do you think she wants people to think about her when she posts a makeup video?</i>
Sofia	<i>Actually make her feel confident in her makeup skills or maybe she's trying to teach other girls her age how to do makeup.</i>

For Grace, confidence means moving your body. For Sofia, confidence means being good with make up. Both learning to dance and getting good at make up require a significant amount of time and labour—central factors in Foucault’s governmentality suggesting that girls, who share their bodies on social media, may be participating in Gill and Orgad’s confidence (cult)ure. Yet where positive affectual confidence ends and oppressive Foucauldian governmentality begin is hard to decipher. It would be a mistake to label these acts of body movement and adornment as wholly oppressive. Sanvi’s experience further complicates confidence culture as it is difficult to measure some “true” level of harm she might be experiencing, or alternatively a “true” level of joy or happiness in relation to body positivity and body confidence.

When I use social media and when I see people with a more quote unquote perfect body, or perfect skin care, perfect life and stuff like that, it does make me feel ashamed of myself and more embarrassed in the sense that like, why can't I have these types of features? Why was I born like this, type of thing. But there's also some people, like female figures on social media, that would spread awareness of their more...I don't know the word for it. For example, like stretch marks, or what's it called, what's the other word for it, like dark spots on your skin, I forgot the word for like acne or pimples, just awareness in those type of things. It makes me feel better about myself in terms of, oh this is actually a normal thing and not everyone has flawless skin. In that aspect social media has a more positive impact on me. So it's always like an either or, I have both negative feelings towards it and to the body image and there's also a positive influence and types of body images as well.

Long standing discourses around female body perfection cause the affect of shame in Sanvi and other girls. Yet the modern discourses of Girl Power, Girl Boss, and Body Positivity (confidence

discourses) gives them language to feel good about and proud of their bodies. The girls move in and out of these subject positions often in the same moment as exemplified by Sanvi. They feel shame and pride simultaneously. It is almost an irresolvable dilemma as they sit with both hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses. Yet Sanvi's experience shows us how living in the contradictions and with harmful hegemonic discourse is not necessarily a psychosocial death sentence. Sanvi has chosen to live through and with the "negative feelings" around the girl-ed body by embracing certain confidence narratives. In this way social media is a paradox, as mentioned in the literature review, it is potentially both a space for oppression and liberation. This is particularly salient for Sanvi as a racialized girl. When she asks herself why she can't have "these types of features" she is likely referring to "white" features since as already mentioned, ideals of beauty are manifested through white skin. Therefore, when Sanvi suggests she is also able to feel good about her non-white skin, this is nothing short of revolutionary. Her act of liberation breaks through the symbolic order of gender as it is constructed through notions of race—i.e. that in her act of feeling proud and girl-ed in her racialized skin, she destabilizes the gendered order. Sanvi is participating in the larger practice of re-defining beauty and as such, redefining gender. While simultaneously not being able to fully emancipate herself from it.

The Pretty Girl

The girls suggest that seeing certain imagery around beauty on social media will lead to negative affect, i.e. they "don't feel happy" (Jamila) or they may get "upset" (Julia) (quotes above, p. 151). Yet, at the same time seeing certain images of beauty can make girls feel bad about themselves, it can also make them feel good. As evidenced by the research in this dissertation, girlhood is a constant contradiction, and the girls here are discussing this yet again as they talk

about feeling “pretty.” It can also be helpful to move beyond a good/bad binary of “pretty” as suggested by Ingram (2022) in her study with girls, beauty, and prom.

Bodies are defined not by what they are but by their affective capacities. These capacities are not pre-existing but are produced via relations within assemblages...relations of affect (e.g. ‘feeling pretty’) create conditions of possibility for what a [girl body] can do and become. ‘Feeling pretty’ as an affective relation works to limit or expand the becoming of [girl bodies] (p. 293).

Ingram argues that the girls move in and out of dominant discursive formations of pretty, creating an unstable girlhood that transcends definitive meaning, so that “understandings of beauty might reinforce, supersede or potentially rework pre-conceived discursive boundaries” (p. 296). Ingram positions her study from within Coleman and Figueroa’s (2010) discussion of “beauty as hope” and “as an aspiration to normalcy that is, simultaneously, optimistic and cruel” (p. 358). Ingram, Coleman, and Figueroa are reiterating my argument that girls do not sit passively as dupes consuming media, but instead “play” with girl-ed images and discourses to (re)make themselves in their current moment. In this study, instead of discussing whether girls feel good or bad about their physical appearance, we can think about how the process of searching for access to the “pretty Girl” via social media constitutes the girl/Girl body in both ontological and material ways.

Isabel *I find that most people will post pictures when they feel good about themselves or a picture that they really liked. I like to comment on my friends posts and be like ‘oh my gosh, you look so pretty in this picture’ and things like that. So more for uplifting them and things along those lines.*

Claire *I was talking with my friend or something before, and they were like, you're trying so hard to be the pretty girl or whatever, because of my posts on Instagram. Someone was telling me that like, ‘oh, you try so hard to be that girl’ or whatever. So my answer when my friend told me that I'm like, I am the pretty girl, because I want to look confident, right? But then when I think about it, yeah, I kind of want to be the pretty girl because there are privileges, if you're pretty, I guess.*

Sanvi *There's only one time I ever posted a story and honestly, I really liked the experience because that was the first time I got so many likes and so many*

shares and so many people saying, 'Oh my God you look so pretty.' I felt really happy on the inside.

Eleni	<i>When a girl makes a post, what does she want people to think about her?</i>
Riya	<i>Think that she's pretty.</i>
Eleni	<i>Pretty. Yeah, I see some nodding. What else?</i>
Gemma	<i>Validation.</i>
Eleni	<i>OK so a girl might make a post so that friends or random people on the internet think that she's pretty. She might want to get some kind of validation. What else?</i>
Grace	<i>Sometimes their friends comment like, 'oh fire' or 'pretty.'</i>

As definitions of pretty come and go, their opportunity to be the “pretty Girl” is just as fleeting, yet they try to capture it nonetheless. Pretty privilege (Mahon et al., 2023) is real for the girls, although it is difficult to find studies that reference pretty privilege at all, let alone its connection to girls and social media. As girls are systemically disempowered by society this privilege can be a significant avenue to accessing some form of power, although limited. As girls extend their bodies into cyberspace, they are creating potential opportunities to access or be denied pretty privilege and power. To be a girl online is to be constantly chasing the ever illusive “pretty Girl” subjectivity, i.e. one that is not wholly oppressed but moving in and out of moments of empowerment. In this way, the experience is “hopeful” and “cruel.” They know pretty is something they desire that makes them feel good when they achieve it, but they also know it is an agent of reductive gendered hierarchy, as shown through their discussion of insecurity above. The girls do experience negative affect, but we cannot necessarily measure to what level that might offset feelings of positive affect and/or empowerment they might feel for achieving the “pretty girl.” What is also interesting here is that the girls give each other access to this power as their friends (often other girls) are the ones calling them pretty. In this way they do not need the keys to the

castle as they can uplift themselves through their friendships. Studies have shown that girl friendships can be extremely positive relationships that defy adult fears and gazes (Sears & McAfee, 2017). As the girls share images of themselves, they *become* the pretty girl through what I would call a pretty girl “naming ceremony” by their friends. As the girls are named pretty (or called into being as Butler would say), they become pretty in a real material way. If they feel pretty, they may feel empowered to try out for the school play, speak up in class, take a difficult course, or stand up to oppressive behavior. What does it mean to use supposed oppressive discourses, e.g. girl as pretty, to combat oppression in another lane? This practice of “naming pretty” by the girls can be further explored through Muñoz (1999) concept of “disidentification.”

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstitutes the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (p. 31).

As the girl’s “scramble” the concept of pretty and use it as “raw material” to work within their girl private-publics and counterpublics, they offer new imaginings of girlhood within, outside, and through the dominant order. The girl becomes simultaneously (de)territorialized and (re)territorialized as the Girl/girl through her “recycling” of the pretty subjectivity and discourse. As girls are marginalized subjects, their ability to “crack open the code of the majority” is essential to empowerment with the ability to measurably rupture dominant codes and thus ways of being. Can pretty be a vehicle for the processes of disidentification? Or does it operate as another vehicle for postfeminism whereby pretty becomes a technology of the self where girls and women “choose” the “pleasure of pretty” on social media that still sits within bodily-discipline marked by patriarchal conceptions of pretty (Schmeichel et. al., 2020)? Claire’s experience of being chastised

by her friend for desiring the pretty label further troubles this dichotomy. Girls can confer pretty onto their friends, but they can also take it away as the heterosexual matrix positions girls in competition with one another particularly around levels of beauty to attract boys/men (Walton et al., 2002) as well as current social media discourses demonizing women (and girls) for being perceived as vain, i.e. desiring to or achieving pretty (Gannon & Prothero, 2016; Grindstaff & Torres Valencia, 2021). “Pretty” as a mouldable discourse creates the Girl and material realities for girls through these moments of becoming as it is (re)used to (re)make the girl over and over in different ways and at different moments in time.

7.3 Witnessing (Digital) Life

To See and Be Seen

Being seen, i.e. visible and its counterpoint being invisible, are particularly salient themes for girlhood studies theorists, as girls are both rendered invisible and hyper-visible in our collective culture (Cedillo, 2020; Jaber, 2022; Morgan, 2023). These extremes are particularly acute for girls with non-dominant identities (Mandrona, 2016; Vanner & Dugal, 2020). The experience of Black girls, disabled girls, queer girls, incarcerated girls, immigrant girls, to name a few, are all made invisible/hypervisible by social structures and culture. For example, Black girls’ (and women’s) experiences of sexual assault/harassment or violence are often ignored (Andrews et al., 2019) at the same time their (hyper)sexuality is hypervisible within media/social media (Petermon, 2014). While incarcerated girls’ experiences of systemic oppression are rendered almost completely invisible (Ivashkevich & Keyes, 2022) while their supposed deviance, i.e. being “bad girls” or “mean girls” is hypervisible (Chesney-Lind, 2008). These are just a few examples of how the girl’s invisibility/hypervisibility dichotomy is used to keep girls marginalized. Digital space then creates a parallel and/or compounding set of moments from which girls can “be seen,” as “today’s

digitalized environments can be characterized by paradoxical logic—ephemeral and intense, technical and embodied, tangible and ungraspable, visible and invisible” (Todd, 2018, p. 37). Throughout the data, in both direct and indirect ways, the girls talk about what it means to "be seen" on social media. This occurs both in and outside hegemonic subjectivities as they use social media to create their own moments of visibility on their own terms. In this act of “being seen” by others as girls, they r(e)define in that moment what counts as the Girl and girls.

In connection to the previous theme that explored perfection in relation to the body, the girls also highlight perfection in relation to one’s life whereby the body is a key component. The girls suggest that they might want to “be seen” as having a perfect, good, or interesting life.

- Julia *Girls this age...kind of flex or show off as perfect like, having a perfect social life. So, I think something that they'd like to do, would be posting them every time they go out. Or taking pictures of the purchases they make, when in reality maybe they return the purchases because they can't actually afford it. But they'll still take a picture and upload it and [inaudible] they're living life.*
- Sanvi *[Girl's post] for attention, for compliments, for thinking that they have a fun life as well. Because the pictures I see, at least the girls' posts on social media or on their story, they're all pictures of themselves [and] them with a group of friends. So, it makes you think that they have lots of friends [and]...thinking that they're having fun experiences. Just so that people could compliment them to think that they have a good life. They have an extravagant fun life. To think they have good experiences, those type of things.*
- Inaya *[When a girl posts] maybe she's trying to get people to think she's doing well.*
- Aeesha *They want to be seen as perfect. For example, when someone shares something about a picture of a car, expensive car in the background and you're wearing an expensive outfit...they wanted to be seen as very easy, people want it to be seen as perfect with no flaws in it.*

In a world that does not make space for the messy complexities of life, particularly for girls, it is not surprising that there is limited space for exploring this complexity on social media. Girls in my

study, as well as others (Freitas, 2017; Gill, 2023; MacDowell, 2017), are feeling pressured to present a curated, perfect image of their life, not just their body. Although the idea of perfection curves toward hegemonic and idealized norms, within that, how one girl defines “perfection” might be different to another depending on their various intersecting identities or the online communities they are a part of. For example, a girl who is interested in sports might define perfection as being fit or achieving some kind of status in her sport. While a girl who is interested in fashion might define perfection as being thin and the ability to purchase expensive clothing. A concrete definition from the girls is also not necessary to understand that the “*process* of making perfect” keeps the girls marginalized. McRobbie (2015) suggests that perfect for girls means “a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the ‘good life’ [that]...also functions as a border-marking strategy, and a new dividing practice” (p. 9). Part of this “dividing practice” is a competition between girls for some unachievable level of perfection. Furthermore, if girls are discouraged to share their lived experiences of struggle, contradiction, oppression, and even joy, and are instead too focused on “self-regulation,” which can be linked to Foucault’s governmentality—they miss out on connecting with each other to form cohorts of resistance (Inda, 2008). This pressure to present as perfect limits girls’ ability for activism and social rupture on both small and large scales. The messy realities of life are hidden and picture perfect, often photoshopped images are brought to the fore. Girls are also encouraged to present themselves as ‘perfect’ or “doing well” so that they can participate in the ever elusive postfeminist utopia in which they are supposedly living. To be imperfect means they are not the “can-do” girls they are told they need to be to succeed in our modern society. In presenting as perfect, actual material realities and lived experiences for girls are rendered invisible on social media.

One way that the girls suggest we can measure their level of visibility is through validation from others. Girls are invisible until someone validates their existence and even their very humanity, as Kalani points out, girls post to have someone (anyone) acknowledge they are “worthy.”

I think the reason why some people will post an image of themselves is probably to feel like they're worthy of love, I guess. Or they want to see if they are worthy of being loved and admired.

Furthermore, through the “like” function and affirmations in the comment section or direct messages, the girls are told directly that someone else has seen them and deemed them acceptable. One way the girls feel seen is to be “liked,” admired, and complimented. This showed up when I asked them why girls post on social media and when they post, what they want people to think about them.

Jamila *Maybe to receive compliments in the comment section from other people. They feel good about themselves because other people are giving them compliments. So basically, the person might be happy from other people's approval.*

Sara *I think see that they are validated in their interests. People who...do a lot of challenges now where it's like, share this about yourself today, share this about yourself tomorrow or like watch this today and then share what you thought about it. There're so many opinions out there. I think people like to know that they're in the majority or that they're in the cool minority if they can be different. Like, 'oh, I don't like the matrix. How cool am I for that?'*

To be clear there is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to be liked or to foster connection with people who have similar interests. Yet like many social structures in this world, it is the social systems surrounding us that create harm. Problems arise when girls as likeable or unlikable are used to reinforce their gendered oppression. In this instance, likeability for girls (and women) could be yet another tool for our oppressive systems as an unlikable girl may be rejected from social life, ostracized and even stripped of her girl-ness. Likeability represents and impossible ideal

that girls (and women) cannot achieve, yet when they fail to achieve it, their unlikability can be weaponized to deny them opportunities, safety, care, education, jobs, public life, and more—which again, is particularly damaging for girls with marginalized identities. For example, Black girls are often negatively viewed as too “aggressive” or “angry” (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; McPherson, 2020). When Black girls do exhibit anger in relation to the ways in which society brutalizes them, the girl as likable requirement erases this anger. To be likable is to be agreeable and to be angry is far from being agreeable—in fact anger is a sign of resistance against something that does not feel quite right (Traister, 2018). This is then also another good example of Weheliye’s racializing assemblages as the Girl is never angry, however Black girls are justifiably angry, thus their abjection creates the category of Girl, from which they are simultaneously excluded. Western culture has demonized girl/women/feminine anger or rage not only as a way to create the category of gender itself but to stymie any resistance to the dominant order (Cherry, 2021). It is also particularly important to note that the feminist subjectivity has been rampantly labeled unlikable across North American culture or what we might call the “feminist killjoy,” coined by Sara Ahmed (2023). There are feminist subjectivities available to girls, but too many of them must be agreeable, meaning they are palatable to hegemony, muted, performative, or what some might call popular feminism (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020; Jackson, 2021). If girls are working hard to be “liked” on social media, their chances of expressing their anger or engaging in a variety of feminist subjectivities, not just the popular ones, are likely lower since these subject positions continue to be deemed as unlikable traits for girls. Finally, another girlhood (and woman) subjectivity structured around likeability is the “cool girl” as defined by Lee (2019).

The cool girl embodies a mixture of masculine and feminine qualities in a “balanced” way. The balance is the most crucial attribute of the cool girl figure in that she must be heterosexually attractive, with a conventionally desirable feminine body, but she should also be “laidback” in accommodating male culture, uncritically following men’s

performance of masculinity (e.g., laughing at men's dirty jokes, joining hookups), and thus can reassure values of masculinity. However, when women break the balance by stepping into male territory, they become a threat to male hegemony and are castigated (p.3).

This “balance” means girls and women are feminine and sexually attractive and available to men and boys, they drink beer and watches sports, they are up for anything (sexually or otherwise), and they don't get angry. Her defining characteristics can also be different depending on the man defining her, for example maybe the “cool girl” likes comics or rock music. Whatever it is, the boys/mans interests are what matter, not hers. She is “cool” because she likes what he likes, and her desires never challenge his power, authority, or his way of defining masculinity (Clavel-Vazquez, 2018; Marso, 2016; Marston, 2018). Girls can share their “cool girl” subjectivity easily on social media, through images of themselves or memes they share that show how they fit into the “cool girl.” Men and society “like” the cool girl.

It should not be lost on us that the “like” function, made popular by Facebook is now widely used across multiple SNSs and girls are one of the main users of social media (Twenge & Martin, 2020). Social media is thus a place where we can measure girls' likability. It is no wonder they want to be seen as perfect as they are searching for approval via the “like” function.

Julia *We've been talking a lot about seeing posts, but I think something that a lot of girls feel is also really disappointed and sad when they look at their own posts and the “like” counts especially...I remember like a lot of girls would compare their likes and comments. If they don't have enough, it would make them feel like, more sad.*

Julia adds and important layer as girls can experience negative affect if they do not achieve the level of likability they are chasing. In order to get the “likes” they will potentially curate a persona that other people deem likable, which may very well only fit within hegemonic codes. Claire adds to this discussion when she mentions an important quality for measuring a girl's likability—friendliness. Claire suggests that being friendly is one of her reasons for posting on social media.

Personally, I post pictures of my friends because I want people to know that I'm friendly. I'm an extrovert. So, if you hear me talking a lot, it's because I'm an extrovert. I want people to perceive that I'm friendly and approachable. I post my face so that they know me if they want to be friends or something. Or they want to sit in class together. I think it's, it's nice to have friends.

In her example, having a lot of friends shows the world that she is friendly. She uses her friends' bodies and extends them into cyberspace as object placeholders for her level of friendliness. In this way girls' bodies are used to construct the Girl assemblage of "girl as friendly" and thus likable. These girls may not have social media accounts of their own, yet they are participating in the digital Girl/girl assemblage. Still, even as girls find themselves wanting to be seen as perfect and likeable, there are moments when the girls (re)define what being seen means outside dominant narratives. In an act of creating her own moment of visibility, Miriam talks about her experience sharing a video of her skateboarding.

I mean, I know that one time I had just been at the skate park for a while, because I'm kind of getting into skateboarding. And I just posted the new trick that I learned to do, because I wanted my friends to know that I'm getting better at skateboarding. Because I just think that that's cool.

This quote is significant specifically because girls (and women) have and continue to be excluded from skateboarding spaces and culture. Seen as a masculine space only for men and boys, it has taken a lot of effort for girls and women to carve out space for themselves in the skateboarding world. There are many cultural and structural barriers to girls skateboarding. For example, skateboarding is particularly physical and girls are assumed to be weak and uncoordinated. Men and boys outnumber girls in skateparks, which gives them power in these spaces and fosters a sense of entitlement among them. This can lead to men and boy actively intimidating women and girls who are attempting to take up presence in the space (Paechter et al., 2023). The simple act of Miriam's friends seeing her "getting better at skateboarding" brings her into the skateboarding space from which she is otherwise excluded. Social media is an apparatus for counteracting current

girl exclusion from public life, thus making the invisible, visible. Miriam’s post might make her feel more secure and she might then bring that sense of self to physical skateboarding spaces—which blurs the line between digital/offline realities. Furthermore, Miriam is using social media to reinvent the identity of girlhood to include skateboarding. Miriam is actively participating in redefining what our collective culture accepts as the Girl and girlhood. This has been argued elsewhere as, “social media can provide a space to enable the expression of gender and serve to influence understandings of gender. Social media in particular has aided the expansion of gender ideals by giving its users the ability to experience and express greater gender fluidity and freedom” (Kondakciu et al., 2021, p. 82). It is important to consider how Miriam’s post is part of a larger collective shift in expanding the boundary of girlhood. Even if it does not lead to radical macro-level change, what is meaningful is the micro change that it means for Miriam and possibly the girls close to her. These are moments of girl becoming that are so often left out of view.

An interesting finding that presented in the data is that the girls talk about how they want to be seen on social media as "funny." This desire exists in stark contrast to the current, acceptable mainstream cultural stereotype—simply, that girls and women are not funny (McMeen, 2021; Miron-Spektor, 2023).

Emma *Well, I've kind of been known as a person who, especially at school, I don't say much, but when I do, I always have a sense of humor. But it's also, not a dopey humor, it's kind of like a goofy, but educated humor. if that makes sense. So I tried to incorporate that into what I post. It's like, a video game joke or even something that my mom cooked that I thought was really nice.*

Sofia *When I post funny relatable content, I want people to be like, 'oh, she's actually pretty funny or this actually made me laugh.' When I post empowerment content, I want people to actually sit back and think about the content that I'm posting and see how it can relate to them.*

Quinn *I don't usually post myself, so I can't answer that. I'm not posting on Tumblr often, but if I do, it's usually like a joke. So, I want people to think I'm funny or appreciate the joke.*

Similar to Miriam, this is another example of the girl's redefining girlhood through social media. As society tells them they are not funny or not allowed to be funny the girls have decided otherwise. They have let their desire to be funny supersede the social narratives that dictate to the contrary. Still, being funny could be another symptom of the desire to be liked. In this instance, girls "being seen as funny" could be an agent of oppression and/or a possible liberator.

Representation

The girls discuss what it means to be seen on social media, and this can include being gazed upon, but they can also see themselves represented (or not) by other girls/women/people. Another central topic in girlhood studies is the representation of girls in media, most often around the sexualization of girls in the media (American Psychological Association, 2007; Jackson and Vares, 2015b; McGladrey, 2015; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2012) and body image (Coffey, 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018). However, girls are too often presented as the victim in these adult centered concerns while being excluded from these material and theoretical conversations (Lamb & Koven, 2019; McBride et al., 2024). What is more, conversations around social media representations of the feminine body focus more on young/adult women's experiences and girls are sidelined. The girls in my study counter that exclusion as they think critically about what it means for girls to be represented on social media. They reflect on how they are excluded from popular (viral) representations of girlhood while also seeing it as a place for their self-expression. Emma directly signals to the larger social forces that deny non-dominant identities a fair share of social media space.

I do believe that social media does not accurately represent girls, especially the main things that you see. Or even in movies and TV shows, you don't see a lot of body positivity being represented or even, gender fluid people...there's not really a good lot of representation on social media in general, whether that be like culturally [or] LGBTQ2AI+. Really, anything that's a little bit outside the norm is not represented at all

really on social media...whether that be celebrities, TV shows, movies, or just on your feed in general.

It is inspiring to witness awareness at such a young age. Emma occupies non-dominant identities herself, which could be one of the reasons she has awareness around her own exclusion. Whether media literacy for girls reduce harm or not, as the research around this is not entirely clear, specifically for girls with marginalized identities (Mazzeo et al., 2024), Emma's own individual reflection and self-awareness is encouraging. Sanvi directly mentions her exclusion in relation to her identities as well.

I also don't see a lot of people with my identity. So as a [South Asian] person, I don't really see those type of people in social media, like the more famous influences at least. And so, in that sense, it just makes me feel like... it makes me feel underrepresented but it doesn't influence me a lot, just because it's not something that I think about too much, because I'm so used to not seeing myself, like my identity type of people in social media.

Papina also adds to this conversation when she critiques representations on social media in relation to gendered power dynamics and patriarchal/colonial systems.

Social media overall does not actually represent girls. But I think individual accounts, some of them do. Where they show real life experiences. But social media as a whole no, and I will say no because it, what's it called...social media in general, I am pretty sure, if I really think about it, every social media account that was made, is owned by a man. So, there's a man's perspective on what they want to put out. So an example, the Tik Tok bans of people's accounts. If it doesn't like what you posted, it's gonna ban it...so if it's okay, in a man's perspective, social media will keep it on, even if it's not a true representation of a female or like a woman.

Papina astutely calls out the general domination of men within society. She acknowledges the exclusion of girls and women's "perspectives" on social media. Even more so she acknowledges that these exclusions are systemic as she mentions how girls and women's post will more likely be banned or removed (Faust, 2017; Witt et al., 2019). In a similar train of thought, Quinn mentions the unfortunately common cultural practice of deeming girl interests as less than, frivolous, stupid, and unimportant.

I'm trying to find a good example. I mean... I'm sort of thinking about how comic book movies have become such a big thing. And it's a real big thing, like for adults it's a serious business. But it's about superheroes, it's not that serious. But because it's a boy's thing, that's treated as like, this is for everyone...but the same doesn't go for things that are considered or...like popular girls, even like... okay, the classic... I don't know if it's classic, but a good example is how Twilight was popular 10 years ago and people were like, 'Oh, this thing is so lame, because teenage girls like it,' and it's like... it doesn't have to be good, and it's not good, it's super racist, it is pretty racist, and there's some creepy things in there. But that's not why people were complaining. People were complaining because it was a thing that teenage girls liked and that means it's bad.

Girl interests have and continue to be sidelined and demonized by mainstream culture (Mitchell, 2016; Wardy & Newsom, 2013). Quinn does not have to be embedded in this academic research as she experiences this exclusion firsthand. It is also quite gentle of her to acknowledge that she herself sees this particular girl interest (*Twilight*) problematic for another important reason (racism) but still does not judge other girls for being interested and keeps on task with her argument that girl's interests are demonized. Sara also suggests that since girls' interests are either banned or not represented on social media, they turn to different social media spaces that are welcoming and inclusive.

Everyone else on Tumblr is also there because they also don't really feel like they fit in with mainstream social media and stuff like that. And they also just want to talk about weird stuff, like, 'oh, I have a taxidermied mouse' or something. There is weird stuff on Tumblr, but that's what I like about it. Because that's one space where no one really has to look pretty all the time...but it's very normal for you to not feel like you have to act a certain way. Whereas on Instagram, it's like, you're just posting pictures of yourself making new faces or not looking super cool or whatever, some people might be like, 'Oh, that's so lame. What are you doing?' You know, it's about the space and what you use it for.

Julia also reflects on this as she discusses the contradiction of self-expression on social media.

I think social media can be [a good place for girls to express themselves], it depends in a way because it could definitely be a very open place for you to express yourself if it's with just close people. For example, Snapchat, where I'm just adding my friends, I can totally express myself and send some really dumb pictures. I know it would be perfectly fine. But if you make your account public and you post, definitely the hate you'll get is inevitable. You'll have to be very strong to push through it. But I think it is a very good platform for girls to express themselves. I really look up to the girls that are able to do that, like Linda Sun, how despite the hate she got, she still puts out content for girls like me to empower.

It is interesting that the girls suggest social media use is about one's mindset. This is well represented in the research which suggests "that the extent to which social media platforms related to lower or higher levels of well-being might depend not on whether people use them but on how they use them" (Bailey et al., 2020, p. 7). In Evens et al. (2021) study they found that young women who "filtered out" "negative" content generally felt better about themselves. The girls seem to agree with this by suggesting that social media can be positive if you go into it with a positive mindset and ignore the "haters." Julia is reflecting on this as she mentions that girls can express themselves on social media as long as they can "be strong" and "push through" the hate. It is unfortunate that girls should have to push through harmful behavior, especially hate. Some activists and scholars have critiqued the idea of "resilience" as another way for powerful systems and people to avoid accountability. Systems are erased and therefore do not need to change because people are "strong" and "resilient." This is particularly acute for women (and girls) as McRobbie (2020) argues, there is a history of resilience narratives that suggest, "women must therefore find feminine ways of dealing with stress and uncertainty, they must learn to adapt and accommodate." (p. 49). Yet faced with the world as it is, instead of the girls being passive receptors of hate, they do their best to navigate this in any way they can, even if that means expelling precious time and energy managing the "haters." In spite of the hate and the erasure, the girls critically reflect on (under)representation of girls on social media as they continue to strive to be seen.

Making Memories

One of the more positive features of social media that the girls discuss is how it can hold a moment in time—a way to "see" themselves in the past, creating a temporally ambiguous girlhood, even if it is out of mainstream view. The girls talk about how their photos can be used to capture a happy memory, that they can revisit whenever they want. Claire expresses this in our interview.

I realized that I really like taking pictures because it's like you're freezing a moment in time and you have this record. It's nice. I think for me, when you're hanging out with your friends and you take a picture you have a souvenir...So I think for me, I really like Instagram. If I can post the pictures as well. So, it's on my feed. I see pictures I took before with friends.

Claire also participates in this conversation during our focus group, in this exchange between her, myself, and Emma.

Emma *If it was like a picture. Maybe it's like I said before, like a fitness journey, or you're having a nice dinner. Maybe they were trying to let everyone else see what they saw at the beauty of the moment or trying to immortalize it in the pictures that they post.*

Claire *I love that.*

Eleni *Yeah that's a very nice way to put it.*

Emma *But it was supposed to be kind of like, they felt so happy in the moment. Let's take a picture to finish off the day or something and to post it so everyone else can know that we had a good time today...to show that this was a good moment for you.*

As a feminist researcher, who wanted participation in this study to be of benefit to the girls, I liked this moment because the girls are making meaning together by positively reinforcing each others' ideas as Claire tells Emma she loves the way she has thought about this topic. Papina is also happy with this feature of social media.

Exactly, or you're like, 'oh my goodness, I remember I had this really nice food around this time, I don't remember it.' Oh, yeah, I posted it. I could go back and see.

What is interesting about this idea of social media being a place to immortalize memories is that few have explored “social media as part of personal [digital] archives” (Cannelli & Musso, 2022, p. 263), which means there is even less on what this means specifically for girls. This is then a perfect example of how the girls and I are creating knowledge together and including an otherwise ignored experience for girls. Annabell (2022) suggests “the assumption that memory can be accessed through stored representations of experience conceals the fluidity of memory in which

the past is reconstructed” and that claiming “digital traces are ‘memories’ must be treated with caution. Rather, the digital traces shared and stored on platforms have the potential to play a role in remembering” (p. 1546). The girls’ experiences can add to this conversation about digital images and memory by becoming an example of a positive way in which the girls can be seen, even if it is just by themselves, by using digital images to play with the “fluidity” of “remembering.” The girls can look back and see themselves in a different season of life. It brings them joy to remember their own life through a happy moment. Through their personal digital archive, the girls are becoming over and over, seeing themselves as girls in different ways every time they view their digital memory. As the girls get older and become women, how they “see” their girlhood will change over time, thus reinforcing the idea of the Girl/girl as a constant becoming. Regardless of when they decide to view their previous girl self, they are seeing themselves and defining their girlhood as they want, their representation of self is their own, particularly if it is a private account or picture, it can remain (mostly) unscathed by harmful comments. In a world that erases girls’ experiences, the girls are able to see themselves on their own terms. This is particularly pertinent in relation to Instagram stories. The way Instagram currently functions, you can share a story, and it will disappear after 24-hours. However, the story will save on your personal account so that only the holder of the account can go back and view it (unless they create a story highlight but that of course, is within their power to do or not do). This means that the girls can and do create memories that although initially might be shared publicly, become their own private memory bank that they can return to as they wish, which Annabell (2022) also suggests is important for young women to “counter the cultural expectation that sharing is enacted only for external validation” (p. 1554).

- Miriam *I mean sometimes I post on my story because that's impermanent and no one can see it after 24 hours...I'll post random, just random thoughts, because I get bored a lot. I'll just say a random thing.*
- Julia *I think it can be a pretty good place, especially with stories on Instagram, and how they just go away in 24 hours. It's a really good feature that just lets people rant a bit or post a small snapshot of their life. And, yeah it'll go away in 24 hours.*
- Sanvi *I don't post pictures. The only pictures I post are on my story because they're 24-hour pictures, so I don't mind them and the pictures.*

The feature of the disappearing 24-hour story seems to give the girls a sense of safety. They can represent themselves on social media and be seen by others if for just a moment. Yet their ability to see themselves remains a happy opportunity for the future.

Authenticity

As the girls reflect on what it means to be seen, how girls are (mis)represented on social media, and the practice of making memories, there is one particular theme that flows throughout, the concept of authenticity. There is no shortage of theories regarding authenticity as it intersects with scholarship across disciplines, most notably Western psychology, which saw a surge in research in the early 2000s to understand the connection between authenticity and well-being (Bayram & Artan, 2024; Wood et al., 2008). There are also Eurocentric philosophical debates around how authenticity comes to exist within the individual, i.e. if it is something that is essential to the individual and must be found through self-discovery or that authenticity is constructed through “a free creation of the self” (Leuenberger, 2021, p. 412). Authenticity is also argued to be relational as someone’s perceived authenticity by one person might be inauthentic to another. Within this idea, Beerends and Aydin (2021) argue that authenticity is not some concrete idea that exists within a named boundary, it is instead a culturally informed *process* of negotiation that is always in flux.

What is authentic and what is not, and what is natural and what is not, is dependent on particular (sub)cultures. What is considered (in)authentic is shaped by available discourses and the cultural habitat of images and narratives that shape the tastes, desires, and ideas of the people living in that particular culture. As culture changes—and with it, tastes, beliefs, values, and practices—so too do definitions of what constitutes the authentic (p. 1670).

Beerends and Aydin and others (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2017) also point out that the idea of authenticity is highly valued in Western culture while other scholars have suggested, in fact, that modernity is defined as the “Age of Authenticity” (Ferrara, 1994, p. 242). Furthermore, feminists have engaged with theories around authenticity to explore gendered experience. For example, Favaro (2017) argues that authenticity is highly valued aspect of modern femininity, as it relates to a building block of “affect-laden” relationship building and intimacy, essential traits to successful femininity (p. 332). Genz (2015) also suggests this, claiming that authenticity and femininity have become synonymous and mutually reinforcing, specifically in the construction of online femininity. As well, that authenticity is highly valued, is also exemplified through the ways in which authenticity and the study of girlhood are intimately linked. Since Pipher’s (1994) oft cited book, both academic and non-academic work on and with girls has put significant emphasis on girls’ authenticity. People who research and work with girls want them to find and keep their authenticity (Dougher, 2016; Farady, 2010; Impett et al., 2008; Theran, 2010). In girlhood studies authenticity is also sometimes referred to as “voice” which originated from Brown and Gilligan (1993), another central work that sparked an increase in girlhood studies. Yet as Beerends and Aydin suggest, authenticity (or voice) is far from some obvious ontological endpoint. As such, my intention here is not to judge whether or not the girls have found or not found authenticity as some marker of their well-being. Instead, I will look at how the girls participate in the *process* of making authenticity “mean” through current cultural codes via social media. The girls (re)making meanings of authenticity is another excellent example of the Girl/girl becoming(s).

Since most of the girls do not post themselves, they often talked of authenticity in terms of other girls or influencers. However, Papina does give us a glimpse when she talks about how she curates authenticity on her page.

When I post on my feed on Instagram, I post pictures that I feel show my authentic self. Sometimes it's a picture of me in a cultural outfit or a picture of me just smiling. I'm showing my authentic self and really showing [that] happiness comes in different ways. If that makes sense. I show basketball, for example, that's a part of who I am...if you see my page...you can really tell who I am...for example, I graduated I'm posting that or... I don't really post memes because that's not who I am. So, if somebody was to come onto my social media page or watch my story, something I want them to see is my authentic self and who I am.

For Papina, authenticity relates to her culture, and she can share that by using her body when she wears cultural outfits. Authenticity for her is “smiling” which might be understood as positive affect, generating a sense of intimacy between herself and the viewer. This is another way she is using her body (its ability to smile) as a way to represent authenticity. She also defines “who she is” (authenticity) through things she does with her body (basketball), or accomplishments (graduating), or (dis)interests (sharing memes). She can show these moments of authenticity *through* the images she shares on Instagram. In another quote, Papina reiterates certain scholars, as she reflects on the current high value placed on authenticity for girls when she names the “pressure” girls feel to be authentic on social media.

[Photo editing] apps are always geared towards women. If I go to the App Store, it's going to... its probably going to show me at least one photo editing app that [is] geared towards girls and basically encourages them to use it. I think it's a negative aspect. I feel like lately, it's not something that I see much anymore because there's this whole... I don't know the right word but there is a push to be your authentic self, even if people don't like it, because there's somebody else that's probably struggling with that same thing.

There is particular pressure for girls to be authentic online. Being authentic is a markedly gendered experience, as women and girls are expected to be authentic and to do otherwise is unacceptable. Rogan (2023) uncovered this in her study with girls, as “the regularity with which girls and women

were denounced as ‘fake’ by participants was notable. In almost all focus groups, women performing ‘fake-ness’ seemed to be positioned as the ultimate transgression” (p. 143). In this way, authenticity is a requirement of the Girl. Papina highlights another definition of authenticity, as she ends with suggesting that authenticity offers connection through shared struggle. In her definition of authenticity, the struggle is what sets people apart from being fake. This is also suggested in the literature as to be fake (inauthentic) is to present an idealized life, where to be authentic on social media is to show life’s complexities and messiness (Bailey et al., 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2021; Barta & Andalibi, 2021). Sanvi (below) reiterates this as well, while also adding another layer which suggests that more than feeling pressure to be authentic, the girls think social media as an opportunity to be authentic, which Sara also suggests.

Sanvi *You could definitely show your authentic self on social media. Sometimes you have negative comments when you do that. But I think, you know, power of people. A lot of people want to see themselves represented on social media as well. So, it does have a positive impact, a positive influence in that sense as well.*

Sara *I think it depends on the platform as well, because when you think about how Tumblr has been used mainly for either talking about a show or movie or a band or whatever that you really like. There I feel like people are... it's a lot easier for them to be authentic. Because everyone else on Tumblr is also there because they also don't really feel like they fit in with mainstream social media and stuff like that.*

Papina, Sanvi, and Sara equate having non-dominant experiences and “struggling” as being authentic. This idea sits with some in the constructionist camp of authenticity, in that although authenticity is freely made (not found) one cannot be authentic if they align with the dominant cultural codes. In this constructionist model, authenticity equals rebellion against the norm(s) (Santer et al., 2023), often represented through “struggle,” mental health issues, or any experience with oppression (Reade, 2021). Berryman and Kavka (2018) explain this experience specifically

as it relates to girls and young women. For the Digital girl, connection is constructed through the sharing of struggle (i.e. the girl is not perfect), which is defined as authenticity.

Contrary to the assumption that affective labour on YouTube must be self-affirming in order to support the attention economy...affective displays may be negative and yet productive, in the sense that they cement authenticity, offer (self-)therapy and strengthen ties of intimacy between YouTubers and their followers. As people, especially women, increasingly use online video channels in order to expose and simultaneously mitigate their isolation, it is the tears, sobs and struggles of socially mediated feeling that constitute the newest digital terrain of the intimate public (p. 90).

It is clear from their reflections that the girls have aligned with this frame and thus to them, one way to be an authentic Girl/girl is to reject dominant norms and share their struggle. Even more so, authentic online feminism has also been defined as “grassroots organizing” and activism (Chidgey, 2021, p. 1058). To be an authentic girl is not only to share her struggle but to take action against it (child redeemer). The Girl is subsumed within dominant notions of (her)self while the girl is simultaneously supposed to reject such a self in order to be an authentic girl. This girlhood loop inevitably keeps them trapped in a hegemonic/non-hegemonic, dominant/non-dominant chaotic dance of subjective meaning making for the Girl/girl. Of which, this dissertation has inevitably participated in.

Feeling pressure to be authentic might lead someone to look for ways to achieve it. Potter (2010) suggests that authenticity is one of the most prominent discourses that shape people’s lives and one way people seek authenticity is to “buy” it through consumerism. In his argument Potter also reiterates the sentiment above, that people believe to achieve authenticity they must purchase or engage in consumerism that goes against mainstream culture (e.g. counter hegemonic codes). Although he made this claim right at the beginning of the social media boom, it has only become more relevant as current users attempt to develop “branded authenticity” to sell themselves and ultimately a service/product (Maares et al., 2021, p. 3). Roivainen (2023) argues that the most

successful way to sell a product is to convince followers and viewers that you are authentic. In another meaning loop, one can achieve authenticity on social media by offering “truthful” product endorsements (Lee and Eastin, 2021, p. 826). In essence, a perceived truth equals a perceived authenticity. Claire explores these concepts in our interview.

In the future, I feel like people will lose trust with... influencers. Because there's too many of them. I feel like some of them are not credible. I think some of them are...so some celebrities and influencers...they scam people, some of them. Okay, so I feel people would lose trust or be more careful with listening to influencers because they scam people sometimes.

Bishop (2018) also argues that in addition to truthfulness, credibility is crucial to maintaining influencer authenticity. Claire is suggesting that she knows influencers are not credible which suggest they are not authentic. Since influencers (at least ones that gain any kind of success) are mostly white women (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), this is an interesting position for Claire (who is racialized) and other girls. Their girl-ness is juxtaposed against a future (white) womanhood, which is not credible, true, or authentic. One of girlhood studies’ initial arguments was that from within feminist discourse, girls were not their own subjects, and instead always “women in the making” (Carlton, 2021; Kearney, 2009). Here, Claire challenges both consumerism and her position as girl come woman by rejecting a dominant woman subject position that is wrapped in whiteness and capitalism. Unfortunately, there is another way to analyze Claire’s distrust of influencers; the enduring legacy that women are historically and currently positioned as untrustworthy (Bonthuys, 2019; Lackey, 2017). This is interesting in that although whiteness is both privileged and dominant, as it attaches to the category of the influencer women, her whiteness does not necessarily insulate her from the system of sexism. For Claire, is she rejecting dominant forms of whiteness steeped in capitalism? Or is she simply engaging in the legacy of sexism? Alternatively, what does it mean if these things are happening simultaneously? Finally, the

presence of influencers on social media sits within a set of political assemblages that can leave girls unable to determine authentic political action. Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses *economies of visibility*, a term originally coined by Robyn Wiegman, which Banet-Weiser brings into the modern context.

Economies of visibility fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end. In this way, political categories such as race and gender have transformed their very logics from the inside out, so that the visibility of these categories is what matters, rather than the structural ground on and through which they are constructed” (p. 23).

She goes on to offer an example of someone wearing a t-shirt saying, “This is What a Feminist Looks Like.” In this moment, feminism becomes about *looking* a certain way, instead of concrete political action. In the current neoliberal model, the modern feminist looks like a white, able-bodied, financially stable, confident, young woman. Moreso, her feminism is “seen” as authentic through the presentation of such identity, in this example, through the t-shirt. Influencers create a certain “truth” around what it means to be a feminist that is communicated through what she looks like rather than what she does. This definition of feminism is transmuted through the body, in this way, the body, authenticity, and feminism are used to uphold corporate, capitalist logics that render invisible, certain political actions/identities.

Influencers, consumerism, and capitalism are but a few factors in the process of making authenticity mean. In Schmieder’s (2024) study, he found that audiences demanded to see influencers’ “real” faces as this was a way to determine if someone was “real” and “authentic.” A person’s face is one of their most defining features and since it can be manipulated on social media via photo editing apps to show one’s “true” face is a sure sign of authenticity. Reade (2021) also found this in their study where authenticity was equated with “keeping it raw,” i.e. unedited faces

and images (p. 539). This is similar for Emma who defines authenticity as “showing your real face” and she does not require this of only influencers.

I feel people, girls specifically, I don't think they mind using it. I think also when you use [photo editing], it's kind of a considered a taboo because you're not showing your true self, you're not showing your real face. The taboo and stigma around that, probably is what deters people from using it.

The girls often used the word “fake” as another way to describe inauthenticity. The words, “fake,” “real,” “true,” and (in)authentic were used together in these discussions. For Julia, inauthenticity occurs when someone is trying to impress people, whereas authenticity means showing people your “real” life.

I think for me, what I look for is the intention of the post and the message. Usually in fake posts they're just trying to impress you. The things that they post will be kinda unrealistic if you think about it. They usually caption it with something that just makes it seem like it's nothing. While a real post would be more realistic and also they probably wouldn't be trying to show off as much. They would just be posting how they are and how their life is.

Emma defines “real face” as a face that is not photoshopped and Julia defines “real life” as not showing off. Similar to Papina, Sanvi, and Sara above, for Emma and Julia authenticity and realness require sharing life’s imperfections, which seems to be a strong theme for the girls. What is interesting is that these comments are in direct contradiction to my earlier discussion where the girls told me they want to be seen as perfect. Finally, in Luna’s reflection, she equates inauthenticity with the (in)human.

Something about social media is that it's really manufactured. The ways a lot of influencers now post, it doesn't feel human. If social media could just change...I [would] want it to be more something that's just like, a community coming together. More like that instead of just people posting themselves and it seems unrealistic...I guess more personal, but the actual social media is too manufactured again, I'm just repeating things, I don't know. It doesn't feel like it's people reacting to each other, now it's a lot of bots. It's kind of like we're all bots on a website, to me at least.

Luna is engaging in an important discussion around social media, reality, humanness, and authenticity. For example, there has been a rise in what is called “virtual influencers”—an AI

generated “person” is created, given a life, a backstory, and an account where they post about said life—sharing products, pictures of them “traveling,” “hanging out” with fellow celebrities/influencers, going to events, posting about their “activist work,” and more. Koles et al. (2024) suggest that “the very essence of these virtual characters blurs the fine line between what is usually considered by users as ‘real’ entities, raising once again the issue of authenticity” (p. 2). Luna and the other girls are participating in a conversation that has been around since the beginning of not just social media but the internet, as scholars since the 1990s have debated “the authenticity of interpersonal connections online and explored the impact of disembodiment on the expression of the self” (Turner, 2006, p. 184). This is not simply a question about social media but larger questions around digital selfhood and the nature of humanness. Girls make meaning of themselves and others online through their level of authenticity which is simultaneously a judgement of their humanness.

7.4 Conclusion

One of the most prominent, if not *the* prominent way we make gender mean is through the body. Since social media is inherently about sharing the images of bodies, the girls and the Girl inevitably come into being through the digital images of bodies. Social media is a prolific place for the body to exist and be seen. Social media undoubtedly reinforces an idealized gendered body, however, it is a much more complex, contextual, and contradictory experience for girls. They move in and out of and between dominant and non-dominant discourses of the girl-ed and woman body, often simultaneously. They become girls through the way they discuss and feel self-esteem, insecurity, confidence, and the idea of the “pretty girl.” The girls becoming online is not only about the way they see their own bodies but the way they understand and view others. As they move in and out of being (in)visible they navigate desires of (im)perfection. The girls want to be liked, they

want to be funny, and they want to see themselves represented on social media. What they highly value however is authenticity and they both look for it and try to cultivate it in themselves. This chapter has explored many ways in which girls make meaning of themselves and others on social media.

Chapter 8: Contradictory Girl/girl Becomings – Paths for the Future

8.1 Introduction

A founding critical reflection of feminist theory is the idea of the “double standard.” Girls are expected to be sexually available to men, but they cannot be prudes or “too slutty.” The modern girl is expected to be a good neoliberal citizen by desiring success and achievement; however, she shouldn’t be too aggressive in her tactics and should not achieve success over boys (or men). She is expected to work on her body and be (heterosexually) attractive but she better not be proud of her body or vain. These are a few examples but the dilemmas, traps, and paradoxes which girls face are limitless. These contradictions are not binaries, as they exist on a continuum in constant motion. In this way, the Girl and real girls are constantly battling a slew of contradictions, contradictions that came through organically and were deeply explored in this project. I am not the first to claim that the digital girl lives in contradiction as Rogan (2023) makes the same concluding frame in her book, *Digital femininities: the gendered construction of cultural and political identities online*. She ends with the claim that, “it is difficult to characterise girls’ and young women’s digital experiences as anything other than dichotomous and, in many instances, contradictory.” (p. 186). The Girl then comes into being *through*, because of, and in spite of the numerous contradictions. As these contradictions move in and out of dominant and non-dominant meanings, it is not always clear where one narrative ends and the other begins. *This is the assemblage of the Girl: a chaotic mismatch of mutually inclusive/exclusive social codes, identities, affect, and subjectivities that sit within contextual temporalities*. This assemblage then leaves real girls to both surveil and navigate themselves continuously from moment to moment, week to week, year to year. There is no end to this (re)making of herself, even as she moves into womanhood and/or adulthood, her contradictory girl-ness is a foundational piece that informs her entire life.

As the girls move in and out of these contradictions, where hegemonic meaning ends and counter-hegemonic revolution begins, is difficult to decipher. Are all discourses and subjectivities simply technologies of the self, that keep girls (and all of us) trapped in continuous metaphysical labour that always already keeps the status quo and dominant power structures firmly in place? Can the “master’s tools” (a term coined by Audre Lorde) really dismantle the master's house? Can we construct new ways of being outside of the dominant meanings? Or are we destined to be gobbled up by hegemony no matter what we do? I do not think we have clear answers to these questions. However, the hope is that there are paths to genuine care for ourselves and others, paths that break from hegemonic patterns of thinking, feeling, speaking, and being, paths that allow people to live lives of care, self-determination, freedom, joy, and complexity. In thinking through the girl and all her contradictions, we might just be able to see this path forward.

As I move into this final chapter, I will summarize the ever-changing contradictions that (re)make the girl as outlined in my six themes. I will also reflect on the collaborative Instagram project I enacted with my participants and what that means for a feminist research ethos. I have a set of six recommendations, reflecting what I think meaningful change would look like, but they are certainly not the only paths forward. Finally, I will end this dissertation with some words of hope and promise for the future.

8.2 Collaborative Instagram Project - @thedigitalgirl

The impetus to include a collaborative project as part of my dissertation stemmed from a prominent theme in girlhood studies—that girls are far too often erased and ignored. This can happen in almost every aspect of their daily lives, and it can certainly happen when they participate in research. Nachman et al. (2023) suggests that creative, art-based projects also have the potential for contending with power imbalances between researcher and participants. Although this project

was not another avenue to collect data (even though the content they produced could certainly be used for future analysis), it intentionally and by design, created space for the girls to “produce knowledge in their own way” (p. 18). By sharing their posts on Instagram, that knowledge is then shared with others who engage with it. Creating a space for them to share their thoughts and experiences through a creative outlet while outside of the larger research project was part of my commitment to feminist research that enables the opportunity to share individual experience(s). A feminist research ethic works toward flattening the power dynamic while also creating mutually beneficial relationships. Feminist research is a political project which strives to advance the emancipation of girls and women (and other marginalized beings) by actively engaging its participants in feminist moments. These moments may not seem political or activist on the surface but that is a result of the rather limiting dominant definition of political activism—which more specifically, erases girls’ experiences by labeling their actions apolitical (Taft, 2011). As such, I would argue that any girl sharing her experiences or thoughts through any public forum, is inherently a political act. Creating an Instagram page made by the girls is itself, feminist, political, and a form of digital (feminist) activism. Although the debate around whether or not digital (feminist) activism is possible, productive, or successful is far from settled, those who believe in its transformative powers would define it as “broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge” through digital spaces (Baer, 2016, p. 18). This is evident as shown through the content the girls created. For example, they explored themes around mental health, gender diversity, healthy eating, gratitude, God, healthy sleep, emotions, body image, plastic surgery, body dysmorphia, effective communication, self-acceptance, menstruation, mindfulness, self-love, climate change, and more (refer to the Instagram page @thedigitalgirl for

a more fulsome picture of the content they developed). All of these topics fall under the enduring feminist legacy, “the personal is political.” These topics are deeply personal to the girls and thus, undoubtedly political. The collaborative Instagram project was to work in tandem with other aspects of my feminist informed methodology, for example, encouraging the girls to take the conversations during our interviews and focus groups in directions that were meaningful to them, as opposed to rigidly sticking to my questions. However, another feminist research ethic is that of self-reflection and as I worked through the collaborative Instagram project with the girls, I could not help but reflect on what I was doing, why I was doing it, and if the outcome was meaningful. Powell and Takayoshi (2003) write about the important nuances of feminist research—that it is collaborative *and* reciprocal. Collaboration can mean including participants from the start, with research development followed by data analysis and even final writing. Yet this is only one part of a fulsome feminist research practice.

Studies can be done collaboratively without being mutually beneficial. Participant contributions might be understood in such a research relationship as meaningful in that they help the researcher “get the story right.” Certainly, the more perspectives a researcher can gather, the more complex a picture she will be able to draw; from a research standpoint this is a valuable role for participants to play...Likewise, seeing reciprocity as a context-based process of definition and redefinition of the relationship between participants and researcher helps us understand how our projects can benefit participants in ways that they desire (p. 396-397).

They further elaborate, suggesting that collaborative research can give participants “voice,” and this is (and was in the case of my project) certainly a positive outcome. However, most importantly, they claim that reciprocal research includes *the participants stating directly what they need or desire*. Furthermore, the researcher and the research participants, cannot necessarily predict what might benefit them, as this is something that will come out through the course of the study—hence the need for “definition and redefinition.” What the participants want or need might change over time, in relation to the research or other context specific aspects of their lives that might come up

only during the course of the research. Thus, what is reciprocal about the relationship needs to be defined by both researcher and participants in the process of doing the research together. This did not necessarily occur through my Instagram project for a few reasons. I decided to do the collaborative Instagram project before even finding participants. As it was part of my research proposal, this aspect of my research was predetermined—meaning that it was not informed by what the girls in my study told me they desired or needed. It was informed by what had been stated previously by other girls and other researchers through my own review of girlhood studies literature. The girls in my study did not directly tell me this project was something that would be meaningful or beneficial to them. Rather than co-creating the idea together, I presented it to them and asked if they'd be interested. In fact, during one of the focus groups the girls specifically talked about how since the pandemic they were somewhat exhausted from being online. During the pandemic they had to shift a lot of their life, specifically school, online. They had become fatigued with spending so much time in front of screens. This comment was one of the first pangs of doubt I had around the collaborative Instagram project. I wondered if the Instagram project was something *I thought* the girls wanted, rather than something they actually wanted to do themselves. Since I was giving them a \$25 honorarium to participate, this further brings into question whether or not this was something the girls would desire to do otherwise. There is also no way to measure whether or not this project benefited the girls in any real material way, except for the provision of a material honorarium. Money is power, even a small amount, and the girls were able to use that money as they wish to bring themselves some moment of joy or purchase something they needed for themselves or their family. However, this seems like the bare minimum for material benefit, and I would gather that Powell and Takayoshi mean more than this. Feminist research must mean more than this. The point is that it is unclear exactly how the Instagram project was beneficial to

the girls, and I am not sure I can claim the project was sufficiently reciprocal. As of the writing of this chapter, no additional content outside of the content they initially created (and which I have uploaded myself), has been added. If it was truly beneficial to them, I am left wondering why the participation halted. Perhaps their lack of further participation has more to do with the platform itself versus the project or my research. I didn't press this issue, as I didn't want the inherent power imbalance to put pressure on my participants – young women who I learned so much from. Despite my worries that this was an imposed versus co-created initiative grounded in reciprocity, there are a few unmeasurable but potentially beneficial observances I can pull from the project. Most directly, the girls that participated said it was “fun.” Another girl told me she had never used Canva before and that it was nice getting to know how to use that tool. In that sense, I created the opportunity for her to learn something new that she wouldn't necessarily have known she wanted to learn, but it was a happy consequence that she did. During the interviews and focus groups, some of the girls said they do not often get to discuss issues related to social media and girlhood, so having the opportunity to do so was welcome. In this way, they did indirectly state their desire to have more opportunities to discuss these issues, and the Instagram project offered that. Indeed, girls having any opportunity to share their true thoughts, feelings, and experiences anywhere, whether it be with one another or in a public space (Instagram), is a feminist political act. The act of sharing, of listening, and supporting each other, is certainly meaningful and reflective of potential promise for the future. What would it mean for me to create spaces for girls that are feminist, empowering, and liberating in a truly reciprocal, mutually beneficial way? Next time, I commit to directly asking the girls what type of activism would be meaningful to them. Next time, I will reserve judgement about what I think digital activism looks like for these girls. Digital

activism of the past might not be the same in the future and I do not want to deny these future girls their right to choose their own empowering, feminist acts of resistance.

8.3 Overarching Conclusions

Since girls are a complex amalgamation of their own individual experiences, filled with contextual histories, cultures, moments, affects, and temporalities—it is hard to say with a definitive claim that girls are one way or another. We can, however, loosely define the Girl and hegemonic girlhood in this specific historical moment from the North American perspective—as constructed *through* the experiences and thoughts of the real girls in my study. This Girl is specific to this moment and will undoubtedly change in the future. She will remain connected to Girls and girls of the past in certain ways, while shifting and (re)defining herself in the future. I started my research asking two questions about how we currently (re)define the Girl and how that intersects with systems of power. Throughout my six themes I explored how we “make the Girl mean,” and I would argue more importantly, how she comes to be “known” in the collective consciousness through our systems of power and how she is used in service to oppressive systems. My work complemented research already done in the field of girlhood studies while also adding new knowledge and perspective.

Girlhood studies scholars have written extensively about how the Girl and girlhood are shaped by neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. My research has complemented this showing how central these discourses are to shaping the subjectivities of girls specifically from a digital context. Firstly, the Digital Girl is one who is productive. When she uses social media, she is there to increase her professional network, increase her work ethic, gain skills, or improve herself in some way. To enjoy social media outside of being productive is risky and she feels guilty for doing anything else. Keeping girls in a constant state of improvement shifts the focus from systems and

onto themselves, thus erasing systemic issues and allowing power inequities including sexism, racism, sizeism, etc., to go unquestioned. If a girl is “addicted” to social media, it is her own moral failing and her responsibility to manage. Since it is girls and not systems who are responsible for their problems, this also extends to other social issues, as the Digital Girl should use social media to make the world a better place, to “redeem” us from a broken society. If the girl is required to work on herself and save the world then she better not “waste any time.” Time is a precious commodity for the Digital Girl if she is to be productive and save the world.

My research has also expanded the topic of “connection” within social media, as connection is a centerpiece of the Digital Girl. Since girl-ed bodies are physically restricted from political and public life, the Digital Girl creates a subjectivity both inside and outside the confines of her supposed hegemonic self. Even though the Digital Girl is restricted on social media in certain ways, she still finds moments to create counter private-publics, most notably with her friends. One of the defining features of the Digital Girl is that she exists for and because of her friends. Real girls come online most often to stay connected with each other. Through their direct messages, taking photos, sending GIFs and memes, and sharing a variety of content, the Digital Girl comes into being through these interactions. Through this connection with their friends and others the girls “play” with dominant and non-dominant meanings of the (digital) Girl to (re)make herself *through* the act of sharing content. The Digital girl also finds meaning through shared interests and through her community connections. What is interesting about these communities is they offer a space to subvert gender, as they are related to sports, video gaming, or political activism—all areas that have historically (and still currently) exclude girls. The Digital Girl’s becoming occurs at the site of gender (re)negotiation.

The Digital Girl is both in and out of *control* online. She is restricted from social media use by adults in her life, parents, and teachers. Recycling long standing discourses around adult moral panics relating to children's agency and sexuality, the Digital Girl sometimes welcomes adult protection, ironically *from* adults themselves. In the name of "safety" and "care" Digital Girl movement and expression is controlled online, often by the very adults charged with their well-being. Even still, the Digital Girl subverts some of this control to find her own moments of expression and joy by finding corners of the Internet outside of the adult gaze. The Digital Girl also moves in and out of control in relation to social media algorithms. The Digital Girl has some level of control over the content she sees, as she can somewhat curate her algorithm to see content created by average people, who do not simply and without critical thought, reproduce dominant norms. The Digital Girl is then able to (re)make herself through images and ideas that simultaneously flow in, out of, and between hegemonic and non-hegemonic codes. At the same time, social media algorithms are specifically coded to present certain types of content and thus the Digital Girl is unable to completely bifurcate herself from dominant, hegemonic codes and meanings. The ways in which the Digital Girl "plays" inside these spaces is impossible to track, thus creating a wild, even unknowable becoming. The Digital Girl also looks for control in digital privacy settings. Although the actions of enacting privacy settings rest on long standing discourses around girls (and women's) responsibility to thwart any and all danger that might come their way, there are material realities to contend with and moments of empowerment within this for the Digital Girl. In this way, the Digital Girl has certain agencies that allow her to chose who can witness her digital self. Through adult restrictions, social media algorithms, and the notion of privacy, the Digital Girl is juxtaposed as both in and out of control online and specifically, on social media.

Still, as much as the Digital Girl desires control, there are unavoidable side effects of the Internet and social media that intersect with larger social systems far outside her control. The Digital Girl can and does experience harm, much of which aligns with the fact that girls and women are seen as inferior to men in ways which reinforce violent notions of their sub-humanness and disposability, and thus are susceptible to their harassment and violence. The Digital Girl is (re)made through her mostly harmful relationship to boys and men's dominant behaviors grounded in gender-based expectations of maleness and masculinity. The Digital Girl experiences this harm herself but also witnesses it happening to other girls and women. Through postfeminist and neoliberal narratives that normalize men and boy's violence, the Digital Girl is "made to mean" through her responsibility to defend herself from such behaviors. Furthermore, the Digital Girl does not necessarily always have the language to speak to such experiences and thus, normalizes and minimizes them. Since the Digital Girl is on the defensive against harmful behavior from men and boys, this confounds her potential for any kind of desirable, pleasurable, joyful or positive sexual experiences online. The Digital Girl is susceptible to harassment from men and boys via direct messages or comments, however this harassment and violence also takes the form of hateful, sexist, sizeist, and bigoted content she sees online, of which the Digital Girl witnesses being perpetrated mostly by men and boys. If the Digital girl manages to avoid this content (as much as she can) by curating her algorithm, she still might experience forms of harassment from her peers—behavior that operates outside of algorithms. Harassment from men and boys plus harassment from peers, both open up the potential for public shaming of the Digital Girl, which contributes to the long-standing history of shaming girls (and women). Social media did not invent this shaming machine, but it has created a new avenue for such gendered disempowerment.

As the body is a significant place to produce gender, girl-ed bodies online increase this “meaning making” capacity ten-fold, since social media is inherently about images and the imagery of bodies. What is important here is not exactly how the Digital Girl defines beauty, but that beauty is undoubtedly a prominent tool in the process of (re)making of the Digital Girl, most notably in ways that further her oppression and societal marginalization. Ideas of beauty change depending on the historical and cultural context(s) of the moment, what is consistent is the ways in which these definitions are (re)purposed to keep girls (and women) constantly disliking, hating, critiquing, working on, and self-improving their bodies. Similar to shame, social media in this instance is simply replicating and potentially amplifying these political, social, and economic structures and systems that keep girls and women defining their value through their degree of current heterosexual attractiveness. This is certainly not new information. What we want to think through is the current ways in which awareness (the act of being aware) of the aforementioned processes has been (re)named as liberatory for women in girls, yet still carries many of the trappings of oppressive discourse. As the Digital Girl comes online to embody her newfound self-awareness around self-esteem and body confidence, she must contend with the spectre of failure to achieve these postfeminist goals. To thwart failure, she must continually work on herself, to achieve such bodily freedom. In this way she is still trapped within Foucault’s governmentality. She moves between liberated consciousness (confidence) and oppressive patterns (self-betterment), without clarity where one ends and the other begins, and if she is ever “truly” liberated. Even from within these confidence narratives, it is difficult for the Digital Girl to stay in connection with her body on social media, as the sheer amount of imagery convinces her otherwise. This dominant imagery is difficult to avoid and bodily connections *become* insecure and are broken. It is unclear how much “true” confidence it will take for girls to “truly” liberate themselves

from dominant images/discourses of proper girlhood/womanhood. And yet, we do not want to limit the Digital Girl's creativity in shifting oppressive power structures. The Digital Girl can and does access the "pretty girl" or "beautiful girl" subjectivity and uses that power to challenge dominant systems. Whether or not this leads to micro or macro change is unclear but there are real moments where she in fact, does feel powerful.

The Digital Girl wants to be seen as "perfect" on social media. Although real girls may define perfection differently, for the Digital Girl perfection, whether in body or life, means a constant state of self-regulation. The desire to present a curated image of the perfect life and body on social media, makes the Digital Girl become a mechanism for the erasure of real girls' experiences. Since the Digital Girl strives to be "likable," made measurable by the infamous "like" function inherent to social media, her complexities and contexts are flattened and erased. All of this limits, if not erases, an inclusive representation of the Digital Girl on social media. Within this erasure there remain moments of visibility, as social media also offers private spaces from which the Digital Girl can (re)make herself in ways only "seeable" and thus "knowable" to herself. These private moments of subjectivity-making exist outside societal and researcher gaze, thus rendering their potentiality limitless. It is difficult to fully know what happens as the Digital Girl shares her inner life and makes memories with others (mostly friends) and perhaps more importantly with herself. Since meaning making is inter-relational, what does it mean for the Digital Girl to make meaning of herself, to herself? This makes me think of the philosophical question, if a tree falls in the woods does it make a sound? If the Digital Girl is seen only by herself, does she exist? Social media creates these questions as the girl creates a privately housed²⁷ "hard coded" Digital Girl to which she can see, revisit, and remake in any way she wants.

²⁷ In reality, nothing is truly private on the Internet as companies and government surveillance entities can and do violate human privacy rights (Connor & Doan, 2021). This is a much larger conversation, but here I would suggest

Finally, I ended my discussion and analysis intentionally with the subtheme of authenticity: a highly valued concept in Western culture, philosophy, social science, psychology, and more. It has also become a central topic in digital media studies, debates around social media, as well as being a particularly salient topic in girlhood studies. Authenticity online, offers girls opportunities for intimate connection. To be intimately connected, is to be feminine and therefore the Girl. In this way social media is a vehicle for reproducing the dominant code that girls must exhibit femininity of which authenticity is central. One way to represent this authenticity is through shared struggle, which is seen as “raw,” “real,” and “not fake.” To share one’s struggle is to go against the mainstream culture. Furthermore, authenticity online has almost ubiquitously become attached to branding and consumerism. As influencers try to sell themselves, their goal is to be viewed as truthful and credible and thus, authentic. Authenticity is the highest achievement of the influencer, and girls are some of the main authenticators. Finally, authenticity offers another way to determine a person’s perceived “human-ness” thus opening opportunities for people to be deemed (in)human by others who are navigating a variety of discourses that delegitimize certain bodies as human.

In my social justice work, I myself have touted the idea that creating a world in which people are able to live an “authentic life” is the highest goal we can achieve. However, in thinking through the complex notion of authenticity as it is used and understood by girls, and researching how authenticity has been theorized, has made me rethink the feminist aims of girls and women’s authenticity. The girls reaffirm the high value society places on authenticity, but what if striving for authenticity is another self-betterment trap similar to self-esteem, body-image, self-confidence, self-love, and resilience? At some point, I would hope working on ourselves can exist outside of

that this personal data is not necessarily viewed by human eyes. The data can be evaluated and stored by computer programs, meaning private social media accounts of the average girl may actually go “unseen” by anyone (human) but herself.

Foucault's governmentality but where does governmentality end and "true" revolution begin? At some point, we need to be able to better ourselves within a productive model of social justice—where meaningful material and psychosocial change is happening. I am unsure of what "true" authenticity looks like outside of hegemonic traps hiding within acts of self-betterment, or if we can ever really define authenticity outside of cultural codes (that are formed through hegemonic, oppressive dominant meanings). I would hope that feminist and social science theories bring deeper understandings of important issues as time progresses, but specifically with the advent of social media and AI, how we can define and then "know" what authenticity is or what it looks like, seems like it is becoming more unclear. Since we value authenticity so highly in North American culture, yet it seems to have become so precarious through our technological advances, the lines between authenticity, humanness, realness, and thus our very identities (like girlhood) are messier than ever. Deep fakes, scams, catfishing, misinformation, and inauthenticity are pervasive on the Internet, and they can have real, material, psychological, and affective harm on their users. That the girls in my study are striving to find and define authenticity for themselves and the Girl, I would argue, is an incredibly important task against a dark backdrop of the strange, inhuman technological future we are exponentially moving toward. This is not to romanticize the past and demonize the technological present and future, but to question where this technology is taking us as it relates to "real" moments of human connection. There was no doubt, that for these girls, social media offers them a place for meaningful, genuine, and joyful connection. This was the thing that kept bringing them back, amidst the harm, lack of control, and chaos. There is a hope that social media and life online does not have to result in disconnection from each other, from humanity, or from ourselves. In the girls' bid for connection and authenticity (however they define it), I would

posit that they are trying to find some humanity in a space that too often denies it. The Digital Girl is ever hopeful.

8.4 Recommendations

My six themes explore how we define the Girl as well as how real girls experience both the Girl and girlhood. These real experiences capture the third and final question for my research, which is an excellent guide for recommendations that can offer concrete actions. The girls in my study gave us a glimpse into how they experience the Girl and girlhood, however, there are millions of girls with their own story to tell. Understanding who the Girl is helps to create a path toward understanding and supporting real girls as they navigate, live in, and experience their psychic and metaphysical relationship with the Girl. However, strategies that support one girl might not support another. This means that recommendations need to consider what intersecting factors might limit or enhance their effectiveness. This is, in and of itself, a recommendation—that strategies to support girls need to include *critical reflection of their contexts and intersecting identities*. Feminist and girlhood studies scholars have written extensively on the need for theory and praxis to be intersectional and I would argue that is still the case. What a Muslim girl from Scarborough needs or desires is different than a Black queer girl in small town Ontario, or a disabled Indigenous girl in Manitoba, or a white immigrant girl in the Maritimes. Their identities carry different histories, present moments, physical realities, and affect and all collide with geographic norms and cultures. My recommendations to follow are generalized, however if and when someone intends to employ them, the intersecting identities of the recipient girls needs to further solidify the action plan. Furthermore, strategies aimed at supporting girls need to be developed *with* girls. This is a pervasive recommendation in girlhood studies literature, but it needs to be stressed repeatedly as many well-intentioned adults continue to work for Girls versus working with and learning from

them. Girls' involvement in driving knowledge creation or support development will happen to a varying degree. It must be unique to the girls' themselves and based on the girls' well-being (outside of an adult savior perspective), wishes, capacities, skills, time, and resources. For example, girls may not have access to funding for research or programs. They may not know what funding exists but they also likely lack experience in strategically writing funding grants. An adult with experience in successful grant writing would take the lead on this while incorporating girls' perspectives where possible. In another situation, a research project might involve handling sensitive topics like violence against girls and women. Although the girls could be included in creating the research questions, in order to ensure psychological well-being, they might not be involved in the data collection or analysis. This is not protectionist as this act of self-care is not solely slated for girls, adults can and should engage in this kind of boundary as well and as needed. Whatever the situation, without including girls in in some capacity in these processes, we will miss their important perspectives on their lived experience which only continues to contribute to their erasure or marginalization.

Girls as Knowledge Creators: The girls in my study mentioned repeatedly that they just “want to talk about this stuff.” This desire sits squarely within the feminist commitment to honour girls and youth as knowledge holders and creators. Adults have a certain type of knowledge, that does come with experience, but it is one *type* of knowledge, and it is not necessarily “better.” Adults need to use their knowledge (experience) to bring youth into the conversation. Adults need to be the ones who build bridges between youth and adults by creating mutually beneficial and respectful relationships. Since adults have disproportionate power in the relationship, it is their responsibility to do what they can to shift that power, part of that is honouring girl and youth knowledge. This means truly hearing what they have to say, actively listening to their words

outside of pre-judgements on what adults think they might feel, want, desire, or need. This means that policy recommendations, media literacy programs, and education programs aimed at making girls “safer” should be critical of adult self induced moral panics around where, when, and how girls are actually unsafe. For example, the girls in my study talked about their experiences with “strange” adults online. However, it was difficult to find nuanced research on this experience, outside of the “stranger danger” narratives that rely more on myths (that are too often grounded in racism and classism), than the actual experiences of girls. These studies should exist outside the frame that adult researchers are there to “save” girls from some xenophobic informed “bad guy.” When those with power, i.e. adults, misunderstand or erase the actual lived experiences of those they care for, support strategies will in the least be unsuccessful, and at the worst, often indirectly or unintentionally reproduce the very harmful realities they are trying to remedy. One way to avoid this trap is for adults to use their networks and resources to fund research by girls and for girls, action the conclusions and recommendations, facilitate publications, and engage in strategic dissemination of the findings.

Creating Opportunities for Connection: One of the more important things for the girls is connection, either on or off social media. The girls want to connect with people, who share the same experiences as them, but they are also interested and curious to connect with others who might be different. Social change is rooted in human connection. Since this is what the girls are looking for and enjoy, fostering that desire will lead them down paths of connection that can potentially support change—whether it is change in their own lives, their communities, or the world. To be clear, this does not put the onus on girls to change the world and become the ever-fraught child redeemer. Connection is forged through collective practice and building connection requires different people(s) coming together. Instead of girls or youth being solely responsible for

redeeming the world, if desired, they can be part of a collective social justice project that includes peoples of all ages, races, genders, creeds, abilities, and more. Social justice means different things to different people, which is why creating opportunities for girls to connect with a variety of ideas and people will allow them to chose (or not) which path toward justice feels right to them. The girls in my study were astutely aware of social issues and I would hope other girls feel the same. With so much of the world structured to exclude girls, those with power (i.e. adults) need to make opportunities for girls to connect with each other and others to work toward some form of collective liberation. For example, my study created opportunities for connection, as the girls directly stated they enjoyed coming together and hearing each other's perspectives. A few girls even asked for the contact information of the other girls in their focus group (this was not possible of course, to ensure confidentiality). What this suggests is that social science research is a viable opportunity for girls to connect, share knowledge, and be heard. This will be even more productive when the girls are directly involved in the research process from the start.

Creating opportunities for connection also has the potential to challenge the very category of Girl, which can then unsettle power. Through my research it has become clear that it is difficult to determine exactly when and where some idea, narrative, or way of being "truly" breaks from the dominant codes i.e. the "master's tools," However, one way to accomplish some form of rupture is through vulnerability. By creating spaces of care and safety where girls can be vulnerable with each other, it might be possible to create narratives of the Girl built on nuance and complexity; as opposed to its current iterations which too often rests on one narrative, one image, one way of being. The more girls share with each other, they might just become more comfortable sharing their whole selves with their parents, friends, family, and communities (digital or otherwise). It is these stories and moments of vulnerability that create the opportunity for human-to-human

connection that can then challenge harmful myths. As the girls share their experiences, isolation of thought and feeling recedes, opening the space for solidarity and problem solving. In knowing they aren't alone; they might feel more secure in bringing their experiences to people in their lives who hold enough power to make a change. This is undoubtedly happening already, through a litany of girl programs, clubs, groups, and community activities in Canada and beyond. A few examples of current organizations or programs include but is not limited to: Girls Rock Camp Toronto, Plan Canada, Girl Guides, YWCA Toronto Girls' Centre, Girls Inc., Power to Girls Foundation, GirlUp Canada, Lady Ballers Camp, GEM, and more. As another example, my in person focus group was held at a centre for girls (which I cannot name). This center has a variety of programming that creates the opportunities for girls to connect with one another. Where possible, we must find funding to increase and expand such centres. One way to do this is through the Ontario Trillium Fund, which offers a significant amount of money to a variety of social service and justice projects. Universities as well, have the capacity to fund research and programs focusing on how to get girls in connection with each other. Finally, governments, such as the city of Toronto need to be pressured into providing continuing and increased funding for girl focused community spaces. Private funds, universities, governments, and non-profits all need to be involved in continuing or expanding spaces and programs that foster connection between girls. Such action will have far reaching effects. In creating/expanding these spaces, the goal is to create a million micro-moments that bring people into empathetic and compassionate connection with one another. We can never have enough of these moments as the more we have, the closer we move toward humanizing the Girl/girl, which I argue is a fundamental building block to a more equitable and just society.

Reducing Digital Harm: It has already been said by girls serving organizations, girlhood research, and policy groups that reducing harm for girls online is essential to not only their well-

being but liberation. For example, Plan Canada (2020) did a large-scale global study of girls' experiences of harassment online and from that made targeted recommendations. I will use these recommendations as an example of girl focused solutions currently leading the field whilst adding my own thoughts on such work. For example, they recommend expanding and developing laws to protect girls from online harassment. However, I do not put much hope in recommendations framed through a liberal feminist lens. There is significant scholarship that argues "protection" laws actually give more power to the police and government, who hold a monopoly on violence and surveillance, thus contributing to and perpetuating harm specifically against marginalized populations (Maynard, 2017). Furthermore, laws sit within carceral logics, that rely on blame and punish models, which do not create revolutionary change, as it mainly continues systems of oppressive violence. Movements like "defund the police" argue for models of transformative justice, that work outside our current legal structures (Ansfield et al., 2023). Furthermore, there are those who argue that the Canadian and US legal systems are not broken and instead, work in the ways they were designed, to control certain populations and enrich and privilege a minority. Promoting a legislated "rights-based" approach to social justice within a system structured to actually deny human rights will likely never lead to revolutionary material change (Sircar, 2022; Simmons, 2023). For these reasons, I do not put my faith in the legal system as a place from which to reduce harm. Plan Canada has also recommended social media companies publish data on gendered harassment, improve moderation mechanisms, and demand corporate responsibility. I also have little hope for this recommendation. Since social media companies are for-profit, that is always their bottom line. Corporations are notorious for participating in performative social justice, in that they often only participate in the facade of social justice trends of the time to sell products (Smialek, 2021) or promote a sense of "goodness" in their brand. Capitalism is a system

antithetical to social justice and human dignity—its mechanisms (e.g. corporations) main function are to uphold said system. Therefore, I want to offer new recommendations in addition to and/or instead of recommendations that have already been made in the field. Plan Canada also recommended strengthening community care, which is where I now turn.

The girls do not believe they can talk to adults about their experiences of harm on social media. There was one focus group where the girls were completely jaded by their lack of support from the adults in their lives, including their teachers and parents. They either do not think they will be believed, that it will be taken seriously, or they will be understood. This is not surprising as moral panics around girl safety in the least, misappropriate support and at worse, can be mechanisms for increasing harm, not reducing it. Yet girls do face actual harm, even if adults (researchers, teachers, parents, politicians) may be mischaracterizing their experiences. For this reason, there needs to be thoughtful, intentional, intersectional work done on reducing the digital harm girls experience on social media. Firstly, some of these harms are unavoidable and likely to continue unchecked, for example the incredible amount of hateful, sexist, and oppressive content that currently exists online (this can be posts, comments, or direct messages). Hateful, salacious content gets “clicks” and is profitable, suggesting social media companies are likely not interested in restricting it. The girls have done some of the self-preservation work themselves, doing their best to stay on the “positive” side of social media by curating their algorithms and being selective about who they follow and who follows them. Yet, the girls should not bear this mental load alone. In general, if it is their desire, girls should be able to avoid, with minimal effort, hateful content online. I therefore recommend the development of a software program that filters out hateful content, ideally by a not-for-profit organization. This is no doubt a complex task, one that is outside my skillset. There also may be software programs and apps that are either currently in development

or slated for the future. However, it is difficult to find official confirmation of such projects as any mention of this type of software has not been verified by trusted sources, i.e. governments, universities, or non-profits who focus on digital space. Instead, less fulsome tools are what currently exist. For example, on Instagram users can censor sensitive or violent content by creating a comment filter with specific words. A user can tag certain words and if they show up the comment section they will be hidden/deleted.²⁸ Other programs can filter out ads and spam. However, the function of most of these filters does not leave the user in control, and most certainly not users who are children/youth. For example, YouTube and TikTok also have content filters for parents, however this raises philosophical and political debates around the material control parents/adults have over children. Google also has a filter option for pornographic or violent content, called Google SafeSearch. However, Google sets the parameters for the filter and it is often controlled by parents. In general, much of the software around content filters is geared toward parents controlling what they consider to be “age-appropriate” or “sexually explicit” content. Finally, there are some open-source software programs that attempt to filter out sexist or hateful content, however to my knowledge the legitimacy, effectiveness, or user viability has not been formally researched. Therefore, the tool I am suggesting does not appear to exist in the exact form I am suggesting it. What girls need is a more focused approach to filters, narrowing in on and giving control to the user to define and then filter hateful content. Yet, this tool is only one part of a safer digital space for girls. In the gap between now and some future software tool that goes beyond what currently exists, girls need to be able to speak to the adults in their lives about these experiences, without shame or judgement or inducing adult anxieties. This is a call to any adults

²⁸ It should be noted however, that Instagram has a problematic record of filtering content that challenges the status quo. Instagram brings normative identities to the top of the algorithm (white, attractive, able-bodied, rich, etc.) while (Gerrard & Helen Thornham, 2020) shadow-banning non-dominant identities and anti-imperialist content. Relying on social media companies to be leaders in critical content filtration is misguided.

who care for and work with girls to hone their listening skills and be critical of the ways their emotional responses might be buttressed by oppression informed narratives. Finally, since much of the harm the girls are experiencing online comes from men and boys, first and foremost we must dismantle the patriarchy and our sex gender system, part of which means countering narrow notions of masculinity. We desperately need men and boys to speak out, stand up, and join women and girls and queerfolk when harm has been done in the name of masculinity. Jackson Katz is an important resource on how to support men and boys to challenge masculinity. He works with men and boys to think critically about how media portrays masculinity as inherently violent and how society denies them access to empathy. Katz also focuses a lot of his work on encouraging men and boys to stop being “bystanders” (Katz, 2018). This solidarity must happen online and on social media. For example, men and boys should be encouraged to participate in solidarity movements like UN sponsored HeforShe (2024), which is often used as a hashtag and shared via social media—i.e. it is a form of digital activism. Within that girls need to be supported in developing feminist language in order to be able to speak about and against such experiences of harm. One way to do this is through storytelling, as suggested by Bernier and Winstanley (2021). As girls tell stories of their lives, they have the opportunity to think critically about how their experiences are gendered. Girls have the capacity to notice the contradictions in their lives and can develop this critical feminist lens for themselves. Another way to promote the development of feminist language is engaging in storytelling of “everyday sexism” as suggested by Sara Ahmed (2017).

Everyday Sexism so important and compelling is that it shows how the cataloging of instances of sexism is necessarily a collective project. The project involves the creation of a virtual space in which we can insert our own individual experiences of sexism, sexual violence, or sexual harassment so that we show what we know: that this or that incident is not isolated but part of a series of events: a series as a structure (p. 30).

Digital spaces where girls (and women) can share their stories, of sexism but also racism, ableism, and all intersecting forms of oppression, offer opportunities similar to what Bernier and Winstanley are suggesting. The more these experiences are spoken into being, the more critical thinking around why and how they occur, will lead to thinking about what we can do to enact change. In general, regardless of the medium, methodology, or program, for girls to develop a feminist language that can contextualize their experiences, we need to create safer spaces for girls to explore and connect with each other and others (see recommendation below).

Ensuring Privacy: In conjunction with reducing harm, I would suggest increasing or ensuring privacy, something the girls deeply desired and strategized to maintain. The girls were very aware that control over their privacy could be lost at any moment. They understand that social media companies are mining data and collecting their information. Scams and data breaches are real, and the girls are doing their best to navigate such a treacherous landscape. Media literacy programs typically focus on teaching girls to be critical of and reject harmful gendered norms and images while increasing their self-esteem (of which I already discussed is a potential trap). Computer software courses also enable girls to learn the intimate workings of computer and digital technology. This is not to say these programs are not helpful. Although these likely need to be redeveloped, especially in public schools, as Share et al. (2019) argues, “not many educators have been prepared to teach students how to think critically with and about the media and technology that engulf us” (p. 1). While Currie and Kelly (2022) highlight that critical media literacy curriculum is not often included in teacher programs in Canada. Beyond including basic critical media curriculums for public school teachers and students across Ontario and Canada, there is an additional form of knowledge, similar to financial literacy, that is becoming more and more necessary for the average person, that of digital safety literacy. A Canadian nonprofit,

MediaSmarts (2024) has been working on a digital media literacy curriculum which includes topics like reading media, media representation, ethics, media authentication, mental health, consumer awareness, and more. Their education program also includes a section on privacy which is similar to what I am suggesting, and we need programs like this and more. Privacy curriculums would include things like how to protect your data, how to understand terms and conditions or user agreements, important privacy settings for various websites and apps, how to spot scams, protecting passwords and logins, and more. Including these as part of public-school curriculum is essential. Furthermore, what is not always happening in overall youth digital media literacy programs, is a targeted focus on girls and their intersecting identities. The way information in a privacy curriculum is presented would therefore need to be specific to girls, not youth or people in general. Other intersecting identities should be included as well but since this recommendation is for girls, that is the main focus. For example, there is a plethora of research around scams that target the elderly (Toomey, 2023), but it is difficult to find research around scams that specifically target girls. These digital literacy programs focusing on girls' experiences would have to engage in research around exactly how these topics relate to girls. These curriculums would also need to be tied to funding that would support the girls in relation to the issues, for example grants for girls to purchase password management software like 1Password. That the girls want to protect their privacy is something they told me directly, so this is not a recommendation about what I think they want. In a just world, girls would not have to endure such labour and bear this responsibility, but the reality of online insecurity is not going anywhere, and it is potentially increasing. Adults in their lives should support them in managing what amounts to a part-time job trying to protect one's privacy online. Yet we also want to share and co-create knowledge around how they can be empowered to protect their privacy on their own terms.

Creating Safer Spaces: To even attempt to action the recommendations above, requires creating safer spaces for girls to discuss, exist, learn, share, and grow. To develop research with girls, challenge harmful narratives, create opportunities for connection, and reduce digital harm, there need to be spaces where girls can feel safer. As with any action involving girls, safer spaces for girls needs to be developed *with* girls, what do safer spaces mean to them? However, to get them into the room in the first place, we need some initial ideas. I believe my model for creating welcoming and safer spaces for girls to discuss their experiences worked well, with of course room for improvement. This means safe spaces should include: flattening power as much as possible (voluntary, paid, collaborative, reciprocal), creating a warm and welcoming environment (making the space judgement and shame free), and actively listening to the girls (repeating back what they said with support and curiosity). The physical space and accessibility are also important. In-person meetings may work for some girls while virtual meetings work for others. Some girls might prefer to write, speak, or communicate through images and/or art. Girls also might feel safer being guided by adults who share similar life experiences or identities with them. To successfully support girls, we need to meet them where they are and welcome them into connection.

8.5 Future Research

Firstly, as the Girl/girl is in a constant state of becoming, so too should the research around this becoming. The Girl/girl of the present moment will not be the same in the future and how the girl comes to be “known” in the collective consciousness will undoubtedly change. Girlhood studies research needs to continue “mapping” the Girl and how narratives of the Girl, girls, and girlhood are used in service to systems of oppression. Through this, harmful discourses can be challenged in the collective consciousness to create new imaginings of girlhood. This then creates space for real girls to develop for themselves—a meaningful social, metaphysical, and psychic life.

Second, there are a variety of inroads to research that tether to the overall digital girl project, some practical and others abstract. As briefly mentioned above, research into digital scams that specifically target girls will promote focused, intersectional, and holistic digital literacy programs. Another interesting yet glaring gap in the literature is how incarcerated girls are accessing, using, and experiencing social media (if at all). This could offer a fascinating discussion around the existence (or not) of incarcerated girls' digital activism in relation to the criminal justice system and restorative justice. Artificial intelligence is another important and explosive topic that needs to be explored in relation to girls and girlhood. What does artificial intelligence mean for the assemblage of the Girl? How does it influence online gendered experiences? Another topic relates to one of my favorite codes, "time" as the girls were strongly concerned about "wasting" it. From what I could find there is minimal research that focusses on the intersection of girlhood, conceptions of time, and digital media. I find the philosophical nature of time quite interesting, and this would be something I would like to more deeply explore in the future. The girls in my study did not discuss their sexuality much and more specifically, did not mention online pornography at all. Research around online pornography topics is limiting in that it is too often fueled by adult fears and antiquated notions of girlhood, childhood, and youth sexuality. Youth studies around pornography also too often focus on the experience of boys, which although incredibly important in relation to how they relate to and interact with girls, only tells one part of the story. Therefore, more research is needed on the experiences of girls with online pornography (as well as gender queer youth). Pornography is often referenced in girl studies where another topic is the focus, for example sexting. Studies that directly focus on the relationship between girls and online pornography should think about, if they watch it, how they watch it, what types they watch, what they think about it, how they might experience it as harmful, how it integrates into their

material lives, and even if they enjoy it or find it pleasurable. A study like this would also need to interrogate how these experiences intersect with other identities the girls hold.

Although this research study did not use Queer Theory as a central framework, this theoretical field is deeply connected and integral to feminist studies. Inquiries into girl's social media use from the vantage point of femme theory, queer readings, disidentification, low theory, homosociality, crip theory, varying interpretations of Butler's work, and more, will only add richness to the girlhood studies field. More specifically, as was made clear in my literature review, queer girlhood at the intersection of social media is often absent from dominant texts and their experiences need to be included in generalized studies but also more focused studies. A content analysis of the functionality of search engines and how their algorithms are discriminatory for locating girlhood centred research and information is also important.

Finally, I ended my discussion and analysis with the concept of authenticity because it seems quite poignant within the context of social media. Social media and digital technologies have only expanded philosophical, social, and political reflections on what is "real" and how we define "reality." As a girl-centred researcher keenly interested in girls' online presence and the need for digital activism, my most hopeless moments tend to focus on the horrifying level of misinformation and distorted realities we see rampant in media and Internet spaces. Significant portions of North American populations have structured their entire realities around hate and fear buttressed by oppressive systems and discourses. This dissertation referenced the "manosphere" but there a myriad of other dark corners of the Internet of equal concern given their troubling reach and power. It is therefore important to research how girls are navigating this chaos and how they are (re)defining what authenticity and reality means to them. How are they navigating digital spaces that seem so devoid of reality, all sense of humanity, care, and comprehension are lost?

How are girls choosing authenticity for themselves and how are they naming it in others? What does authenticity *mean* in a digital space for girls? With the current digital realities, it is important to understand how they are authenticating love, kindness, empathy, compassion, and hope.

8.6 Final Thoughts

Given the girl-centred aims of this dissertation, it seems prudent to commence my attempt at some final thoughts with reflections from the girls themselves about participating in this project.

- Claire *I personally feel good because it's a topic that isn't commonly talked about in a normal setting. If I'm with friends, we would usually talk about school, or our fucked-up workload for school, basically school, or music or whatever. So, it's something, you know, something controversial. I feel it's glossed over so much that people kind of, don't really look into it. So, it's nice to reflect on these types of things and share our opinion and our perspective about social media.*
- Sanvi *It was fun being here. You give off a positive energy. You're very bubbly, very fun to talk with too. So, it was really fun being here.*
- Papina *It was really interesting. It was really engaging, like you said at the beginning...feel free to, you know, open space. It felt like a really open space to just voice some ideas. I'm somebody that like, I can be articulate, but sometimes not so much. Because I can talk a lot but I really liked how I [said] something and I start going all over the place, but then you really put it together, [by repeating it back to me]. So, I really enjoyed that. I really liked that part. Because it was very helpful.*
- Miriam *It was fun. I kind of thought that it would be really quiet. I was kind of nervous that no one was gonna say anything and it would be really awkward. But then everyone was talking and that was nice. It also kind of made me realize that I have a lot more opinions about this than I thought I did and a lot more thoughts than I initially realized. I think that it kind of helps that other people were here to kind of get my brain moving as well, which was nice. It was it was really nice talking with all of you.*
- Julia *I would just like to let you know I'm really thankful for you creating such a safe and positive environment and I'm happy to share all my experiences with you.*

In academic work involving research on real-world issues, it is important to be self-reflective and humble. Throughout this work I did my best to be self-reflective and humble toward the knowledge

that came before and the knowledge that was to come through my time in the field. It may not be humble to share all the words of praise the girls offered me, but it does signal that my research might just have been beneficial, even if it wasn't beneficial one hundred percent of the time, beneficial in any quantifiable way, or beneficial in a way I planned. At the end of each interview and focus group I asked the girls to reflect on the experience in this research, and as the quotes above indicate, they found it positive. During our time together, the energy was encouraging and it was apparent the girls enjoyed the experience. This came through in their tone, in the level to which they shared their thoughts and experiences, their obvious enthusiasm to speak to me and with each other, and yes, their final words. In this way my goal that this research espouse feminist values and practices is perhaps achieved. At a basic level, my research fostered connection, restorative connection. The girls connected with me but more importantly with each other. On a deep level, I hope they connected with themselves as well. They shared their joys, concerns, conflicting feelings, contradictions, and critical thoughts. At the end of such a long journey and piece of writing, it is difficult not to offer grand statements of truth or finality. Since I do not believe in ultimate truths, perhaps these will just be grand truths of the moment. This work was challenging and taxing, yet incredibly fulfilling and special. I hope it was meaningful to the girls who allowed me a glimpse of their lives and minds. I am forever grateful, and I truly hope I have done them justice in this work. If there is some way in which I have fallen short, as I hold steadfast on my own journey of feminist informed restorative social justice, I hope to continue to self-reflect and move toward what I define as the ultimate goal of academic work, of my life's work—to create a just world, where people can live and be however they want, free from violence and harm, full of self determination, safety, kindness, compassion, joy, and with the opportunity to openly explore all the messiness and mystery that life has to offer.

This experience has been a privilege.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Findings

*The Findings Appendix is a presentation of code/code cluster quotes that correspond to each theme. This includes quotes directly presented in the discussion and analysis chapters as well as additional quotes that were not specifically used in the chapter but still guided particular codes and the development of their corresponding theme. This allows the reader to then draw their own conclusions around each theme and/or get a deeper understanding of the meaning of each theme.

Theme: Neoliberal and Postfeminist (Digital) Subject Formations

Being Productive:

The first thing I check is my phone, which is not good because, I think the first two hours of the moment you wake up is really crucial. It's like you should do something more productive.

[I follow these accounts for] the motivation that they give, like Inaya said, sometimes when you hear those people's stories, you get motivated to, you know, change your life, and do something.

Sometimes when I use Tik Tok I might feel guilty [and] I guess shame because I could be using that to do something more productive. Actually, I also feel stressed while using Tik Tok because I'm using Tik Tok to procrastinate. In my mind, I'm also trying to stress over the fact that I have homework to be done. So using Tik Tok is a little bit stressful to me as well.

There is a part of it that's fun. If you find content that you like or you like talking to your friends on social media, then it can be really fun. But, just in my personal experience, I'll go on Tumblr or something because I'm bored. Even though I have a lot of stuff to do. I'll have chores or homework to do. But I don't want to do it and so I'll be bored. Because there's nothing to do that I feel like doing. So I'll go on Tumblr or something. Also, it's like, it's fun. But then if there's a lot of posts to look at, because on Tumblr you can get to the bottom of your dash where you're caught up with all the new content that you missed and if there's a lot of posts then it can be exhausting to be on there for so long. It's kind of stressful because it's not just with social media, if I'm doing anything when I know that I have assignments to do, then it's a little bit stressful, even if I'm doing something I enjoy. Because it's like I could be doing something productive.

So, basically, it's time management because I really struggle waking up in the morning. Honestly, I'm not a morning person. But watching this video, even though I'm not waking up in the morning, it kind of like, having the intention to wake up in the morning. It's very great for me. I also think these videos really help me to keep the mindset like, having the habit to wake up and making my bed in the morning, and like having a productive [day].

If I post a lot, because back then I used to. If I post a lot, back then my perspective will be [that] I want them to see me as a productive person who wakes up in the morning and has this lovely breakfast and all that.

Which is why I deleted them for when I'm studying for my exams. I found when you have too much free time you just endlessly scrolling. I figured that's not good for me when I'm trying to be focused.

I put timers on my social apps as well...which I think is a good idea as well. It's like, even if you are on social media, it's also good to balance those like, what were you doing on it? Was it for work? Was it for like, school and stuff? Or was it for your entertainment?

Usually when I use YouTube or something, or Pinterest, I just use it because none of my friends are talking to me, or I'm alone and just can't stand the thought of having nothing to do. I always want there to be something that's going to keep me busy.

I personally enjoy using social media, but I think over time, I get tired of it, but I just can't stand the thought of having nothing to do. So, I just keep on rewatching videos or something.

And then after school, I should be doing homework. but and with scrolling, you have the capability to just open it and look at whatever you want. So sometimes, instead of doing homework, I might be on my phone.

Yeah, productivity would be just the responsibilities I need to get through today. I don't really have a problem with giving myself a break. I think it's actually important to make sure every now and then I just get some time to play around on Instagram, take some dumb Snapchat photos to my friends. But I think the problem lies when it really gets in the way of my responsibilities. Like I know, I have an assignment due in one hour, and here I am on Instagram, scrolling around. That's when I know there's a bit of an issue. I did catch myself being less productive and not really getting to my responsibilities just because social media was eating up too much of my time.

Addiction:

The reasons behind it, honestly Tik Tok is very addicting. Because of how short the video clips are, it's really easy to like, if you don't like the video, you just scroll past it, and you'll find a video that you like. It's really easy to use as well, so it's very, very addicting. I am really afraid of the amount of time I spend on that app. [It] is really concerning to me.

I set [the timer] for an hour because I was like, my screen time was going to skyrocket if I don't...The way I have it set up you can have like, give me one more minute, so I'll finish watching the videos, I'm like, Okay, you need to stop doing this. Or sometimes I just give up on weekends. I'll just call it my cheat day or something, like okay, whatever. It's okay, I can stay up an extra couple of hours just to watch this Tik Tok.

It's like when you're eating chips you are like okay, this is the last one. It's the same thing with Tik Tok.

I guess another negative thing would be people's addiction to social media. Where it's like you're so addicted you feel like you can't put it down. I think that's a problem. I thought people were especially addicted to Tik Tok.

I do believe a lot of girls are addicted to social media, especially making and producing their own Tik Tok and hopefully becoming Tik Tok famous. I think that's a big problem recently. When they stop what they're doing in class to go to a corner and make Tik Toks, I think that's a problem.

What I actually think is bad, [social media] is like alcohol. Because the more you have...the more you drink alcohol, the more you get addicted to it.

It's kind of that dopamine hit, you're like, "yeah that feels good." It's a temporary thing. But I feel sometimes it's addicting.

I'm not really addicted to it. I can restrict myself, especially nowadays, because I have exams I see that I do.

Tik Tok is pretty addicting. You could just tell yourself, I'm just going to spend like five minutes on Tik Tok, but you end up spending two hours just mindlessly scrolling.

Tik Tok can be addicting is because every single video is five to seven seconds long. So if you don't like a video, just scroll down and if you like it you can just keep watching it. I think because the videos are so short, you don't think that you're spending a lot of time on Tik Tok, even though you're spending two hours plus on the app.

With apps like Tiktok and Instagram where there's an algorithm that's giving you content that it thinks you'll like. I think it's easier to stay on it for a while. The app is purposefully giving you content that it thinks that it will get you to stay on the app for longer.

It makes me really stressed out at the end of the day. So I feel like because the addictiveness of social media, a part of me really hates it too, especially Tik Tok, I'm always on Tik Tok, and it really stresses me out.

You can find different things for fashion and stuff. and things that suite your interests and your "For You" page is tailored to you. So, it's really, really addicting.

I'm personally having a more positive experience on social media, except for like the addictiveness aspects.

I feel like if you're in middle school and you don't go anywhere after school or you have any extracurriculars, I feel like having a phone is not really needed. And it can cause an addiction.

I feel like for me, I get hooked on [social media] when I wake up and when I'm about to go to sleep, and then just continue scrolling for like hours.

I was noticing I was using Instagram quite a lot. I was kind of scared it would be somewhat of an addiction. So quitting it for a month proved to me that I would be okay without it.

Speaker 1 Sometimes I watch YouTube and I am really addicted to Tik Tok.

Speaker 2 *Yea me too.*

Eleni *Who else is addicted to Tik Tok? I see a lot of hands raised.*

Perfectionism and Self-Criticism:

Speaker *I actually have a YouTube channel. But it's been a long time.*

Eleni *Were you uploading like videos on there and stuff?*

Speaker *Yeah, I did.*

Eleni *What types of videos were they?*

Speaker *It's just spiritual videos to motivate others. It's been a long time, I forgot about it until you brought it up.*

Eleni *It's funny sometimes a question will spark your memory. No judgment, but is there a reason why you stopped posting? I'm just curious.*

Speaker *I actually got busy with school [and] I don't have any idea of what to do, because I don't... you know if it wasn't something, as I said earlier, like changing the world and posting something really unique. I don't want to post anything that someone already did and it's going to take a lot of time. I don't want to just post something people already see. I want to do something unique that will help me too, not just the person watching it.*

Eleni *Gotcha. So you got busy with school and then it seems like you weren't exactly sure what you wanted to post about, right?*

Speaker *I was just posting, for example, I posted something I made because I gained some skills in grade 10 and it was making videos. I took media art. I was taught how to make videos, editing, and adding features in it. I used to have skills to kind of make the video I did. So that kind of helped me. I think if I have more skills, I'll be able to post more, maybe."*

I actually did [post] on a bad day, I posted a little thing. But then I [thought], why did I post it? It's like, of no benefit, so I deleted it.

You use social media to put your best version forward, most people don't post pictures of themselves when they're crying...they need look their best. They post pictures of themselves when they look their best or they feel their best.

If I'm making a stupid joke, if I say something stupid in real life, I'm not going to post that on the internet, because it's stupid. I don't want other people to see that.

They only post the stuff that they think is really good, which I know that every artist does. Then other artists on the internet who see that are going to think, "wow they're so much better than me because I make all this bad art."

Choosing a profile picture does definitely lead to a lot of fear of judgment because I know everyone's going to be able to see that. Even if you're not following [me], you could still see the profile picture. So I think having a profile picture is definitely one of the biggest pressures.

Discord does leave me with some negative feelings sometimes, especially when things don't go right in the game or when things are going south. I can feel disrespected sometimes especially because if I'm underperforming, people can get mad at me. Which leads to me feeling really annoyed and withdrawn too. That also leads to like sadness, you know, I feel kind of disappointed in myself for not being able to perform as well. Also, powerless and ashamed just because I wasn't able to do good enough in the game.

Sometimes I'll think of making a post...and then usually I don't just because I think people will think that I'm lame... what if I make a post about this fandom and they'll think I'm cringe?

They post only for the "likes" or people to like it. And if for example, they don't get enough likes or something, they'll delete the post cause they'll think it wasn't worthy.

Time:

Although, it does come to a problem with the reels, because if you touch one, then you're just in it forever. Which I also have a Tik Tok, which I feel like it's pretty common. And I had to put a time limit on it. Because, you know, again, once you open it, you're just there forever.

I have something on my YouTube that it's mostly you know like, Oprah, like some kind of motivational things like that. And basically, when I watch it once and I keep watching it, like basically, automatically, it kind of calms down my scrolling thing. And it's very easy for me not to waste my time scrolling.

Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat. But I would say that those definitely kind of when they have free, when we have free time. That's one of the first things that we go to. Yeah, which is why I deleted them for when I'm studying for my exams. I found when you have too much free time you just endlessly scrolling.

It has to have a purpose for me, and I actually need to be conscious of how I spend my time...I mean, when I sit on my bed and I don't have anything to do with schoolwork, it feels weird. I actually think I have a lot of time now, it's definitely [spent] scrolling through social media. I guess when girls do get free time or if they don't, depends on who you're talking to, we do tend to use social media a lot more.

I realize I spend most of my time on social media, which I should not.

I have a timer on my app I mean on my phone, which like basically tells me when I've been on the app for like, 30 minutes, and I think at that point, like, I realize it's been enough time and I get off.

Personally, for me, if I don't have lots of work to do, I tend to watch YouTube for the entire day. For me if it's a school day, I'll probably, that little time space between entering school, like, staying at your desk and before school's starting, you have a little bit time to do whatever you want. So, I'm usually on my phone, I'm scrolling on Instagram, looking at my friends posts and other people's posts and just random stuff.

I normally don't touch my phone [or] go on social media during school, but sometimes when I get home, I have some time before doing my homework or eating dinner. So, I would usually scroll through Tik Tok and because there's no commitment.

It's so easy on Tik Tok but sometimes I do get sidetracked there and stay on social media for far too long.

Sometimes I'll go on Pinterest. I don't use Pinterest that much. But sometimes when I do go on Pinterest, like the rare times that I do, I'll stay on there for hours just looking at fan art and stuff.

Every couple hours I usually go on my phone, answers snaps, [and] answer texts. But I wouldn't say I'm on it all the time.

Mostly it just stresses me out. I watch a lot of commentary videos on YouTube. I learn a lot just about the culture of what other people my age are doing from that. It seems like Tik Tok, it's interesting in a lot of ways, but it's also kind of terrifying, because they intentionally make it more than any other platform so that...you're not only being sucked in, but also all the content is under three minutes, and like a lot of time it's like 30 seconds or so. And that has kind of damaged people's attention spans.

It's becoming a bit of a problem where I have so much work right now, but I'm like, I could spend another 15 minutes. Then it [becomes] another half hour or an hour. I'm on my phone a lot and most of my screen time is made up from like Instagram and Snapchat.

I'm definitely one of those people who are chronically online and I spend the majority of my day on my phone.

It's really concerning, it's like over three hours a day. It's too much.

Honestly, I would love to create content but right now I want to focus on my education and getting my degree of course. If I do have some spare time, maybe I can create my own fashion and makeup content.

I used to watch some YouTubers where they'd go and look for content that's pretty upsetting and then they make jokes about it and it's like, that's cool. I don't know if there's anything wrong with that but then I'm sitting there, and I just sort of feel like I'm staying there for too long just to be

like, “wow look at all these people who don't agree with me, aren't they crazy?” It just kind of makes me feel weird after a while. So, I try to avoid that, too.

Eleni *Why else might we use social media?*

Speaker 1 *To pass the time.*

Money or Wealth:

There's [people] that are supposed to be inspirational or motivational, while they're just downplaying your emotions and your feelings, like no more sad stuff boss up, you can do anything if you have enough money, or it's like, they're really downplaying the mental and social structure that's already set in place that you have to overcome first before most people can achieve what they're talking about.

The problem with social media, is the corporation's running it, being entirely focused on profit, because that's what corporations are for. They're designed to keep you online for as long as possible and that's dangerous and manipulative and toxic.

I literally will sometimes just watch one video and then all of a sudden there will be so many ads like ‘watch it now, buy it now, buy the box set.’ And I'm like, what? That's really weird. That makes me feel kind of strange because I just showed a passing interest in this one thing and then all of a sudden, I'm getting bombarded with ads for it and like... that just makes me a little bit uncomfortable.

Some people are flexing new clothes, new everything, like consumerism, I'm like girl why? Like sometimes it... Yeah, it kind of makes me jealous sometimes. Specifically, when I see people, they have this lifestyle that I want but I know that I'm not there yet in achieving it. Sometimes. I don't know, maybe I should have a different mindset. Maybe I should use that as inspiration. But I'm like, it makes you jealous at times.

As a person who grew up in a poverty ridden rural household, you have to realize you have a place. These people are coming from a place of privilege. So, if you want what they have you have to work extra hard to get there. Because you're already so low, you have to slave yourself and work really hard to get that high.

There's going to be a lot more misinformation, like clickbait. I'm not optimistic about the future, based on what I'm seeing with humanity, because people really want to make money and in order to do that sometimes they have to lie and clickbait. So, that's what's going to happen because money runs the world. I think so. People kind of do everything in their hands to make money. This is my opinion but I feel like people will sell their soul or morals for money.

There's a lot of potential scams, like you sign up for a contest. There's scam burner accounts that come after you saying give us your information and we'll send you the prize money.

I kind of wish that [corporations like Facebook and Instagram would] find another way to make money instead of having this algorithm that makes people feel bad.

It's so weird that people get blinded by money like, [some] campaign is paying them so much money. I feel like they should have some review like, review the ads that companies want to put in there, instead of just letting people because the barrier of entry to make ads is very low because people are greedy. Capitalism, basically.

There's this whole thing [called] "Baby Mama." [Where] everybody wants to be a baby mama. For girls, because of the chance that [he's] probably rich or something so they can provide for them. Or they get themselves caught up, like to follow the celebrity's style of life [and] working. It's very not good for you...because they are celebrities and they have money.

They might post, maybe not a car but a house. It's your parents house or might just be a house they went to for a party. They post the pictures like, "oh they're living lavish." You know, they have money, whereas they probably don't.

I've been getting a lot of spam messages on Instagram saying like, "hey, I need some money can you send me some money" or like, I can't remember the messages off the top of my head. But those kinds of messages saying stuff like, "Hey, I earned some money through this program. You can also earn this much money too if you send me money." I know those are spam messages and so I don't click any of them and just block those messages, but the fact they are getting into my messages is kind of creeping me out.

I think there's some other people that use [social media] just for money or even clout. They see somebody that does a certain type of content and they'll copy it and see if they can gain the same amount of following or even revenue as that person.

People are always talking about the algorithm. So whatever sort of things that the algorithm demands, that's how people try and create their content so that they can make money.

Theme: Modern World (Dis)connections

Ease and Accessibility:

I just like how convenient it is, [how] we could communicate with each other and just see how people [are] living. For example, if I haven't communicated with you in a long time. I now know if you're doing great, instead of me coming all the way to your house.

I used to use Instagram mostly because I had a friend [in another province] and she said her mom took away her phone. All she had was Instagram to talk so when I got Instagram I was like, hey I have it now we can follow each other.

I do think that social media can be enjoyable, especially if you're able to connect with your friends, especially, because you're not always with your friends, you're sometimes at home and they're some other places. So it's really easy to connect with your friends like that.

I realized that I really like taking pictures. Because it's like you're freezing a moment in time and you have this record. So, it's nice. I think for me, when you're hanging out with your friends and you take a picture you have a souvenir. And it's free because you know, you don't have to pay for an Instax camera or a film camera. So, it's really cheap.

It's easier on social media to meet people who have similar interests as you because they're following similar things or they're interacting in similar ways as you. I also find that it's easier to send pictures and memes and such to your friends who are also on Instagram through direct messages.

I'll get messages overnight because again, my friend lives halfway across the world. So, there's that time difference. She'll reply at past midnight or something when it's more convenient for her. So, I have messages from Instagram. I'll get group chat messages and things like that people asking me for homework.

Everyone's on Instagram, too. So, all my classmates, all my friends. I was able to connect with them really easily.

It's just very like, what's the word I'm looking for? Customizable, I guess. I don't have to see anything that I don't want to see. If I want to find something, I can find it really easily. It's super easy to find what I'm looking for. So, it's really accessible in that way.

(In)direct Communication:

I think that the reason a lot of people would initially get it, would be because everyone else is doing it. I know that I got Instagram pretty recently just because I know that all my friends were using it. It's easier to talk to people on an app that everyone else is using.

So [I use it for] communication, in the sense that I'm able to talk to a lot of people at once. I'm able to connect with a lot of people because everyone is using social media at this time.

I usually just take a picture of the ceiling and then send it to my friends. But then I think on the receiving end, I kind of like seeing what my friends are doing. Or sometimes there would be like an occasion one, they would send an interesting picture and then they would, then it would like, spark a conversation.

You don't have to actually talk to people on Snapchat. Who I know, I don't really talk to them, but like, I snap back to them. You could send a picture and then they snap back, and so forth. It just kind of continues. And it's like, you know, I'm not actually talking to you but I'm still connecting with you in a way because I'm just sending a picture or whatnot.

With some of my friends, we do send memes and that's how the conversation starts. You start reflecting on the meme that I just sent or what she just sent, but there's times when we just want to check up on each other. Maybe I had a bad day at school and my friends notice and they'll be like hey, what happened to at school?

I actually think personally, [what's] good about social media is the fact that I could communicate with someone way, way far away from me. I could literally communicate with someone abroad. I mean, I could also communicate with people back home and everything.

For me, it's kind of similar to the other girls I only use Instagram to mainly text my friends or to see when anybody posted a picture or not, or communicate with my family that's not in Canada.

Communication, in the sense that I'm able to talk to a lot of people at once. I'm able to connect with a lot of people because everyone is using social media at this time. For example, there's this friend I have and I don't have her number. If I need to ask her something I just send her a text on Instagram because I have her on there. If, for example, I had this class and I don't understand what's going on, but my friends are not in this class, I could ask someone, like a person that I know in class through it Instagram and ask her the question that I have. So, in terms of communication, it is very powerful in the sense of Instagram and Snapchat as well.

I say communication a lot because I think it's honestly communication. The fact that lots of my friends are going to go out of Toronto for university or just for jobs. I feel like to have a network that I can actually count on to communicate with them, is something that I'm going to miss a lot.

Discord. I use that one because it's pretty popular among gamers and people who play games. Since I do that, it's a great place for me to communicate with other gamers and my friends.

I think I can easily answer this one with just, communication. Because if social media [only] existed as a place to just view news and quotes, it wouldn't really feel the same. Sure, it would still be good. But I think the main reason I really use all social media is just to keep in touch with others. It's important to like, talk with people.

Building Community, Sharing Interests:

I think [having a community on social media] is a positive because social media can be used everywhere you go and it can be there anytime. Let's be honest, sometimes if you're feeling down or you're not [in] such a positive space—having that community on social media, you know, it's not that far. But if it was a physical community, it will be hard to always reach out to that community or be in that community, whereas if it's a social media community it's always there, you can always go to it.

There's so much emphasis on community on Discord. It makes me feel like I'm part of something. I love it because you use it when you're gaming with friends, so it's nice. It's super fun.

On Instagram, just some of my clubs and stuff that I'm part of at school, we would have to connect in some ways and the most convenient way to connect is through Instagram because everyone uses it. So the groups that I'm currently in like, female empowerment club or equity or stuff like that.

I also think that I know a lot of my friends they'll follow mostly the same things that I do. Some of them will follow different things, but it's mostly based on interest and things like that. I know a lot of my friends watch anime, so we'll go and follow anime fan pages.

It showed the model they created for this new city. It's a very futuristic society. I think [social media] is a place to spread information and make things popular.

I used to be really interested in making clay models. I've seen a couple of those when I was younger. And they make their own characters from games and stuff. And then they make them into clay figures. It's really impressive actually.

There's a personal aspect to it where she talks about gender issues and her journey to being comfortable with being single and stuff like that. Her channel is actually pretty big. Another person I subscribe to is Edward Avila. He's a makeup artist but he always collabs with K-pop groups, because I'm also into K-pop.

Personally, I follow, tourists, who go around the world and try different types of food and also pictures like landscapes or nice scenery. I also follow some anime pages, so they just post anime updates, recommendations, just random scenes that you might find adorable.

I think nowadays I'm trying to get into makeup and hair. So most of my content is around beauty, nails, makeup, hair, how to start your own wardrobe, [and] how to start doing your own hair. I'll get a lot of ducklings and puppies and kittens and sometimes all three of them together which you know, it's obviously the best one and sometimes seals but it's typically from like animal-based accounts.

I think in general, social media is really a great place to keep in touch with people. It's also a good place to get to know other people who may have similar interests as you. I think that's what makes it such a great environment. There's also a lot of empowering influencers that are always spreading positive messages and making the day better. I think that's also a really important part. Whenever I see those posts or quotes, it really does enlighten my day.

It's also really interesting that you see others who are interested in similar things as you, I really liked that. I'm always very curious when I go on social media because everyone always has a different perspective on the things that they're posting and/or doing. When you see that, like the YouTubers who react things, every one of them has a different thought [or] perspective. So, it's interesting. It's like you're nosy, you want to know what everyone else is thinking.

Recently I shared a post of an organization I'm part of because there was an event and then I was on the picture. I'm like, okay girl, like, yeah. I guess it helps with the exposure of the club.

It's just a personal thing to remind me of my prayer. I could see personal inspiration quotes and all that. Yeah, I think that also community things that I could see, like what people are doing in the community.

I also think it's a good way to share your experience or the change you would like to put in the world. Do you want to make a difference? What do you think is not good about the society or the community you live in? I think it's a really great way to share your experience.

For Instagram it's mostly to just involve[ment] in the community and stuff. There're different accounts I follow. Especially also because I play basketball, I'll just follow those basketball accounts, keep up to date with those. That's what I use if for, to keep up to date with stuff and also just coaches that message my Instagram.

I want to connect with people who have the same interests. I feel like, there's this thing, be the energy you want to attract. So, I'm trying to be the energy I want to attract.

It's easier on social media to meet people who have similar interests as you because they're kind of following similar things or they're interacting in similar ways as you.

I personally use Twitter a lot. A lot of people in our age group don't use it as much. But I like Twitter because you can find a lot of people in your similar interests and interact with them. That's really fun.

I follow different vinyl businesses because I collect vinyls. I just love it. So, obviously I follow more to see more different record stores to see what they have. See what I can get, it's kind of like loophole.

I know sometimes people have spam accounts. They'll share things that they're excited about but only to their close friends who they actually want to tell. Then you can have conversations with them based on those things. They'll also share about their interests and be like, 'hey I'm excited about this.' Then hopefully other people also get excited about it or elicit some type of reaction that's along the lines of happiness.

I think my Instagram feed is pretty diverse. I have sports content, make-up content, dance content, just like all my interests in one account. It's pretty diverse, like the content I see on my Instagram page, and Tik Tok.

When I see posts that relate to my culture or who I am, it definitely makes me feel very comfortable. And I'm not the only one. There are also other people who have the same traditions and have the same sense of humor, same interests, and that definitely makes me feel very valued, I guess.

What I also like about social media is that I can learn new language. I can communicate with other people who are willing to teach me new language, we could do like a language exchange. I could teach them my language while they could teach me their language. I really like that about social media.

Theme: Desiring Control in a Chaotic World

Adult Restrictions:

When I was younger, my mom was always very anti social media. I didn't get any form of social media until grade nine, when she let me get Instagram, because my school posted updates there.

When I first started, I was really apprehensive because me and my mom share my Facebook account, so whatever I do on Facebook, she can see it.

I think I kind of agree with Julia's perspective on the age restriction. Grade 7 and 8 is a good age to have social media because you're supposed to go to high school and some of your friends may be leaving so you want to stay in touch with them. That's a good age to have such restrictions. But despite the restrictions you still can't be like, 'Okay, are you sure you're this age?' You know what I mean? There are 5-year-olds, their parents make accounts for them. I think there should also be a restriction for if you can make an account for your children or not, cause they're babies and you want to make an account for them, because you can profit off of it for making money. But how about when they grow up? How sad, because it's not like everybody wants their childhood to be publicized.

Something I've noticed is that younger kids, even prepubescent, they're kind of sexualizing themselves, whether they realize it or not, and it's really weird that they're just putting out publicly, like a 10-year-old twerking. I don't know, I feel like it's not even their fault necessarily. It's like, what is the world or what are their parents telling them? Where does it come from? Because I feel like it is the internet but it's also people in their lives who tell them it's okay if you do this or they can put more control over like, 'oh, I don't want you going on Tik Tok this young because I don't think it's good for you.' Or 'I don't want you posting on Tik Tok because I don't want people to see you dancing and such a weird way, like provocative.'

My mom, she doesn't like social media. I didn't ask her, and she doesn't know but I have a Tumblr account that I use a lot. That's what I use more than anything. I don't have any other social media, but I just have my little Tumblr account that I use.

I think that something that we should change would be the age restriction because there's a lot of kids on social media nowadays and I really feel that's unsafe. Even though, I think the minimum age for signing up for like Facebook and Instagram is like 12 or 13, I still feel like that's a little bit young. They should probably increase that to like 14 or 15. Because that way, [they are] more mature and you know how to look out for yourself a bit more.

I mostly use Instagram because it is the only social media app I'm allowed to use. After all, my mom says Snapchat tracks our location and that TikTok has too much explicit content.

I was not allowed to have any form of media until I was really in my late teens and only a couple years ago, I got a phone. Only a couple of years ago, like last year, I was allowed to be on Instagram and Facebook.

I think it depends on the age and when they start using it. I feel like the younger they start using social media and especially if your page is not monitored by parents or people of maturity, I don't want to say just parents because some parents are not that mature. If you don't have maturity, then it will begin to have a negative effect on them.

I feel like they'll probably have more independence, because I know lots of kids who are on social media nowadays, they have parental supervision. They're not really used to exploring the apps

freely. I think they'll have more independence when they're my age. Maybe even inspired to become their own content creators and promote their own content that they feel happy about.

Social Media Algorithms:

There's also a way to tune your feed based on algorithms and what posts you like and who you follow, that can make it a more positive experience for you.

I found a lot of body positive accounts because I myself am a bit of a chubby girl. I find that I feel better when on my feed I don't see people expressing unhealthy ways of living.

Yea I feel on Instagram, I'm a bit biased and not a big fan of Instagram. Because, I mean, [its] basically the same for each platform. I feel like the Instagram algorithm makes it worse. So for Instagram, I think I read some research paper that the algorithm makes you feel worse or have some negative emotion related to it, then they'll make you hooked.

When Claire was talking about an algorithm. I also noticed that and it's a super good point, because Instagram is also run by the people who run Facebook. They both have the algorithm of things you watch, posts you like, or people you follow. They recommend you things based on the things that you have shown interest into because you involuntary sign up for it and they're just giving you all the stuff that they think you would like. It's really annoying.

I don't use Tik Tok, but I do know that the algorithm specifically is tailored to show people who are conventionally attractive and conventionally attractive includes white or whiter features. Even on people of color they are going to show people with color who have more white features. That skews your perception of what people look like, because it's always going to be, you know, that sort of thing.

I know, a lot of things went around with thin-spiration and stuff. It's still going around, but not on my feed anymore, so we moved on from that one. You can get a lot of really negative things. But there's also a way to tune your feed based on algorithms and what posts you like and who you follow, that can make it a more positive experience for you.

How they know exactly what's going on in my head sometimes that algorithm is freakishly right. It could be something I was thinking about or something I said to a friend.

It's a tricky question cause Instagram feeds in, has this like, weird algorithm that makes people feel bad. For me though, I personally enjoy it, but I respect other people who do and who don't.

It also depends on the content that's portrayed on your social media. Some people say very negative things. Some people because the algorithms depend differently for each person. So, if you stay on the positive side, you're more likely to feel positively about social media while you're using it. whereas I feel like, we're always on the negative side, liking things that are more negative, or people are sending you things that are negative. Your algorithm will change from that kind of social media.

I don't think everybody has the same experience on social media because everyone's perspective and view is very different. Also, everyone's account is different. Even if you follow the same account, you may not like the same thing. So, your algorithms will be very different.

Social media is so broad, you can be surrounded in different areas of social media...websites track your cookies. So, I'm pretty sure they probably measure your personality based on how fast you type or how fast you move your mouse based on certain situations and they try to read your personality because they can manipulate you, you know, into voting for certain presidents like they did in the past. I think it's definitely going to be different for all the people because they're going to see different things, thanks to the algorithm. The algorithm is going to change the way they think and the way they're going to interact with social media.

Social media can accidentally push someone who's like, I don't know how to phrase this in a way, like casually racist into sort of more extreme views that can be even more detrimental just because it's giving them the content that they wanted and they initially engaged with. So, I think that making algorithms less scary, would be something that I would want to change about social media.

There are maybe posts or accounts that might make you feel bad about your body or life, but that then you can maybe potentially curate your algorithm to get those accounts and those posts that are not going to do that right, that are [instead] going to bring enjoyment for you while you're using the app.

In terms of the algorithm, its job is to put you into a specific box. This isn't a common thing, but I'm regularly clearing my browsing history and my cookies and switching browsers and making sure, all of that stuff. I don't trust tech companies.

I think that, in general, maybe they should make the algorithms a little bit less harsh, because as much as I love my weird duckling videos that I get, I think that maybe we could expand that more so that people get more variety into what they like. It would give more of a chance for people to find new interests, learn new things, you don't only get your own perspective.

I'm very careful [with] my algorithms. On Tik Tok, I'm careful which videos I specifically choose to watch. For example, I don't know how the algorithms work, but the first 7 seconds of a video, if I don't like it, I scroll through it. If it's a video that's not the kind of content I want to see I might block it.

If I follow you, it's probably because I know you or because [it's a] Biblical slash Christianity pages. But even then, I don't follow them as much because I don't like following people, I'd rather just scroll through my 'for you page' on Tik Tok and see whatever comes. But then again, the algorithm is kind of geared my 'for you page' to biblical and Christianity kind of pages, and then also entertainment.

Privacy:

There's always the awareness that there are people out there that will use social media for their own advantage, and that may cause you to leak your own personal information. I think you should be cautious, regardless of if you are on social media or if you're not social media.

I feel personally, if you do the right things to make sure your identity is hidden online, then it's a bit safer for you.

With social media platforms, I kind of wish that they were, more upfront about what they're doing with our data because basically we are the product, our data is a product, with Facebook, Instagram, because they're selling it to companies. I kind of wish that they are more upfront about it because they're being cunning about getting our data. You have to dig into stuff in order to turn it off.

I made my accounts on private. You know who [is] following you and what they know about you. I feel you're more safe to post the things about you like, if you post a joke or a meme or a picture of yourself or something. It's not going to be received as negatively because people who you let follow you are your friends.

A lot of my friends on social media also have private accounts.

I really liked how they have a feature that tells you when somebody screenshots a conversation. There's the setting, if you want something to be automatically deleted, there's the setting for that. So, I really like that. Because if I'm talking about, like a secret, or I'm having a serious conversation that I want to be really private. Let's say, I'm having problems, and I don't want other people to know about it, then I can use Snapchat if I want to, to talk about it. Because you have so much control.

On Instagram I have two accounts. I have a main account, which I post pictures that are possible for my main feed. Then I have a private account. I call it the spam account. I just kind of take pictures of random things, mainly of places I go to that I find interesting and then a bunch of pictures of myself, like selfies, or pictures that my friends take of me.

For Instagram, I have maybe two accounts because one is for school and the other one is for me to follow. I have two accounts one is for any volunteer place I'm volunteering at. So, I follow that and my second account is for personal, for school, basically.

So that's where everything's on privately but we reported it to Instagram and Facebook, but nothing was done for the harassment. So, if people have a legitimate claim, there should be more action to deal with that claim.

I basically posted so much and because I wasn't thinking, you know, I didn't know that a lot of people can find out things based on what I'd post. So, I had so much stuff. I had to delete some things about myself, just for privacy reasons. It's hard because it's already [out] there and cleaning it up is not the easiest thing to do. So, I feel unsafe, and sometimes.

I think that being online doesn't necessarily mean that you're unsafe, there are ways to protect yourself, such as making your account private, or making it so that you have to accept your followers and friend requests from only people that you know. But I think if you make things public, it can be unsafe pretty easily.

I already have restrictions on comments. You can choose what works. So, somebody like has specific words they can't post those kinds of words under comments. You can also restrict how many comments we get. Or if you don't want people to comment under your posts.

You can't control other people's actions. So, if someone's going to be creepy towards you, you can do much to prevent that. It's not like people who get harassed online, it's their fault for not being safe, but there are safety precautions you can take. On Instagram you can make your account private. And just the stuff that you post, if you don't share your real name, or your face on the internet, that kind of helps.

I'm a very private person as well and so I don't share anything on social media. There's no pictures... any pictures. I don't post pictures. The only pictures I post are on my story because they're 24-hour pictures, so I don't mind them. The pictures I do post on those stories I always make sure no one sees my face just for privacy reasons.

I have my own private account where it's like, if I don't know you, you can't follow. It's private, it stays private.

I felt pretty unsafe because I have my private information on my account, like where I live, my email, my name, [and] my age. So, the hacker could have used that personal information against me. Or maybe identity fraud.

I'd say that like, mainly [girls accounts] are private, but there are a few popular kids who would prefer having a higher follower count. So, they just make it public.

Theme: Navigating (Digital) Harms

Men/Boys, Harassment, Haters, Sexist Content:

I do have a friend who likes to post pictures of herself when she's at parties and stuff like that on social media, because like, why not? A lot of the times she would get these creepy messages from old men asking her if she can be [their] sugar baby. It's really disgusting and really scary knowing that older men are having these views of a 16-year-old girl.

If you're a girl, you're so prone to weirdos messaging you, like really weird messages, unusual messages. I have sisters, all of my siblings are girls. We kind of gloss it over and [don't] really talk about these types of things, but I think that people should talk more about how social media is affecting them. But based on [my] observation, they get messages from grown men and they're both minors.

Speaker 1 *Me and my friend got texted by this guy who was like, I'm looking for a sugar baby. [Everyone laughs].*

Speaker 2 *Oh god.*

Grace *Like your reward is... I don't know why it's funny to me. Maybe that's like, I don't know, it shouldn't be funny. But he's like, your reward is this every week, I will give you rewards you will be spoiled. All my friends got this. I got a text on Instagram.*

Eleni *So it was on Instagram?*

Speaker 1 *Yeah, random men.*

Speaker 1 *I remember from one instance, this one guy, he texted me, and he was asking for nudes. And he said that he would send me money if I sent him the nudes.*

Speaker 2 *Oh my gosh*

Speaker 1 *I remember feeling uncomfortable. I reported his accountant and blocked him right away.*

Eleni *What platform was this on was this on? Instagram, Snapchat...*

Speaker 1 *It was Instagram.*

Eleni *Yeah, that sucks. So, you did report him and he did get blocked? Did it stop after that?*

Speaker 1 *Yeah, it stopped.*

I noticed a lot how some girls dress on social media, they get kind of, I don't know if it's offensive language, [get] slut shamed. You understand why people are doing that, but you don't understand. You understand what they're seeing and why they're saying what they're saying; but like, you don't. Like, don't say it to people like that. That's mean. But also, it's weird when people want people to dress like that but then they get offended when they do.

I think the negatives are, there are haters out there and there are people that are posting that influence the wrong age groups. I think there's this guy named Andrew Tate, and his whole persona is revolving around using women as slaves, abusing women, basically radicalizing the younger generation of men to abuse women in their daily lives.

Whenever I see any sexist comments, which do come up every now and then where people will think lower of girls. Like recently, I think Andrew Tate was under fire for saying some controversial things.

But there's even like, those really strange podcasts, which are run by men with a bunch of women in the room, and then the men will be like, oh, yeah, well, I only like women when they can only cook, like that type of thing.

[Social media] becomes really negative, especially for girls. Because often, let's be honest, a lot of things that are posted on social media are geared towards girls. Even if it's not, like, consciously or intentionally, it still becomes more so a woman's problem I guess I should put it. For example, it's a really long while ago but the whole... I don't know if you've heard of the Megan Thee Stallions shooting? That's the thing I can think of off the top of my head. [In] the comments...there will be women that are supporting her, but the comments are also men just belittling her, sexualizing her all that kind of stuff.

Speaker 1 *We actually had this whole expose page on my school. People exposed their friends. There [were] lots of negative things being said about students at my school.*

Eleni *An expose page? Could you explain that to me?*

Speaker 1 *Say that you're having drama with somebody at my school, you can [post] them on the exposed page, and the person that owns the page will post it. So basically, the whole school can see what's happening.*

Eleni *It'll be an explanation of the drama? Like this person did this to me and it'll be just like, an explanation of the drama that's happening?*

Speaker 1 *Yeah, it can be negative, it can be pretty nasty...since the majority of the population at my school has social media. There were lots of pictures going around, lots of nasty words being thrown out. People were definitely getting exposed more. It makes you feel like they can't really trust their own friends at that period of time.*

Speaker 1 *Someone decided to open some mask fishing account and I think that was something that a lot of people feared because like, what if they get exposed for being a mask fish. Are you familiar?*

Eleni *No, what's mask fishing?*

Speaker 1 *So mask fishing is you put on... when you're wearing a mask, you look different than without a mask, right?*

Eleni *Oh, yes like a COVID mask. I was thinking like a mask when you go to a ball or something. Okay yes, so I know what mask fishing is, please continue.*

Speaker 1 *They were exposing people who were mask fishing and I think that made a lot of people feel quite unsafe, because what if they get exposed next? What if people leave bad comments on it? That account got shut down pretty quickly but still, that was one time where I was kinda unsafe, you know, I felt a bit scared.*

Sometimes there are things that I just don't know and then I ask for help from friends and most of the time they would be guys. Then they would make this like, joke. It's like, a woman moment. Basically, what it implies is that, oh, you suck at computers, or you suck at this because you're a woman, or something like that.

So, if you look at my posts on Instagram, it's compliments from women. I think that I've been really lucky that women I'm surrounded with are really supportive, and supportive with my decisions in life. I've never had an encounter when I was put down by women, or something. Unless it's a funny, harmless joke with my friends, my interactions with women yeah, it's amazing. Then I think if you're women and you're online, it's inevitable for you to get creepy, weird messages that are asking for your selfies. Like, what the fuck, sorry for the profanity.

I think as females in general, we're already over sexualized, and on Instagram, and Tik Tok that happens more, which kind of makes it unsafe for females. I believe for me, if I posted a picture, and lots of the older guys were texting me and trying to interact me. They could kind tell that I am under age, but they didn't really care. So, I feel for females it is way harder on social media.

Then there's other people, I'm using gamers [as an example], because it's the first thing that popped in my head. This guy who tries to preach the Bible while he plays games and he's just, completely being a terrible person while he does it, on social media, like Twitch and such, trying to preach the Bible and saying that you're going to go to hell, if you don't believe in God. Very, very terrible guy.

Mostly it is unsafe because like there could be a lot of issues for girls. They could face anxiety, depression, and all that. It could also lead to long-term effects on girls. For example, like a girl actually sent a picture to a guy she was trying to make friends with. But the guy tricked her, that he is going to post the picture on social media or send it to her parents, which could actually lead to something that could ruin her whole life.

Another thing I'd like to see is more female perspectives, because like we previously mentioned, it's really male dominant. Males mostly have control over the content on there. So, I feel like having more female's perspectives on it would be nice.

In terms of males, I think it depends on what age you are, because I have heard about issues where people, well older men will target these younger boys to send these photos. So, I think if you're older, as a male, [social media] should be [safer].

I don't think it can be safe for some females because I've heard about my friends. One of them, she got this message when she first opened her Instagram account, and it was asking her to do this and do that. Basically, she was being harassed by this man.

I do have friends who have more negative experiences on social media, especially when creepy old men are messaging.

This has mostly happened to my sister, but she gets texts all the time from creepy guys like, 'hi my name is James Bruce. I thought you looked very pretty, and I'd like to ask you if you want to hang out' or something, like weird stuff like that.

In fandom culture, there's a lot of sexism and racism. Specifically, people will place high emphasis on male characters over female characters, no matter [what]. If there's a really well-rounded female character, they might not focus on her at all. But if there's a male background character who shows up for five minutes, they'll be like, 'this is my favorite character, he's the best.' It's not like that it's inherently bad to take a character that doesn't have a lot of presence in Canada and extrapolate them into something new. That's fun and that's cool and that's what I really liked about fan culture, that you can do things like that. But also, it's almost always [an] emphasis on male characters, or male white characters. Characters of color, women of color are just not as focused on in fan cultures.

They're on social media and they look older, much older than they are. There are random accounts following them and telling them how pretty they are. Then it's like, oh good I'm being validated. So, you're a young girl but you look like you're 18 years old and there's a grown man telling you how beautiful you are. All sudden you feel loved and you feel validated, and that becomes a problem. Because they don't see you as a young girl or as a child. And they shouldn't see just as a child, but you know, to them their mind it's 'oh you're 18, I could do this and this and this. Oh you're 18, I can talk to them anyhow, this and that.' So, I think that's when it becomes a problem where to certain people, you're no longer a child, you no longer somebody that still needs taking care of. You're a grown person. You can make decisions for yourself. And even if you make those decisions for yourself, you're grown enough to face the consequences.

I'm like, okay, this girl was totally hacked. So, I think it becomes so unsafe, where even the people you know are getting hacked. And it's grown men doing this.

Social media gives people a way to cyberbully you basically. It's different if you're messaging people with just your phone number and they don't have your phone numbers, so you're kind of okay. But when you have social media and they know you have social media, they can go out of their way to attack you in a different way.

For some reason, girls, when they bully each other, it feels more cutthroat than the guys. I don't know why, it feels more scary when girls bully girls. Then if you throw in race, and if you have a different gender identity, like if you use she/them or she/they pronouns, and people get kind of weird about it. There's so many things nowadays that can separate you from everybody else. That it makes it 10 times easier for someone to find the smallest thing, to just blast at you. It's so mind boggling, because it's like, why do we do this? Why do we pick on the smallest insecurities?

I've definitely noticed a lot when a kid posts something, when [you] scroll through the comments and take the time to look. All these accounts that are messaging them or hating on them or being any kind of creepy to them. They're all adults, older men, older women. It's like, what are you doing?

I have been bullied online once and those were some very horrible things, but I brushed it off. It hit me for one second, but they weren't worth even looking at. Now that I think of it, I wish I would have said something like, 'you think your useless words will hurt me, not even close, go back to your useless life.' Because that would have just spited them, and they would get so angry and spend like an hour blowing up my phone saying all kinds of things. While I would have just muted the chat and went on with my day. I felt unsafe in a bullying experience before this online thing, so I guess it toughened me up in some ways.

I have this other girl she wasn't really my friend. She didn't really like me but on social media she posted a picture. It was a picture of herself, and she is of a heavier set and she always felt she was getting made fun of at school for it...but she posted a picture [and] she said 'like a single Pringle.' Then the only comment on that picture was 'you mean forever single' and it had an absurd amount of likes for how rude of a comment that was. When you go to school to report that she's being bullied the administration at school makes fun of her for how she is whether it be weight or personality, which they're not supposed to do.

In public, if someone does something inappropriate, then other people can see it. But, if you private message someone where no one else can see it and the person you're messaging can't see your face, then you can send sexual messages, you can send mean messages, you can send death threats and stuff [which] I know are pretty common. People I feel are more bold with saying bad things on the internet, because they have this sort of mask of anonymity. Because if the person who is saying bad things, or doing bad things, if they don't share their name or their face then no one can really connect it back to them. Which I think makes people a little bit braver about saying bad stuff to people.

There's this quote and it's like, give someone a mask and they'll show you their real face. I feel like that really defines social media. Because it's so scary how people are not scared to say anything on social media. Even in real life if they're just going to stay quiet, [but] on social media, they're like a whole different person. And you don't know where it's coming from because it's online.

I think [getting bullied is] worse if it's in the comment section because it's public so a lot of people can see it and they can also join in in the bullying. So, it's more people just ganging up on you. If it's in the DMs there can be less people, compared to comments.

I think you have to be able to not get too focused on the negatives of what people tell you. I know for a fact what you post, you're going to get a majority nice amount of comments, like hey this is actually really nice and cool. And there's going to be those one or two guys or people who are just like, this isn't pretty, you're ugly or the thing that you drew was ugly or this is weird or offensive. But it's like, focus on the positive and take what they say as a negative kind of lightly.

If they're not strong enough, they might listen to the comments. Let's say they posted a picture of a hobby or a pet and someone left a negative comment. They might not enjoy it as much or be a bit more upset when they think about it.

[A hater is] someone that sees that you're happy and you're doing well and wants to bring you down. This could be a friend, or even a family member that just feels insecure about themselves. They want you to feel insecure as well.

I am Chinese, so I remember when COVID was starting up, there was a lot of posts about COVID. There was also a lot of racist comments about how it's the Chinese virus and such. That definitely did affect me quite a lot, seeing all those comments and such. So, I think whenever I see any messages or comments that attack or insult my identity, or something I identify with, it does make me feel down.

Theme: The Becoming of (Digital) Girl Bodies

There's only one time I ever posted a story and honestly, I really liked the experience because that was the first time I got so many likes and so many shares and so many people saying, 'Oh my God you look so pretty.' I felt really happy on the inside.

I think for girls when it comes to body standards we are supposed to look a certain way and that's really detrimental to kids who are 10, 11, 12 on social media. Are they thinking, 'oh for me to be beautiful I have to get plastic surgery or BBLs to be presentable in society.'

Sometimes girls are viewed as with make up, with flawless hair, with the clothes and then the guys are all like muscular. Yeah, I don't know much about the guys but yeah, they're viewed as that, but you know girls can be like that too. Girls can like fitness related things. Like Zahra said she really likes anything physical.

When I use social media and when I see people with a more quote unquote perfect body, or perfect skin care, perfect life and stuff like that, it does make me feel ashamed of myself and more embarrassed in the sense that like, why can't I have these types of features? Why was I born like this, type of thing. But there's also some people, like female figures on social media, that would spread awareness of their more...I don't know the word for it. For example, like stretch marks, or what's it called, what's the other word for it, like dark spots on your skin, I forgot the word for like acne or pimples, just awareness in those type of things. It makes me feel better about myself in terms of, oh this is actually a normal thing and not everyone has flawless skin. In that aspect social media has a more positive impact on me. So it's always like an either or, I have both negative feelings towards it and to the body image and there's also a positive influence and types of body images as well.

I actually have a friend who always sends me posts of girls that she finds really pretty. She'll send me them and be like, 'Wow, she looks so good with this makeup. Oh my god, her outfit looks so good'. I think she definitely does try to recreate those looks and try to fit into it. Which can be good in a way because it's inspirational, like, 'wow this fit looks really nice.' But at the same time, it can be kind of damaging to your self esteem seeing all these perfect photos, where only the rich can really afford all these procedures and makeup and professional editing. So, you'll basically never be able to get there, which may be very upsetting.

I find that most people will post pictures when they feel good about themselves or a picture that they really liked. I like to comment on my friends posts and be like 'oh my gosh, you look so pretty in this picture' and things like that. So more for uplifting them and things along those lines.

Maybe girls will look at all the celebrities and look at their bodies and think 'oh, they're so skinny, but why can't I be like that' and they might feel hurt. That can lead to disappointment or embarrassment because they don't feel happy about their body. So body image is important.

I think there's this whole trend about the preference thing. I think, especially in the Black community, there was this whole thing, 'oh you prefer light skinned or dark skinned?' And lots of people will say, 'oh I prefer like, lighter skinned women,' and then you'll start bashing darker skinned women. I feel like if you prefer something, if it's about preference, there's no need to bash other people that don't fit your preference.

There's also models on social media, obviously, but like, there's nice little niche ones from photography. They're all so beautiful, and everyone's beautiful, but whatever they are wearing really complements them. [But] when you look in the comments, everyone's like, 'it doesn't match you, it doesn't fit you properly, or go eat more food or eat less food.' So what are we doing?

I was talking with my friend or something before, and they were like, you're trying so hard to be the pretty girl or whatever, because of my posts on Instagram. Someone was telling me that like, 'oh, you try so hard to be that girl' or whatever. So my answer when my friend told me that I'm like, I am the pretty girl, because I want to look confident, right? But then when I think about it, yeah, I kind of want to be the pretty girl because there are privileges, if you're pretty, I guess.

Speaker 1 *Well, I see a lot of negative body standards on social media, like people comparing themselves to others. There's this trend [called] 'God's favorite' because they're good looking.*

Eleni *What's this trend?*

Speaker 1 *People only see their value in looks and the body. That's because they're surrounded on this platform. People want to be like someone, and they just forget who they actually are and that kind of spreads a lot of negativity.*

Speaker 2 *I've seen those videos. There's a really pretty person and they're making this [random] video and the comments will be like, 'Oh your god favourite' and all that.*

Speaker 3 *It's so normalized how people in the comments are like, 'I hate myself, I want to be you.'*

Speaker 2 *Yeah, because you're the chosen one.*

Speaker 3 *There are so many people that think stuff like that. Then once in a while, I see people who are trying to go against what this culture is like, trying to spread*

awareness about how we stop being like that. But then the rest of Tik Tok is not like that.

Eleni	<i>When a girl makes a post, what does she want people to think about her?</i>
Speaker 1	<i>Think that she's pretty.</i>
Eleni	<i>Pretty. Yeah, I see some nodding. What else?</i>
Speaker 2	<i>Validation.</i>
Eleni	<i>OK so a girl might make a post so that friends or random people on the internet think that she's pretty. She might want to get some kind of validation. What else?</i>
Speaker 3	<i>Sometimes their friends comment like, 'oh fire' or 'pretty.'</i>

I mean it really depends on what the post is, like if someone's posting a selfie, then maybe it was because they thought they looked good and they wanted other people to see that.

I feel like a girl posts pictures of thirst traps because she wants attention. Like compliment me blah, blah blah. Also, when you're having a bad day sometimes, I do that. When I'm having a bad day, I just post something so that I can get compliments.

So for Snapchat, I feel like this one's a bit more lighthearted. So it's usually pretty happy and just free and joyful since I know the pictures I take are usually just to close friends. So I'm able to take really goofy pictures with filters and not feel judged or anything because I know we're all just playing around and having fun so I feel thankful when I'm on there.

Again, I don't really post but I've noticed that other people do hype themselves up a lot more. This one girl she [posted about a] day of her at the beach smoking weed with her friends as like, 'I'm the coolest supermodel ever.' Underage drug use, I don't know how I feel about that but like whatever.

Another negative would be self esteem in terms of body image. Maybe I'm scrolling through Tik Tok or scrolling through Instagram and I'll see someone have flawless skin or a flawless body and I feel sad and embarrassed and ashamed of myself, you know, why am I not like this person?

I don't want them to see my insecurities even though I am not showing my face in any [pictures] and if I am, I am wearing my best friend, my mask. I guess I don't want them to see me like how I see myself, because this is no way to look at yourself, to think of yourself in this way and to have so many other people think like that of you, [it] would just be bad.

I also feel like it can be really pressuring and make them feel really insecure at times. On social media we only see the positive sides of people because people only post their ideal and good things.

This might make girls compare themselves to them. When that happens it's not good because you're comparing yourself to an unrealistic ideal standard.

I might feel insecure if it's someone who didn't edit it and who naturally looks that way. That's where you could feel more insecure because editing you know that's not how they look.

I feel Instagram has so many pictures that are sometimes Photoshopped and sometimes you see all these models their whole life is to look good. You see it and sometimes it's hard to not compare yourself.

We've been talking a lot about seeing posts but I think something that a lot of girls feel is also really disappointed and sad when they look at their own posts and the like counts especially...I remember a lot of girls would compare their likes and comments. If they don't have enough it would make them feel more sad.

So something to keep in mind, whenever I use social media, is this thing I heard a long time ago, that Instagram is something that you want your life to be like, you show where you want your life to be. I feel a lot of people, if they see somebody showing their best life or somebody who's gorgeous and has something that they can't achieve; a lot of girls might feel so insecure about it. Social media can really put them down.

It's really easy to just scroll through mindlessly and things like that. And that's fun. But when it comes down to, a lot of things about body image on there, how you see yourself how other people present themselves versus yourself, where you can see the photogenic people. You'll feel like, 'oh okay, I can't do that.'

I think some people post for the benefit of others, because like we already said, validation. They want to feel a sense, I don't know, they want to feel a sense of, what's it called, belonging. I know some people are like, 'Oh, my goodness, this person is doing this, you know, I gotta make my life look like I'm enjoying it too.' I think that kind of ties into the whole photoshopping, photo editor thing, where you see this person looks like this and now you feel, 'oh, my goodness, I need to do this.' So then they start posting for the sake of other people seeing how better they are at something or how better off they are than the other person. So I think that's a key reason why people post for others.

I personally think [social media is] a good place [for girls to express themselves]. It's also not a good place. I think now with social media, everyone is focusing on what other people think and not on themselves. So mostly girls, and I know most of the girls and including me, we feel very insecure about ourselves.

Eleni *If a girl posts a Tik Tok of her dancing. What do you think she hopes people will think about her?*

Speaker 1 *Maybe she's confident because it's hard to just dance and post it.*

Eleni *OK, so to think that she's confident. Yeah, I see some nodding.*

Speaker 1 *Some girls they post makeup videos, some girls they post workout videos, other girls, like basically whatever that you feel comfortable with is what they want to post. So I feel it all depends on the content you're trying to bring on your platform.*

Eleni *What do you think she wants people to think about her when she posts a makeup video?*

Speaker 1 *Actually make her feel confident in her makeup skills or maybe she's trying to teach other girls her age how to do makeup.*

Eleni *Do we think social media accurately represents girls?*

Speaker 1 *Nope, it causes insecurities to the person who is taking the photo and then viewing it.*

Eleni *Do you find that those kinds of beliefs in the body positivity movement have been meaningful to you? Do you think it's helped you?*

Speaker 1 *Personally, for me, it has helped me because growing up for me, I was bullied for my body type. So seeing other girls with similar body types or different body types, just speaking on how they feel like everybody should be... everyone should embrace the uniqueness. it makes me feel way better about my body.*

Theme: Witnessing (Digital) Life

To See and Be Seen (Code cluster — being seen, acknowledgement/validation, funny, likes):

I mean, I know that one time I had just been at the skate park for a while, because I'm kind of getting into skateboarding. And I just posted the new trick that I learned to do, because I wanted my friends to know that I'm getting better at skateboarding. Because I just think that that's cool.

If I post a lot...my perspective will be...I want them to see me as a productive person who wakes up in the morning and have this lovely breakfast and all that. But now, when I look back at it, I'm like...I don't want them to see me as anything. I'm just a human being at heart.

They want to be seen as perfect. For example, when someone shares something about a picture of a car, expensive car in the background and you're wearing an expensive outfit, right? Did they not show the process of getting that money or to get all those items? Right? So that kind of makes, they want people to think 'oh, the reason, a lot of struggle to get to that extent,' they wanted to be seen as very easy, people want it to be seen as perfect with no flaws in it.

I think yeah, people when they post, they always try to be the most ideal self. And more often than not, I think people are willing to even fake it, just to make themselves look more perfect. So like,

with an expensive car, they might be renting it and just posting and making it look like it's nothing but in reality, they really aren't there in life. But yeah, they're just trying to, like show off.

I don't want them to see my insecurities even though I am not showing my face in any of them and [sometimes] I am wearing my best friend my mask. I guess I don't want them to see me like how I see myself because this is no way to look at yourself. To think of yourself in this way and to have so many other people think that of you, [it] would just be bad.

We've been talking a lot about seeing posts but I think something that a lot of girls feel is also really disappointed and sad when they look at their own posts and the "like" counts especially...I remember like a lot of girls would compare their likes and comments. If they don't have enough, it would make them feel like more sad.

I also think girls want to be seen as an extrovert. I don't know if that makes sense. But they want people to see them as like, if someone is an introvert they want to change themselves to look like an extrovert. Like they have more friends. They are very social.

It depends on what the post is. Like if someone's posting a selfie then maybe it was because they thought they looked good and they wanted other people to see that.

[When a girl posts] maybe she's trying to get people to think she's doing well.

[Girl's post] for attention, for compliments, for thinking that they have a fun life as well. Because the pictures I see, at least the girls posts on social media or on their story, they're all pictures of themselves [and] them with a group of friends. So it makes you think that they have lots of friends [and] ...thinking that they're having fun experiences. Just so that people could compliment them to think that they have a good life. They have an extravagant fun life. to think they have good experiences, those type of things.

What do I want them think? Honestly, I don't really think about that. I don't really care for other people's thinking, because it's like, everyone's thinking is different. And if I really stress on that, then I'm gonna start really gearing what I post towards you're thinking, so I post what I want to post.

Maybe as I get older, I'll post my personal life more or...just being less guarded with what exactly I say about my real life. I don't know maybe someday I just I get that urge to post a photo of my face.

Girls this age...kind of flex or show off as perfect like, having a perfect social life. So, I think something that they'd like to do, would be posting them every time they go out. Or taking pictures of the purchases they make, when in reality maybe they return the purchases because they can't actually afford it. But they'll still take a picture and upload it and [inaudible] they're living life.

I think everyone really wants to be praised. I think women...we like to be praised. If someone praised me I'd be very thankful. 'Oh my God, thank you so much.' I think we all want to be praised and want to be seen.

Sometimes you want to make other people laugh. Sometimes you just want positive feedback on whatever you're doing, whether that's a thing you've made or a thing you've done or your appearance or something like that.

I think the reason why some people will post an image of themselves is probably to feel like they're worthy of love, I guess. Or they want to see if they are worthy of being loved and admired.

So I decided to be [critical] about what I'm using social media platforms for. Honestly, it's changed my experience. I set timers on my social medias too. That way, I'm not indulging so much into what other people are doing. Because then unconsciously I let it get to me, 'oh my god is this person is doing this, what am I doing now?' I guess what I'm saying, we're getting older, I'm not that old, I'm only 18. But you know, now that I'm getting older, especially leaving high school, just leaving high school now. I'm gonna be looking back at people from high school, being like, 'oh my goodness, this person is doing this with their life,' and I'm going to compare myself. So then if I'm gearing these social media platforms to what I really want to be seeing or why I'm actually using them, then I won't be always comparing myself to people and having to validate my soul through what others were doing.

If I'm sending them a picture there's obviously a reason behind it. If they just ignore it that's gonna make me feel kind of down. So, if I'm sending them say, like a picture of a new keyboard I got, I'd be like, 'wow I got this new keyboard.' I'd want them to give me those positive reinforcements like, 'wow, it looks so good.' Or like, 'wow, when do you get it?' But Yeah, if they just ignore it, that could lead to me feeling down. I think when I post I want them to have a response to it.

I have one friend, he's not a girl but he posts a lot. He has an art blog. He posts his drawings on Instagram and on Tumblr. I know that when he posts he wants to get engagement and people to see his art and think that his drawings are good.

Eleni *Why do you think girls post on social media?*

Speaker *I think it's also the positive reinforcements they look for. When influencers or people post something, they're probably looking forward to hearing a lot of support and positive comments. I think it helps with making you feel better, especially about yourself, because you're getting all this attention. I feel that's one of the biggest appeals of posting on social media.*

Eleni *Do you get a lot of compliments on your stories?*

Speaker *So for the stories there are some people that will click hearts, they will heart my story, and so that kind of acts as a compliment too and so I like those as well. There are some people that will actually send me... because on stories you can't actually comment on a story. When you heart something or when you type something, it'll go directly to their messages on Instagram. So there are some people who have said, 'oh, you look so pretty, gorgeous,' those have been comments. That makes you feel validated, like a self esteem boost. I feel good about myself, because they*

think of me in a positive way. In that sense, very positive. I've seen on other girl's posts, everyone is always saying like, 'you look pretty, you look gorgeous,' like many fun compliments. I don't follow influencers, but the people that I do follow like, friends and stuff like that. No one posts negative comments and so everyone's comment sections are always filled with funny reactions...The community that I'm in on social media is very positive in that sense.

Eleni *Why do you think girls post on social media?*

Speaker *Maybe to receive compliments in the comment section from other people. They feel good about themselves because other people are giving them compliments. So basically, the person might be happy from other people's approval.*

Eleni *When you post or when a girl makes a post. What does she want people to see or think about her?*

Speaker *I think see that they are validated in their interests. People who...do a lot of challenges now where it's like, share this about yourself today, share this about yourself tomorrow or like watch this today and then share what you thought about it. There're so many opinions out there. I think people like to know that they're in the majority or that they're in the cool minority if they can be different. Like, 'oh, I don't like the matrix. How cool am I for that?'*

Eleni *When you post or when a girl makes a post. What does she want people to see or think about her?*

Speaker 1 *Think that she's pretty.*

Eleni *Pretty. Yeah, I see some nodding. What else?*

Speaker 2 *Validation.*

Well, I've kind of been known as a person who, especially at school, I don't say much, but when I do, I always have a sense of humor. But it's also, not a dopey humor, it's kind of like a goofy, but educated humor. if that makes sense. So I tried to incorporate that into what I post. It's like, a video game joke or even something that my mom cooked that I thought was really nice.

Personally, I post pictures of my friends because I want people to know that I'm friendly. I'm an extrovert. So if you hear me talking a lot, it's because I'm an extrovert. I want people to perceive that I'm friendly and approachable. I post my face so that they know me if they want to be friends or something. Or they want to sit in class together. I think it's, it's nice to have friends. It's cool. Gives me energy. I post relatable, sometimes self deprecating jokes, or jokes because I want people to see me as funny.

If I have a joke that I think is funny and I posted and I only post the things that I think are funny, then people who only know me from the internet are gonna think like, 'wow, they must be funny all the time.' Which is not true.

When I post funny relatable content I want people to be like, 'oh, she's actually pretty funny or this actually made me laugh.' When I post empowerment content, I want people to actually sit back and think about the content that I'm posting and see how it can relate to them.

I don't usually post myself, so I can't answer that. I'm not posting on Tumblr often, but if I do, it's usually like a joke. So I want people to think I'm funny or appreciate the joke.

Eleni *Why do you use social media?*

Speaker *Being able to talk to my friends and share my outfit pics or to show people that I have grown. Getting a good laugh sometimes.*

Representation (Code cluster —representation, erasure/exclusion, self-expression):

I think especially on young girls, because [the Kardashians are] such popular people, or celebrities, I guess. It really tells... from a young age just seeing these kinds of things...so then it tells them, 'Oh this is one way you need to be.' Cause to be honest, especially using the Kardashians they do the same thing with their own kids, of how their own kids should look like and how they present their kids on social media. So, I think the representation that they put out has a negative effect on young girls especially because then they feel that in order for them to get somewhere they too need to look a certain way.

I think on big accounts, like celebrity and actors, I'm pretty sure it's yeah, it's not an accurate representation. Because they're always posting the ideal lifestyle and what it's like to live while rich and all that. So, it's not an accurate representation. And also because a lot of the posts are fake, so it's unrealistic.

When I first started [using social media], I didn't really see content creators that I could relate with. So, I felt pretty insecure about opening my Instagram, I would only use it just to communicate, I wouldn't even look at content. But now that I'm older, I start to see more creators that I actually can relate to and be inspired by. I feel more eager to open up my phone now to actually see their content.

I do believe that social media does not accurately represent girls, especially the main things that you see. Or even in movies and TV shows, you don't see a lot of body positivity being represented or even, gender fluid people...there's not really a good lot of representation on social media in general, whether that be like culturally [or] LGBTQ2AI+. Really, anything that's a little bit outside the norm is not represented at all really on social media...whether that be celebrities, TV shows, movies, or just on your feed in general.

Social media overall does not actually represent girls. But I think individual accounts, some of them do. Where they show real life experiences. But social media as a whole no, and I will say no

because it, what's it called...social media in general, I am pretty sure, if I really think about it, every social media account that was made, is owned by a man. So, there's a man's perspective on what they want to put out. So an example, the Tik Tok bans of people's accounts. If it doesn't like what you posted, it's gonna ban it...so if it's okay, in a man's perspective, social media will keep it on, even if it's not a true representation of a female or like a woman.

I'm trying to find a good example. I mean... I'm sort of thinking about how comic book movies have become such a big thing. And it's a real big thing, like for adults it's a serious business. But it's about superheroes, it's not that serious. But because it's a boy's thing, that's treated as like, this is for everyone...but the same doesn't go for things that are considered or...like popular girls, even like... okay, the classic... I don't know if it's classic, but a good example is how Twilight was popular 10 years ago and people were like, 'Oh, this thing is so lame, because teenage girls like it,' and it's like... it doesn't have to be good, and it's not good, it's super racist, it is pretty racist, and there's some creepy things in there. But that's not why people were complaining. People were complaining because it was a thing that teenage girls liked and that means it's bad.

I think that people don't really represent girls accurately because girls are, so different from each other. Like, we're not all the same.

I also don't see a lot of people with my identity. So as Sri Lankan Tamil person, I don't really see those type of people in social media, like the more famous influences at least. And so, in that sense, it just makes me feel like... it makes me feel underrepresented but it doesn't influence me a lot, just because it's not something that I think about too much, because I'm so used to not seeing myself, like my identity type of people in social media.

I use discord. But, there's not a lot of women on that platform. it's kinda like, male dominated, I guess.

I think in addition to the fear of missing out, they also want to follow it to just keep up with the trends because trends are always changing.

Everyone else on Tumblr is also there because they also don't really feel like they fit in with mainstream social media and stuff like that. And they also just want to talk about weird stuff, like, 'oh, I have a taxidermied mouse' or something. There is weird stuff on Tumblr, but that's what I like about it. Because that's one space where no one really has to look pretty all the time...but it's very normal for you to not feel like you have to act a certain way. Whereas on Instagram, it's like, you're just posting pictures of yourself making new faces or not looking super cool or whatever, some people might be like, 'Oh, that's so lame. What are you doing?' You know, it's about the space and what you use it for.

My family members and relatives still ask me if I want to go to medicine become a doctor, like do nursing...they still ask me if I'm pursuing health care. I think because in my culture... they really like...they really want children to become doctors or whatever, but I chose not to pursue that pathway because I'm just not... I know myself. I know I won't be happy if I pursue that. And so, then I posted on Twitter just to cope. And then one of my friends [was] like, 'why do [you] feel like this is it because you're a girl or something?'

I think it's like, not a good place for...generally Instagram, it's not a good place for girls to express themselves. Because now they want to express...like they want to impress, right? They want to impress this person, they want to impress that person, or they want to follow trends. It's very damaging to self care, self love, you want to be like this person, you know.

I think it depends on your audience. What's the audience you are expressing to? If not the greatest audience or people you completely don't know, you risk the chance of it being like, not such a great place. Because other people's comments are like people's backlash. When it is people you do know, you kind of have an idea of what they will say. So it's like, you're prepared for it. Whereas if it was just public...for example, some women share their pregnancy, because oftentimes, you see celebrities and their pregnancy like, 'oh, it's all fun and not fun but it's all gonna work, you know, it wasn't hard and whatnot.' Whereas other women, you see what they actually went through and the pain and all of that. So, some people in those kind of comments where it's like... 'Oh, my goodness, you had such a great pregnancy...you know, no stretchmarks...whereas some of these people actually post things like, they do have some stretch marks...so, them posting it, they're being vulnerable and expressing themselves.

I think social media is a good place for girls to express themselves. But it depends on how comfortable they are to share their stories and their daily life. And they have to be comfortable. It has to be a safe place for them to express themselves.

I feel a lot of people, a lot of girls at least, they post because they want to feel good about themselves. They want to feel like they have a good life and stuff like that.

I know my friends who draw, they'll post art that they've made, or my friends who are into photography, they'll post photos they've taken or they've made, just because either they want to get positive feedback on it, or they just wanted to share something that they did with people.

I think sometimes...people will posts on social media if it's just a random thing that they're saying. I know that sometimes it can feel good...if you have a thought or something, you just want to put it somewhere so that it's not kind of just sitting in your brain, but you don't want to write it down or message a specific person, because it's not directed at anyone in particular. So, you kind of just post it on social media because you want to kind of just share that or just have it somewhere else other than just inside your brain. I mean, it could be a stupid thought or something you thought was interesting, or a joke, or something like that.

The only reason I post, the only things I post on my story are pictures of when I go to an event. When I go to that event I look good, I feel good about myself. I post these pictures to kind of get attention but also to feel more better about myself and for people to compliment me you know. I want them to have a positive... I want them to think of me in a positive sense and think like, 'wow this girl has a life.' So for those reasons I do... that's one of the only times I actually post on social media, on my story at least, and just so that people could think of me in a positive sense.

For Instagram, I just enjoy going on Instagram and posting, like for me, once in a while. But if there's something to actually post, for example, maybe I just graduated or it's my birthday, I'll post to my feed. I enjoy doing that, being able to just share a little glimpse of what I'm up to.

Even if it's not a good place for girls to express themselves, they're still going to...whether you like it or not, they're gonna express themselves on social media. But then a comment may not be so positive. So, you are already aware that it will not be positive. So, if you express yourself, you need to prepare yourself for that. But then again, when you express yourself on [social media] there's women and other girls that may have the same... that may relate to you and the way you express and then they join with you and then that way, like I said already, you build community through that.

I think social media can be [a good place for girls to express themselves], it depends in a way because it could definitely be a very open place for you to express yourself if it's with just close people. For example, Snapchat, where I'm just adding my friends, I can totally express myself and send some really dumb pictures. I know it would be perfectly fine. But if you make your account public and you post, definitely the hate you'll get is inevitable. You'll have to be very strong to push through it. But I think it is a very good platform for girls to express themselves. I really look up to the girls that are able to do that, like Linda Sun, how despite the hate she got, she still puts out content for girls like me to empower.

Making Memories (Code cluster —Memories, fleeting moments):

I feel like it's nice as well, because everyone who you kind of met and you somehow are still in contact with over social media. You scroll through their stories, like their posts, it's an interesting perspective because you were kind of there for that stuff. But you were still probably an important person to them in their life when that stuff was going on.

I realized that I really like taking pictures because it's like you're freezing a moment in time and you have this record. It's nice. I think for me, when you're hanging out with your friends and you take a picture you have a souvenir...So I think for me, I really like Instagram. If I can post the pictures as well. So, it's on my feed. I see pictures I took before with friends.

For example, if I'm traveling or if I'm going on holiday, because last year I went on a holiday with my aunt and so we could take pictures smiling you know. I [made] a lot of memories. What I really like about Snapchat, by the end of the year, you can pick some pictures and it shows you [the] memory...what it also does is, like what you did last year, it's going to tell you at the moment, what you've done last year. What's so funny is that if I'm not doing anything, it actually gives me the reminder that 'oh, this is what you did last year.' And I'm like, oh you actually did that?

I post on social media, so that I could go back and watch it, I will post a video. If social media counted the views you yourself watch, I would have more views than the amount of people that actually watch my stories because I posted for myself to go back and watch and laugh about it, and see how happy I am and whatnot. So I don't really post to get other people, I post it so it's like, I really liked this picture. I'm gonna post this. And then I'm going to put a nice caption and

whatnot. Or a couple of my stories is me dancing, "oh my goodness I can actually really dance," I'm gonna go back and re-watch that.

Exactly, or you're like, 'oh my goodness, I remember I had this really nice food around this time, I don't remember it.' Oh, yeah, I posted it. I could go back and see.

Speaker 1 *If it was like a picture. Maybe it's like I said before, like a fitness journey, or you're having a nice dinner. Maybe they were trying to let everyone else see what they saw at the beauty of the moment or trying to immortalize it in the pictures that they post.*

Speaker 2 *I love that.*

Eleni *Yeah that's a very nice way to put it.*

Speaker 1 *But it was supposed to be kind of like, they felt so happy in the moment. Let's take a picture to finish off the day or something and to post it so everyone else can know that we had a good time today...to show that this was a good moment for you.*

I mean sometimes I post on my story because that's impermanent and no one can see it after 24 hours...I'll post random, just random thoughts, because I get bored a lot. I'll just say a random thing.

I think it can be a pretty good place, especially with stories on Instagram, and how they just go away in 24 hours. It's a really good feature that just lets people rant a bit or post a small snapshot of their life. And, yeah it'll go away in 24 hours.

I think people are also very into it because the clips are very short and you can...I think they had this trend going around with a bunch of dances and also short clips and stuff. I think that also makes it very engaging because you get to show yourself doing these things, only within 20 seconds. I think that's another reason why it's so interesting.

I don't post pictures. The only pictures I post are on my story because they're 24-hour pictures, so I don't mind them and the pictures.

Authenticity (code cluster – authenticity, fake, celebrities/influencers):

I feel people, girls specifically, I don't think they mind using it. I think also when you use [photo editing], it's kind of a considered a taboo because you're not showing your true self, you're not showing your real face. The taboo and stigma around that, probably is what deters people from using it.

[Editing a photo], that's another reason they would pick on you...or they might even accuse you if you don't use that sort of thing...let's say you have a nice, everyone has a nice face, but let's say you have a different type of nose or something, this specific type of jaw, they're gonna be like, 'you edited that or you don't actually look like that.'

[Girls might] actually want the real thing not the fake editing app...for example let's say a model looks so pretty the nose is so perfect the mouth is very perfect, girls might really want to get a nose job or something.

I do think there's some negative advantages social media. You can become obsessed with a fake image or obsessed with somebody.

For me a real account is like, I won't say vulnerability but just actually showing life. Whereas for example, if I was to compare the Kardashians to a friend of mine. The Kardashians, we know their rich and whatnot, but... they tend to post a perfect picture. Right? And no one's life is the perfect picture. So sometimes, I'm not saying they always do, but to be honest, yeah sometimes in their posts, for example when she was in the relationship with Kanye and Kanye was struggling with his mental health. She does talk about that but it's also the way they put it out. In my opinion, she put it in the way where it's benefiting her...it's benefiting her views...it's benefiting her money making...she's making her experience sound more or less than it actually was, so that it benefits her. Whereas if a friend of mine was to post something, they still keep their life private I think not like as a celebrity or something. Some people still like to keep their life private and they don't really like people knowing much of your vulnerability or things going on with their life. But their pictures aren't filtered, or people can Photoshop but...you know them personally you can tell their picture's Photoshopped or not because if you know them, you would know. So I think the difference between real and fake is also knowing the person yourself. That way...the believability of what they're posting is something you yourself can connect to.

I think for me, what I look for is the intention of the post and the message. Usually in fake posts they're just trying to impress you. The things that they post will be kinda unrealistic if you think about it. They usually caption it with something that just makes it seem like it's nothing. While a real post would be more realistic and also they probably wouldn't be trying to show off as much. They would just be posting how they are and how their life is.

Actually, aside from social media I think everyone isn't, well most people aren't actually true to themselves. They're all trying to try to hide their true selves. They're just trying to show the best version of themselves, I guess. I think even aside from social media...a lot of people are still trying to put up this image. I mean, in terms of social media, I think it would probably make or encourage someone to act less of themselves.

Something about social media is that it's really manufactured. The ways a lot of influencers now post, it doesn't feel human. If social media could just change...I [would] want it to be more something that's just like, a community coming together. More like that instead of just people posting themselves and it seems unrealistic...I guess more personal, but the actual social media is too manufactured again, I'm just repeating things, I don't know. It doesn't feel like it's people reacting to each other, now it's a lot of bots. It's kind of like we're all bots on a website, to me at least.

You could definitely show your authentic self on social media. Sometimes you have negative comments when you do that. But I think, you know, power of people. A lot of people want to see

themselves represented on social media as well. So, it does have a positive impact, a positive influence in that sense as well.

[Photo editing] apps are always geared towards women. If I go to the App Store, it's going to... its probably going to show me at least one photo editing app that [is] geared towards girls and basically encourages them to use it. I think it's a negative aspect. I feel like lately, it's not something that I see much anymore because there's this whole... I don't know the right word but there is a push to be your authentic self, even if people don't like it, because there's somebody else that's probably struggling with that same thing.

When I post on my feed on Instagram, I post pictures that I feel show my authentic self. Sometimes it's a picture of me in a cultural outfit or a picture of me just smiling. I'm showing my authentic self and really showing [that] happiness comes in different ways. If that makes sense. I show basketball, for example, that's a part of who I am...if you see my page...you can really tell who I am...for example, I graduated I'm posting that or... I don't really post memes because that's not who I am. So, if somebody was to come onto my social media page or watch my story, something I want them to see is my authentic self and who I am.

I don't follow the mainstream people because...I find it would be negative for myself. I was trying to stay away from trends. I never watched Stranger Things till two years after it came out and everyone stopped talking about it. Because I wanted to experience it for myself and when I saw it, I want it to be my own experiences, like for my own connection with characters and stuff.

In the future, I feel like people will lose trust with... influencers. Because there's too many of them. I feel like some of them are not credible. I think some of them are...so some celebrities and influencers...they scam people, some of them. Okay, so I feel people would lose trust or be more careful with listening to influencers because they scam people sometimes.

I think a majority of girls would follow celebrities that they like, especially for fashion, to see what's going on. I know the majority of people that I follow, follow the Kardashians, because they're super big. And that's like a different topic, about them.

I hate to bring them up again but I mean, the Kardashians, they exist. I wouldn't say that they're an accurate representation or anything, but they definitely would almost create stereotypes, I think, just based on how they are. Anyone that kind of falls under that category would act the same as them, I guess, that type of idea. But I think that it's not necessarily fair to say that...girls are accurately represented, although, I mean there's definitely posts where they are.

One influencer that I really like is Linda sun. She's basically just an influencer that spreads positive messages. Especially with body positivity and just being happy with who you are and thankful for everything. I think that's a very important message that a lot of girls should also listen to and hear.

I think it depends on the platform as well, because when you think about how Tumblr has been used mainly for either talking about a show or movie or a band or whatever that you really like. There I feel like people are... it's a lot easier for them to be authentic. Because everyone else on

Tumblr is also there because they also don't really feel like they fit in with mainstream social media and stuff like that.

Speaker 1 *Funny, cuz they're editing where you can see the door. [everyone laughs].*

Eleni *Oh Okay. So, if someone does a bad editing job, that's funny, right?*

Speaker 2 *When people do that, like if they're editing their body and you can see the swirls, all the comments are just bashing this person for doing that. They're all making fun of this person. It's kind of sad, but also don't do it. Obviously if you do it and you do it bad people are gonna notice and they're gonna tell you that, 'that's so fake, and we all know.' And then they'll be like, 'no it's not.'*

Speaker *I don't think everything on social media is real. What I actually think is real is people's real experience of life. For example, when someone wants to talk about the team, let's see emotion, [but] that could also be photoshopped.*

Eleni *So you're thinking that all social media is fake? This is what I'm hearing?*

Speaker *Some might be real, but I don't think everything is real.*

Eleni *So you were using Snapchat just to take pictures but you don't really use it that much anymore?*

Speaker *Yeah because when I actually look at a motivational video, I realized this sounds great, but then it doesn't make my life feel true. It's fake. You know what I mean? Like using the filters and all that. That's how I actually think about it. I still think this memory, the picture of being silly...I still find it very great...I can still use it, but I don't really use it as much. I will not use it as much as I used to.*

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form – Example

Name of Participant:

Study Name: Girls' Experiences of Social Media Use

Researcher: Eleni Marino, MA, PhD (c), Lentzmarino.e@gmail.com

Purpose of the Research: The goal of this study is to explore girl's experiences of Social Media use. From this exploration, I want to work with girls to create knowledge together.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: You will be asked to review this informed consent form in its entirety and participate in one 1-hour individual interview. Interviews will be held virtually over Zoom. After interviews have been transcribed you will be invited to review your transcripts. Within this process you will also be invited to a 30-minute check-in with the principal researcher for a discussion on your experience of the research process as well as any critical thoughts you have on the data collected (only data that you are directly involved in—your individual interview).

Risks and Discomforts: We do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research. You have the right to not answer any questions. However, when discussing one's experiences there can be emotional moments that activate uncomfortable feelings or memories. If at any point you feel uncomfortable the interview can be paused or stopped completely. Wherever possible interviews will be curated spaces to promote emotional/physical safety, kindness and care.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Although there will not be any immediately measurable direct material benefits—sharing your experience may benefit you emotionally, spiritually, physically, or intellectually. Having space to voice your experiences can be at times, emotionally and mentally fulfilling. On a practical level, sharing your experience will help advance intellectual work focused on promoting positive education, awareness, and social justice for girls. You will also be offered a \$25 gift card to the store of your choice.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of your relationship with York University, now or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher, York University, or any other group associated with this project. Your decisions to withdraw will not be judged and the reason for withdrawal will not be required. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised inducement.

Confidentiality: Unless you choose otherwise all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence. Unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Interviews will be audio and video recorded with your explicit consent. These will then be transcribed by the principal researcher with the help of automated transcribing technology. Your data will be safely stored in an encrypted file on the principal researcher’s computer and only she will have access to this computer and any information. The data will be stored for a minimum of two years, after which it will be destroyed. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

This study will use the ZOOM to collect data, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. When information is transmitted over the internet privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). Further, while York University researchers will not collect or use IP addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic devices without informing you, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements (where possible) for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please contact the researcher for further information. Please note that it is the expectation that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting/data collection session.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Eleni Marino by e-mail (lentzmarino.e@gmail.com). This research has been reviewed and approved by the FES Research Committee, on behalf of York University, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

I, _____, consent to participate in Girls’ Experiences of Social Media Use conducted by Eleni Marino. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Signature

Date

Principal Researcher Signature

Date

1. Audio Recording

- I consent to the audio-recording of my interview and/or focus group.

2. Video Recording

- I consent to the audio-recording of my interview and/or focus group.

Participant Signature

Date

Principal Researcher Signature

Date


Appendix C: Call for Participants Flyer



Do you use social media?

ARE YOU A GIRL?

Are you between 14-18 years old?



**YORK UNIVERSITY
CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!**

I am interested in what you have to say!

What are your experiences?

We can create knowledge together!

Purpose of Research Study	Time Commitment and Location	Want to know more?
<p>* Listen to experiences of Social Media use from the perspective of girls themselves.</p> <p>* To learn about your individual experiences, views, and opinions regarding Social Media for girls.</p>	<p>A focus group where you hang out with other girls online. OR a one on one interview over zoom.</p>	<p>Instagram @The DigitalGirlProject</p> <p>Please contact Eleni Marino at Lentzmarino.e@gmail.com</p> <p>Use the subject line "Digital Girl Research Study"</p>
<h2>JUDGEMENT FREE ZONE!</h2>		
<p>This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee at York University. For more information, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).</p>		

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

Main Questions:

1. What social media apps do girls typically use and why?
2. What is it like for a typical day online?
3. What kinds of accounts do girls usually follow?
4. Do we think girls enjoy using social media? How do girls feel when they use social media?
5. When a girl has a social media account, how do you think she wants people to see her? What does she want people to think about when they see her posts?
6. Do we think its unsafe for girls online?
7. Do we think all girls are having the same experience with social media?
8. Do we think social media accurately represents girls?
9. If we could change something about social media, what would it be?

Reserve Questions:

1. Is there anything else about social media that is important to girl's experience that you would like to share?
2. Do you think social media is a good place for girls to express themselves?
3. How do girls feel about photo editing apps?
4. What do girls dislike about social media?
5. What do girls like about social media?

Appendix E: Coding with Miro Whiteboard – Examples

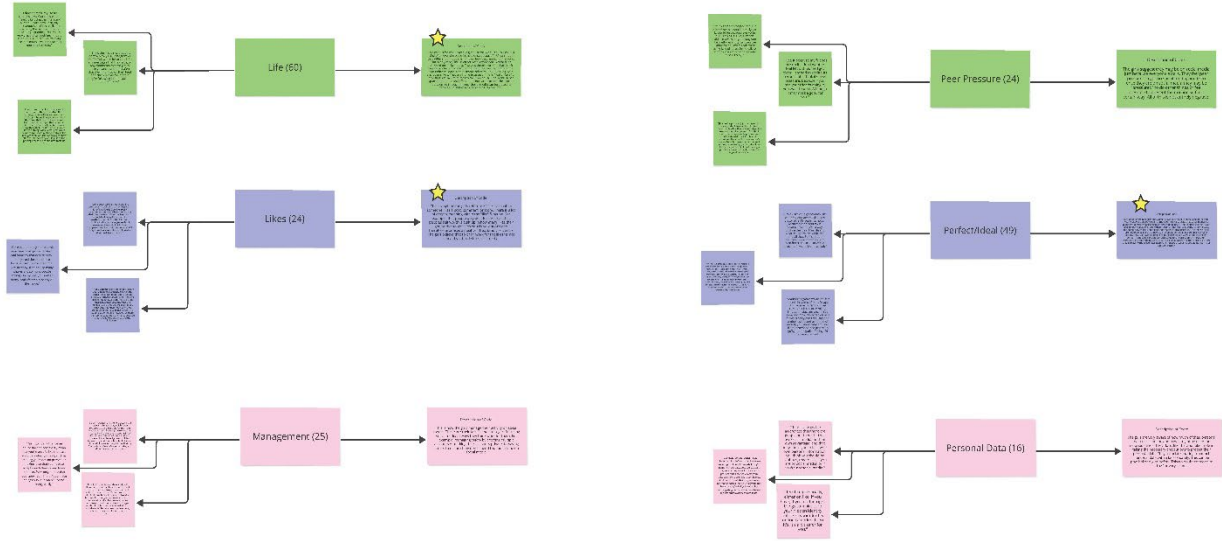


Image 1

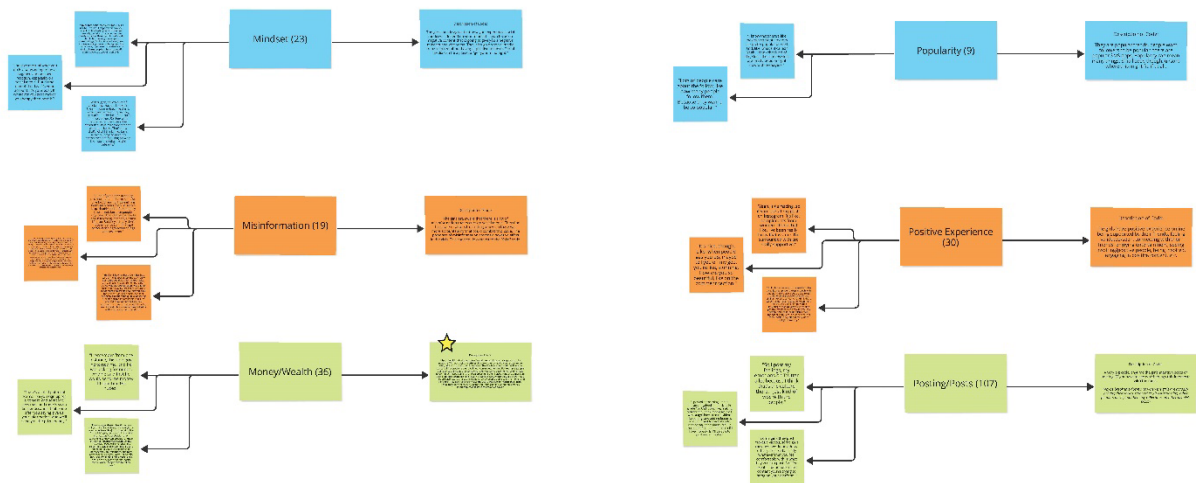


Image 2