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Annelise Stibora

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Connecting to Disconnect: Generational Difference in the Social Media Behavior of White Women

By
Annelise Stibora

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Department of Sociology

College of Arts and Sciences

University of Vermont

Dr. Nikki Khanna, Professor of Sociology, Advisor

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Abstract

This is an exploratory qualitative study on two cohort groups, college-educated white women in Generation X and college-enrolled white women in Generation Z, and their use of social media. I interviewed five women from each group to collect data on their online behavior or rather, their perception of their online behavior. The study focuses on two main areas of analysis which are referred to as the presentation of self and fostering connection. Presentation of self refers to the way the participants use social media as a tool to control others' perceptions of them through the curation of the content they post or share. Fostering connection concerns the way participants use social media to form and maintain connections and community in different spheres of their life. This study provides a deeper understanding and a greater sociological context into an addictive force in the lives of people in vastly different generations.

Introduction

Social media is a pervasive part of modern-day culture and its usage has exploded in the 21st Century. Social media is defined as any network or platform that allows for virtual (or online) connections between people (Tufts University, 2023)—it includes applications (“apps”) and websites where users can post content and interact with others (including with friends, peers, family, community members, and even complete strangers from all around the nation and world). In 2021, 72% of American adults reported using at least one social media platform and the percentage of users is even higher among adults aged 18-49 years—84% (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, though a relatively new digital innovation, social media has captured the attention of most Americans.

The origins of social media include the now defunct digital platform MySpace, which launched in 2003, where users shared content such as personal information and music on their digital personal “pages,” as well as Facebook, a site that was initially created in 2004 for Harvard students to connect with one another (Molloy 2007, Phillips 2007). Popular contemporary examples of social media platforms include Facebook (which has since grown to a worldwide digital network), Instagram (a platform where users share photos), Twitter (where users post messages, photo, and video content known as “tweets”), Snapchat (where users share and post photos to friends), and WhatsApp (where users can share messages and calls, often used in replacement to regular text/calls)—this list is not exhaustive. Each of these social media platforms has millions and billions of users worldwide; for example, as of 2022, Facebook had 2.9 billion active users, Instagram 1.4 billion, Twitter 397 million, and Snapchat 514 million (Dixon 2022).

Some of these platforms are focused on interpersonal communication with friends, peers, and family (e.g., Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger), while others are more focused on allowing users to share content (e.g., photographs, memes, news, thoughts) with wider audiences (e.g., Instagram, Twitter). People use social media for different reasons, but popular functions include keeping up with and interacting with friends and family, as well as consuming and commenting on news stories and content from public figures (such as famous actors, athletes, and politicians, among others).

Research on the topic of social media has exploded in recent years. Some popular areas of inquiry regarding social media include child and adolescent safety, social media's impact on mental health, and motivations for social media use (Martin et al, 2018; Williams, 2022; Livingston, 2008; Jarman et al, 2021; Miller et al, 2016). The major focus of many of these studies has been on child and adolescent populations since they are often considered the most vulnerable age groups exposed to social media. Studies that look at social media usage among adult populations have looked at marketing on social media, as well as the use of social media for professional development in workplace settings; the latter has specifically examined the growing use of social media in the workplace as it pertains to brainstorming, team bonding, and even creating new jobs (Saber majidi et al. 2019, Hruska and Maresova, 2020, & Fisher 2015). Other studies focused on adult populations have looked at mental health, social connectivity in the age of COVID-19, and political engagement (Lewin et al. 2023, Park, C. S., & Homero Gil de Zúñiga 2021)

Though there are a growing number of studies on social media, no known studies compare its use among different generational cohorts. Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) is the first cohort to have at least some access to the internet at early stages of their

development. For example, for someone born in 2010, social media was widely accessible and widely used. As such, by adolescence, most Generation Z were arguably well versed in social media. By comparison, older generations such as Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980) were not raised with social media, but rather they began engaging in social media at later stages in their lives. For example, a Generation X American born in 1975 may not have been exposed to social media until their late 20s or early 30s. This study seeks to examine the different and similar ways in which Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Z (Gen Z) use and consume social media.

In this paper, I conduct an exploratory qualitative study of two cohort groups and their use of social media: white women in Generation X and Generation Z. Through in-depth interviews, I collect data on participants' online social media behavior or, rather, their perception of their behavior. Though there are many different ways in which people use social media, this study focuses on two key areas of analysis: (1) the presentation of self (in other words, the ways in which people present themselves to others to curate an online persona), and (2) fostering connection (the ways in which people use online spaces to create and maintain relationships with others). The aim of this study is to provide deeper understanding and a greater sociological context to social media in the lives of women of different generational cohorts. In the next section, I provide an overview of the literature as it pertains to these two key areas of inquiry and draw on relevant sociological concepts.

Review of the Literature

The growing body of literature on social media usage among adolescents and adults explores many different topics (as described above). In this section, however, I focus on

previous research as it relates to the use of social media and (1) the presentation of self, as well as the role social media plays in (2) fostering connections with others.

Presentation of Self

An important component of most social media platforms is the personal profile. To construct and present a profile, users can display chosen photo(s), create a short biography, and share favorite films, music, quotes, and more. These tools can be used and manipulated by individuals to create their own “persona” to display whatever ideal parts of themselves they wish to share with friends, peers, co-workers, family, and/or the public. These social media profiles are useful tools for creation of a digital “self.”

There is a large body of sociological research that looks at “impression management” (or presentation of self)—the idea that people work to influence others’ perceptions of them to evoke the impression they desire (Goffman 1956). Erving Goffman equates impression management to a “performance” on a “stage” before an “audience,” and he points to several important elements. For example, Goffman says that a “setting” is the scenery or location in which a performance takes place. For example, a setting could be an office space during a job interview or a classroom when a teacher is speaking in front of her students. Extending this to the world of social media, the setting is the online location, or personal page on a social media platform, where the “performance” occurs. Goffman also discusses various parts of the “stage. The “front stage” is where the performance takes place, while the “backstage” is where the performer prepares for their role. For example, in a store, the store’s showroom is the front stage for the worker, while parts of a workplace customers are not typically permitted, such as breakrooms and storerooms, may be the backstage. Extending this to social media, the “front stage” is arguably the persona one curates online and reveals to their followers. Users typically want to

influence others' perception of themselves (their "audience", in Goffman's words) and they may do so by carefully selecting flattering photos and video clips to share with followers, sharing events in their lives that they want others to see (e.g., vacation photos, formal events, a desirous concert), and highlighting their strengths and positive attributes. The "backstage" in this context is typically what occurs offline or perhaps even what is displayed on a relatively more private account (a separate place on an already used platform with a smaller and more personal audience of close friends and/or family). For example, Takahashi (2016) applies Goffman's concept of "impression management" to social media and sees the posts and profile creations of users as modern tools of impression management. Additionally, he argues that the use of impression management reflects a desire for legitimacy—this is particularly important among young people who want to be taken seriously by others. For example, a young teen may dress more mature to try to give themselves more legitimacy to onlookers, though Takahashi explains the use of social media is a newer strategy to achieve this goal.

Other research takes this idea even further. With regards to the platform Instagram, for instance, research suggests that many young people utilize the idea of a "finsta" or what is also known as "fake-Instagram" (Williams 2022). One Instagram account may allow users to present an idealized image that they wish to project to a wider "audience" (such as to parents and other family members, as well as to prospective employers), while their more private account, their "finsta," can be used to showcase a completely different image (or presentation of self) to a different "audience" (for instance, to close friends and peers) (Williams 2022). Thus, people may create different personas on different social media platforms or even on different accounts within the same platform.

The nickname “finsta,” however, may be counterintuitive. “Finstas” may be used to present a particular, or even idealized image, to an audience of friends and peers, but it may also be used to showcase a more “real” or authentic side of the user; thus the term “finsta” may or may not be “fake.” Indeed, research suggests that a “finsta” account are often “...established for the expression of less desirable traits within an account set to private” (Williams, 2022). For example, if you want to tell your friends about something negative or embarrassing that happened to you, but you do not want a wider or particular “audience” to know this information about you, you might only share this on your “finsta” account.

Research shows that even among public social media use, young people often wish to remain private from their parents and other authority figures in their lives (Williams 2022, Livingstone (2008). Thus, they may create different “personas” for different “audiences.” Additionally, research suggests that the act of creating an online persona to impress peers may be unique among adolescents and young adults in the coming-of-age era of their lives (Livingstone, 2008), though more research is needed.

Fostering Connection

Social media connects people together, though it also has its pitfalls—for some, the practice of connecting with others online leads to a disconnect from both in-person social interactions and the offline world itself. This section looks at the role that social media plays to bring people together, as they create and maintain relationships online. This section also examines the role that social media plays in disconnecting users from the people around them.

To begin, social media platforms have undoubtedly broadened the scope of how people communicate, as well as the numbers of people with whom they can communicate. The potential

for communication understandably draws many people to online spaces as socialization and connection are human needs and online communication can be an accessible way for many people to meet this need—even without leaving their home. Research by Kim and Fingerman (2022), for example, look at online communication in older adults and find that mood reports (i.e., rating of their mood by labeling various emotive states on a 1 to 5 scale) improve with more connective social encounters, both in person and online.

However, communication online can be problematic. People are susceptible to phishing schemes (fraudulent messages used to obtain one's personal information), other online scams, and even harassment on social media sites. Research also reveals overt dangers in online communication particularly for youth, such as cyberbullying and pedophilia, in addition to the psychological risks associated with constant consumption of unrealistic body images (Martin et al. 2018, Tamplin et al. 2018). These risks may be particularly pronounced among adolescents and young adults given that reports reveal that they tend to use social media in higher numbers than their older counterparts.

Additionally, communication with others through social media is potentially problematic because online communication inherently differs from communication that occurs face-to-face. Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014) argue that “technology acts merely as a facilitator of human interaction and is value-free, neither promoting the good nor the bad” (34). While a poignant observation, online communication undoubtedly differs from face-to-face interactions because it often occurs without physical cues (such as facial expression), immediate response, and is typically devoid of tone. Gruzd & Haythornwaite, for example, argue that interaction on social media presents “...difficulties in conveying tone, emotion, intimacy, and complex information” and is further complicated by “the lack of personal identity and accountability with anonymous

participants or the use of pseudonyms (online “handles”)" (2013). Thus, though social media is a useful tool of communication, it is not without problems and pitfalls.

Social media, however, does have its benefits. Social media allows people to connect with an online community, or an online version of an existing community (e.g., a Facebook group for those living in a neighborhood or for those attending the same college). Gruzd & Haythornthwaite (2013) found that online communication allows for the formation of communities and interpersonal connections-- regardless of physical location. Research has also revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, connecting with others online was beneficial; it was imperative to many peoples' well-being as they often could not meet and connect in-person for fear of transmitting and/or contracting the virus. Cairns et al. (2020) argued that, “Due to limited social interactions [during the COVID lockdown], people have relied overwhelmingly on technology and social media to manage physical distancing while maintaining social connection” (pg. 281). Online communication created avenues for broader connection to one's peers, family members, community members, and even larger society. This is important because Buodo et al. (2023) found that the use of social media to connect with others was directly associated with a decrease in COVID-19-related symptoms of trauma and distress.

Though research points to the benefits of social media during the period of social isolation during COVID, there is debate about the benefits and drawbacks of social media and their impact on happiness and mental health more generally. Research discusses pleasure gained from the connection of social media (even if temporary), though research also points to feelings of loneliness (Miller et al, 2022). For those with limited offline connections, social media can open a new world of communication and connection (Miller et al. 2022, Heyman et al. 2021).

However, Heyman et al. (2021) found differences in benefit depending upon the social media platforms people used, the ways that they used social media, and if they reported general extraversion (or outgoingness) in offline interactions. Extraversion in real world interactions, for instance, was positively associated with the use of Instagram, Snapchat, and passive use of social media; however, Facebook and active use of social media was negatively associated with real world extraversion (Heyman et al 2022).

Further, Miller et al. (2022) discuss the idea of perceived happiness. They argue that social media sites can make an individual appear happier to others viewing their posts, but platforms with private messaging (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, among others) may better reflect a user's true emotions or well-being (Miller et al. 2022). On platforms where pictures or messages are posted to a larger audience (perhaps to friends, family, and neighbors), there may be increased pressure to perform and "put on a show" (as discussed in the previous section of impression management). However, when the pictures or messages are shared to a limited audience (for example, to very close friends) via a private messaging platform, perhaps users feel less pressure to perform and/or act happy—especially in cases when they are not.

In Best et al.'s (2014) research on online communication's tie to adolescent well-being they noted, "...increased social networking opportunities raise self-esteem and 'belongingness' which may then indirectly impact upon feelings of wellbeing. However, it is worth cautioning that perceived online social support may be providing a false sense of security" (pg. 33). In other words, they argue that online connections that do not translate into offline relationships can give adolescents an unrealistic understanding of the support systems they have, which may be problematic for young users. In the next section, I outline the methods of the study and discuss its contributions to the current literature.

Methodology

Before starting the data collection stage of the study, I was granted approval from University of Vermont's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I initially completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program to learn about (1) the risks involved with using human subjects in research, and (2) the harm that human-subject's research has caused historically. Next, to obtain IRB approval, I answered questions about the study posed by IRB (i.e. concerning recruitment, funding, among others) and submitted an exemption form to avoid having to undergo a formal review by IRB. I was able to submit an exemption given that the study's participants were adults (over age 18) and there was no risk of harm to subjects for participating in the study. I also submitted the questionnaire, the proposed methods of the study, and the information sheet that I planned to use to provide information to participants about the study.

After gaining IRB approval, I started recruiting subjects. To do so, I posted physical and virtual flyers in high traffic areas and shared them among my personal networks. The physical flyers were posted in buildings at the University of Vermont (such as in the Davis Center, Rowell Hall), and a popular community space in Burlington, Vermont- the Fletcher Free library. The virtual flyers were shared through mutual friends and connections, as well as posted to Facebook community groups targeted towards the greater Burlington area and UVM such as "Burlington Vermont", "Old North End", and "University of Vermont Class of 2023 (official)". See the advertisement flyer and virtual advertisement in Appendix A.

Participants were selected for the study if they (1) self-identified as white, (2) were college educated or currently enrolled in college, (3) self-described active users of social media, (4) self-identified women, and (5) members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) or

Generation Z (born 1997-2012). Because all participants were recruited using local Facebook groups and flyers in the Burlington, Vermont area, all of the participants were (at the time of their interviews) living in Vermont. However, I did not collect information about where they may have lived prior. Further, it is important to note that throughout the recruitment process, Generation Z participants were more eager to be interviewed than their Generation X counterparts. This may be because social media has been around for a greater part of Gen Z's life and is potentially a bigger part of their current life.

Regarding social media, the literature shows that user's usage and experiences vary based on sociodemographic variables. As such, I restrict the sample by race and gender, and to some extent by education-level. Dubois and Blanc (as cited in Matassi et al. 2022) shows how echo chambers in social media spaces may be noticed in respective demographic groups and not among general platform users. Because of this, and the hope to eliminate extraneous variables that may complicate the data, the research in the present study focuses on only white women who are currently in college or who are college-educated. However, I compare the experiences of the two different generational cohorts (as described above).

This exploratory study was qualitative. I interviewed 10 participants-- 5 from each generational category (Gen X or Gen Z). The Gen X participants had two women born in 1968, one in 1970, one in 1972, and one in 1977. The Gen Z participants had two participants born in 2000 and three born in 2001. The similar ages of the Gen Z group may be simply due to the fact that a recruitment flyer was posted in a University of Vermont 2023 Facebook group; this group consists of students graduating college in 2023 and the primary birth years for those graduating in 2023 is 2000-2001.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The participants received an information sheet (see Appendix B) to review prior to the interview. Consent was then obtained verbally before the interview. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams because it was ideal to easily record and transcribe the data. The audio was transcribed using the communication technology, but then reviewed manually and analyzed for gaps or discrepancies. The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their privacy and anonymity. I chose to conduct the interviews virtually because of the technology available on Microsoft Teams to transcribe and record our conversations, but also to allow for physical distancing for respondents living in the post-COVID-19 era. Despite conducting the interviews virtually, participants were eager and willing to talk about the topic.

The interview data was then deductively coded for common themes, meaning that I had an idea of the themes that I was initially looking for (e.g., themes related to Presentation of Self & Fostering Connection). Going through the raw data, I created key words to represent and organize the themes in the data. I also coded the data inductively as new themes arose that I had not anticipated and as I coded for sub-themes. For example, I used the key word “community” to represent the theme of maintaining community connection through social media-- a topic some of my participants talked about in their interviews (Under the umbrella of Fostering Connection). Within each code (or theme), I listed sentences or paragraphs from each interview that related to the theme. I then analyzed the data for patterns among these themes and looked at whether these themes varied or looked similar between the two generational cohorts. In particular, I looked for similarities and differences among the two cohort groups in the two key areas: (1) Presentation of Self, and (2) Fostering Connection. In the next section, I describe some of the key findings from the data.

Results and Discussion

The Sample

To investigate generational similarities and differences in social media usage, I interviewed ten white women--five from Generation X cohort and five from Generation Z. The Gen X cohort consisted of women who had all completed at least a college education; one respondent completed a bachelor's degree, three held master's degrees, and one completed a doctorate degree. The Gen Z cohort, by comparison, were all women who are currently enrolled in a college or university. Additionally, regarding religion, four out of five of Gen X women reported no religious affiliation, while one identified as Christian. Of the Gen Z cohort, three reported no religious affiliation, one identified as Jewish, and one as Catholic. Regarding social class, every participant (whether Gen X or Gen Z) described herself as middle or upper middle class.

With regards to their first experiences with social media, all Gen X participants discussed joining one or more social media platforms as adults, while all Gen Z participants joined their first platform when they were students in middle school (aged 11-14). The Gen X group all reported that they started with the social media platform FaceBook, while Gen Z participants began with Instagram. As time went on, Gen X participants described branching out somewhat in the social media platforms they used; four out of the five eventually began engaging with other platforms, but all five reported FaceBook as their most active platform for social media engagement. Conversely, Gen Z participants reported at least four social media platforms that they regularly used. All participants interviewed (both generations) described engaging with at least one social media site multiple times daily. All participants also discussed their original

intentions of joining social media: because their friends, colleagues, or peers were using social media.

First Use of Social Media

A common theme throughout the interview process was the idea of adolescents' use of social media. This is to be expected as the Generation Z cohort began their use of social media while in that age group and many of the Generation X cohort is currently navigating this process (or has recently) with their own children. Because it was such a prominent topic, it was added as a subsection to report on generational difference in social media attitude among youth. The participants were asked if they believe there is a good or right age for someone to join social media. The Gen X women spoke in general terms, often arguing that kids should be older to join social media (implying the age many join is too young). Lisa (Gen X) explained that once you give someone the ability to get social media (i.e., by giving them access to a device that allows them to connect to social media platforms), you have basically allowed them to join. She says, "So you're basically allowing them to go anywhere. ...it's like the Wild West. Here's a phone and, you know, good luck". Kimberly, a Gen X mother of an adolescent girl, talked about how having a set age to join is so arbitrary as there can be a wide range of maturity levels across any age. She says,

"I guess I'm more of the mind that if your kids are on those platforms, it's better that you know about it and that you friend them on those platforms and then you check their device and we don't do any of that backhandedly like [redacted], my daughter, completely aware we do those things. So we're not trying to be sneaky about it. It's just if you're gonna have this platform, you have to allow us to do these things with it. So, but I mean, there's also a part of me that, you know, longs for the good old days when none of that stuff existed and people just didn't always have their face in a screen. But that's unrealistic and really old fashioned..."

The Gen Z group spoke related to their own experiences, and often commented on how they wish they would have joined at an older age. Olivia, one of the Gen Z participants, wishes she waited until high school to access social media. She noted that not only does social media give young girls weird expectations for their looks and bodies, but it drastically impacts the way in which young girls interact. She says, “Like it's kind of driven a wedge between people because we only know how to socialize via Instagram”. The rest of the Gen Z respondents agreed that kids should be in high school to join social media but they noted, like the Gen X cohort, it is an unrealistic expectation. Hannah, Gen Z, commented on how her generation’s use of social media at a young age may have consequential results,

“Social media is like controlling our entire generation. I think we're kind of the first generation to grow up having social media all the time. So, it's gonna be really interesting to see what the effects of that are. And so far, it seems as though it's having like the negative effects are greatly outweighing the positive effects...”

Hannah’s thoughts are important to understand why studying her generation’s experiences with social media are important. Overall, the participants of Gen Z drew on their own experiences and their regrets with joining social media in their youth, however they all still report using social media actively today. A common theme shared among both generations is their opinions on how social media is a negative force thrust upon young kids.

Presenting the Self

As discussed previously, an important aspect of social media behavior is the use of social media to create online personas. Often users want to highlight aspects of themselves that they find most appealing. The participants in the Gen X cohort typically explained that their posts and profiles typically focused on their families/children, professional accomplishments, and fun activities or trips with friends and family. Generation Z, on the other hand, felt more inclined to post photographs when they had a reason to dress up or they chose to post photographs in which they feel they looked physically good or attractive. The results suggest that Gen Z and Gen X users both curate their posts to appear appealing to their audience, but they may highlight different things: the younger group may care more about physical appearance, while the older cohort may care more about showing off their successful personal and professional lives.

Emily of Gen Z explains how she believes her Gen Z peers tie their identities closely with their social media personas. She says, "...it's... how people perceive you on social media. Some people like that a little bit too seriously and like, perceive them as...their personality, their being". Gen Z users mainly admitted to 'putting on a show' for social media, while Gen X saw their own similar behavior as simply very curated posting. For instance, Karen of Gen X says, "I'm actually very aware of what I post and what I say in the comment, and I probably spend a lot of time thinking about stuff before I post it". Yet Karen and other members of her cohort do not acknowledge how this may present an unrealistic version of themselves. The key difference between Emily and Karen is that Emily (of Gen Z) is aware of the use of social media to present her best self, while Karen (of Gen X) may be less aware. This could indicate a potential difference in generations' tendency to be self-aware online.

Accuracy in Posting In each interview, I asked participants about what influences them to post on social media (and when they choose to post). Gen X typically responded that they posted things like vacation or nature photos, and primarily photos of/with their family.

Jennifer (Gen X), however, explained a disconnect between online and reality:

“But that's not every single weekend, so someone might look at that and go wow, she's like, has this great relationship with her kids. She's doing something fun with them every weekend, and it's like, well, we do, do fun things together. But we also spend time apart, you know, but that's not shown”

The idea of social media as a “highlight reel” is a theme that Gen X participants often discussed. Many of the Gen X respondents also explained that they had Gen X relatives or distant friends who post constantly or who post things they believe are not necessary to share. Lisa shares her thoughts: “...my sister, like, love my sister to death. She's like literally the most like prolific poster on Instagram...She'll post like 30 to 40 times a day”. Two Gen X participants (Lisa and Jennifer) described social media like a Christmas card. Lisa says, “You know, like [not] gonna show anything messy in a Christmas card, right? For the most part, right. Like everyone looks great”.

The Gen Z participants’ responses about what influences them to post are similar to the older cohort. They discussed that if they participated in a special activity such as a school dance or vacation, they tended to post online about the experience. However, they took it much deeper than their Gen X counterparts. In addition to posting about the specific event, they consciously considered how they looked in a photograph—particularly when it comes to their face and their body. When describing when she posts pictures to social media, Hannah (Gen Z) says, “Umm yeah, I think it's 100% based on how I look and like if I'm doing something fun”. Vanessa, also Gen Z, explains that she likes to put the best physical parts of herself on social media. She

explains: "... I will spend hours picking like the best photo or like the best filter." Madison further touches on a current trend that she has noticed to make Instagram specifically more casual (and less of a highlight reel); however, she explains that for the most part, the casualness still does not change how she decides what to post:

"Yeah, I feel like there's like been a big push recently to, like, make Instagram casual and like kind of just like post the pictures rather than like thinking on them for weeks and weeks at a time, which I'm a big proponent of. Uh, but I definitely think like looks are 99% of it. How does that make you look? But also, how do you look?"

While a majority of Gen Z respondents discussed their focus on looks and appearance, they still all mentioned how they know of many people their age who take it to another extreme. Olivia talks about girls from her high school who went to college in the South: "...I know for a fact that they use editing apps to edit their body and their pictures to make themselves look better and more appealing to the eye". The Gen Z cohort reported also being acutely aware of social media as a "highlight reel" of someone's life but, as opposed to Gen X, they do not think that is always a positive trend-- even though they, too, contribute to the trend. Vanessa explained, "I think [social media is] meant to be a highlight reel. I don't think it necessarily has to or should be". Madison continues that idea of her own usage, "It's not my life. [It] isn't this one big happy moment that it looks like on Instagram". Generation Z's focus on how they look in their social media posts and their self-aware role in social media as an idealized self may differ from those in Gen X. The Generation X group believes social media as a highlight reel, i.e., an idealized self, is beneficial while Gen Z claimed the opposite. This may indicate that, in comparison to Gen X, Gen Z is somewhat more mindful of how they physically appear online and the way it impacts themselves and others.

Validation The use of social media as a tool to control others' impressions may be explained by a desire for validation. Based on these interviews, a major difference between Gen X and Gen Z's view of social media as a way to be noticed by their peers was that the older group often viewed any post as a negative means to receive attention. Gen Z participants in this study, on the other hand, seemed to have a less cynical view, sympathizing with the need to be validated by their peers via likes and comments on their posts. Jennifer of Gen X, for instance, explicitly said she sees posting on social media as a "cry for attention". Kimberly, a Gen X participant who works in academia, discusses how her career peers yearn for intellectual validation and attention through their social media posts. She says, "They curate this like social justice persona on these platforms. That doesn't translate to their actual lives. That drives me insane." While the Gen X cohort largely believes social media creates an effortless platform to receive seemingly endless validation and attention, they all admitted to participating themselves. All Gen X respondents said they cannot help but check the likes and comments they receive on their posts. Karen says,

"...I might say, oh, that was maybe a lame post and that people didn't really like, you know, react to it very much or whatever. Yeah. Or that the photo wasn't all that exciting. So. Yeah. So yeah, I do notice actually."

They often admitted to checking the engagement on their posts. However, when asked if they ever dwell on the number of likes and comments they receive or tie those numbers to their self-worth, none of them admitted that they did. The younger cohort, by comparison, also expectedly keeps up with others' engagement with their posts. Madison, Olivia, Hannah, and Vanessa (all Gen Z) commented on how online validation used to affect them more when they were younger

(such as when they were in high school or middle school), but they admit that it still is something they notice even now. Madison (Gen Z) mentioned how Instagram created a way to hide the number of likes a post receives from everyone except the original poster, and she described this tool as a good thing. Additionally, Vanessa, a Gen Z interviewee, talked about how she is controlled by the engagement she receives,

“The like thing is so weird. I don't know why I'm so obsessed with it, to be honest, but I think it's more so like when you have a good picture of yourself and like, you feel good about yourself and that and you put out on the Internet, you want a lot of people to see it. And I think like, the only way you get that gratification is through the likes, cuz you can't see how many people are seeing it. ...I just like if I feel good about myself, I want people. to like validate that I guess”

All of the Gen Z participants mentioned that they cared so much about the amount of likes that they received on their posts that they would delete any post that they thought did not fare well with their audience. A notable difference in Gen Z and Gen X's perception of online validation and the engagement many people crave is what aspect of the post they are validating and complimenting through their 'like' or 'comment'. The Gen X participants seemed more focused on bragging about a vacation or their happy family, while Gen Z participants were more focused on their individual physical attractiveness. This difference could be an indication of what women value at different stages in their life. The women in Generation X were primarily mothers with children in or around the age of Generation Z. For the most part, they answered questions framing it in the context of their identity as a mother, showing how important their family is to them. Their roles as mothers seemed to influence their social media posts and the identity they wish to create online. They want to show their followers their value as mothers and have their audience validate this role, but they also want to present an idealized version of this role-- or as Lisa and Jennifer called it-- an online “Christmas card”. On the other end of the spectrum,

Generation Z may be at a point in their life where they value physical attractiveness and look for validation in their appearance. This may be a tactic to quiet insecurities that may be more typical of adolescence.

Social Connectivity

Both cohorts of women, Gen X and Gen Z, applauded social media as a tool to keep them close to friends from all walks of life. If they moved, went to summer camp, or live far away from those they went to school with, it gives them the opportunity to stay connected or, at the very least, stay informed on what their peers are generally up to in their lives. Madison (Gen Z) says her favorite part of social media is being able to see what basically everyone she has ever known is up to all in one place (on social media). Gen X similarly talks about having so many personal connections all over the place and their reasoning for joining social media was tied to this. Since Gen Z joined social media at a time in which most of their connections were in one physical place, their original intentions to engage with social media differ from those of Gen X. However, as they have transitioned to college, gone off to summer camp, moved and had friends and family move, they also find social media to be a great way to stay and feel connected with friends.

The Gen Z women are still in their formative years and may be less established in their lives. They typically talked about using social media to form connections-- as opposed to just keeping them. For example, they described using dating apps to find romantic partners and social media to find college roommates and new friends. Gen X did not describe using social media in this way and it could be due to the fact they are

often more established in their lives with regards to family to career. Kimberly (Gen X) says,

“I think it makes people feel connected. Particularly with what I'll call like moderate to weak ties. So people with whom we don't have particularly close relationships. But I don't think it deepens connections between people.”

Kimberly distinguishes here between feeling connected with friends or peers online and forming new connections. However, that is just her experience. Gen Z is still working to form connections in all spheres of life and have used social media as a tool to connect since they were adolescents.

Career As social media exploded for personal use, social media as a tool for work has become increasingly important. For Lisa, a member of Gen X, her job is what drew her to join social media in the first place. She described how Facebook became one of the means that information pertaining to work was shared so she felt it was time she gave into the pressure to join. Other Gen X participants talked about having separate social media accounts specifically tied to their work—for example, they had specialized social media accounts that they used to promote their business or share content with clients. The consensus among Gen X respondents seems to be that social media provides them with a unique ability to connect with individuals and with content that has the potential to enhance their career.

Generation Z participants, on the other hand, did not bring up the idea of social media as a tool to use in their careers. This may simply be because they are still working on their undergraduate degrees and are not yet full-time in the workforce. One Gen Z woman, Emily, worked for a nonprofit and compared her experience to that of an

“influencer” (that is, someone who makes their living posting lifestyle content to social media), saying,

“So I think when organizations have it, I think that's a lot different than like individuals have it. ...whereas. Like an influencer like, how is your Keto recipe you post, you know, like, going to have a positive impact on my life”

Emily believes that social media as a tool in career support is largely different from the influencer culture which does little to enhance her life. Other Gen Z participants brought up influencer culture when asked if they follow people they did not know (i.e. celebrities, politicians). Madison, a Gen Z participant explains her attraction to social media influencers,

“I was thinking about why I follow [influencer] the other day and I think it's because she and I are the same age and she is living just like a completely different life than I am. And it's just like, really interesting to see, honestly. And I feel like a lot of the influences I follow on TikTok are like like that where it's just like, wow, like, I can't believe you're in high school and I'm in college and you're, like, making millions off these brand deals and like going on all these trips. It's like insane to me”

Madison's thoughts on social media influencers are contrary to Emily's, yet they both can agree on the fact that influencer prevalence has exploded almost as fast as social media itself. The other members of Gen Z found themselves somewhere in the middle of Madison and Emily's views. They do not follow any influencers closely, but simultaneously are aware of their content and messaging they promote.

The idea of social media tied to careers is twofold. Both cohort groups, when discussing the topic, brought up two vastly different views of social media and careers. Gen X typically described how they use social media in their own career toolbox, while Gen Z conversely described how social media *as* a career has taken over in popularity.

Social Media Addiction Social media has brought a lot of positive aspects to the way people connect, but in terms of how often we use it and how productive that time is, many critics see it as an addictive force in society. When asked about their own experience with social media and if they considered themselves addicted to social media, all of the participants of both cohorts said yes. A few of the women in each generation held their phones up saying how they could not help but to keep it close by. Vanessa (Gen Z) said she recently had a concussion and wasn't allowed to look at screens. She said that "... it was the worst week of my life because I could not be on my phone". Olivia, of Gen Z, when discussing her addiction to social media, noted that if taken out of context, it could be mistaken for any addictive substance:

Yeah, I mean, as much as I would like to say no, like I'm in control and I could stop whenever I want to. I think to a certain extent like I it would be a very different life like I don't know that I would be able to stop like cold turkey if I wanted to.

When asked if they are addicted to a specific platform, Gen X participants said no, but all five of Gen Z said they were particularly addicted to TikTok. A common thread in their responses was that the short videos and never-ending feed contributes not only to their addiction, but also to a worsened attention span that they have noticed offline. Both groups talked about the algorithms that social media use to keep you addicted in which they cater the videos that you see to what you have engaged with before; as such, everything on one's social media feed is specifically tailored to their personal interests. These algorithms, coupled with the fact that social media allows people to feel connected with others from the comfort of their own homes, arguably keeps people of all ages coming back. Lisa of Gen X says, "They've packaged an

incredibly addictive product and thought of the things that humans crave, right?”. Many participants believe social media is designed to be addictive and the interviews show at least among these participants, the addiction does not discriminate by age.

Loneliness Though social media allows people to connect, social media can also be a place where people feel disconnected and lonely in their own lives. Topics that often came up in the interviews included how one is expected to present themselves on social media, the loneliness from seeing friends do something you were not invited to, general feelings of isolation after spending so much time glued to scrolling on social media, among others. A common theme across members of Gen X was that they are thankful they did not have social media as adolescents because that period was already hallmarked by feelings of loneliness and fears of being left out and they could not imagine how magnified those feelings would be if social media existed. Gen Z frequently shared experiences of feeling left out because of social media. Some of them also brought up how the pressure to maintain a certain image online often leaves them feeling lonely and disconnected from others. Karen, who is part of the Gen X cohort, explains why she thinks there are generational differences in feeling lonely with social media and how it has a lot to do with maturity,

“I see the pressure it puts on my nieces and you know, it's just. So being older, I think I'm able to step away or it's kind of view it in a like a. I don't know. Compartmentalize.... So it doesn't affect me really, I don't think”

The Gen Z participants are now in college and report feeling more mature than when they were students in high school and middle school. However, their experiences with social media for so many years and in such important periods of their development has led to

feelings of loneliness. Since social media played a role in many formative years of socialization for Gen Z, feeling disconnected both online and offline may be understandable. Olivia (Gen Z) explains,

“...I think that it could have, like affected how we also socialize with each other obviously. And I don't know just like. The way that we got to know each other was kind of thrown off a little bit like..”

It is still unclear what experiences with social media give Gen Z a deeper feeling of loneliness, but from the testimonials of both cohort groups it seems that the younger participants are more profoundly affected by the disconnect social media can provide. Loneliness may be an important byproduct of social media usage, especially when users find that connecting online with others is not enough to provide fulfillment or when connecting with others online is problematic in some way.

Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of this study was to look at generational differences in social media behavior and the strategies white women of different generations (Generation X and Generation Y) use to create online personas and connect online. Looking at presentation of self, there were similarities in the ways both generational groups used social media as a tool to control the appearances of their peers. They both carefully curated their posts, though the major differences noted were what each group valued when curating their online selves. The younger generation (Gen Z), all women in college, cared about how they looked in their posts regarding physical beauty. By comparison, the older generation women (Gen X) seemed more concerned with showing off their happy family or career feats. These findings tie back to the work of Erving Goffman--

specifically his work with regards to presenting the self. The findings reveal that the participants actively work to manipulate others' perceptions by using tools available in their social media spaces. They use their front stage to perform to their audience (whether to family, friends, potential employers, etc.), showing the facets they wish to highlight about themselves or their lives.

Regarding fostering connection, both generational cohorts were far more similar than different. Both regarded social media as an excellent way to keep in contact with people from different parts of their lives. Each generation cited actively enjoying social media because they could stay in touch with people they otherwise see in person rarely, if ever. These findings echo those of Gruzd and Haythornewait (2013) and build upon on the idea that online spaces allow for community to form and be maintained regardless of physical location. The human craving for connection spans generations and social media is simply the latest tool to maintain connections with others. Concerning social media tied to career, Gen X utilizes social media to connect with other professionals and content to enhance their career. The Gen Z group does not, however they are aware at the rising trend of their generation forming careers with social media. Both groups found negativity that comes with social media such as the addiction to social media they all experience and loneliness from consistent social media use. This is significant information because it shows that social media's influence spans these generational groups in both the positives to foster connection and community as well as the negatives from overuse and disconnect from the offline world.

The field of social media research is a very important one. Social media has become a new medium to study many of the social dynamics previously studied in sociology such as presentation of self and how people connect with one another. Understanding the way different

generational cohorts utilize this tool to create and maintain their own social networks, as well as curate their online selves is a salient aspect of not only social media studies but the understanding of generational differences as well. Moreover, examining how these 21st Century social spaces give rise to relatively new opportunities for presentation of self and connection to others allows researchers not only to understand social media, but the changing world as a whole.

Limitations & Future Directions

The present study is an exploratory research study. The objective was to examine any potential differences in the ways in which respondents of different generations use social media. The intent was not to generalize these findings to the general population, but rather to open the door for further research and hopefully inspire more comprehensive studies concerning generational differences in social media usage. A strength of this study is that due to its qualitative nature, it allowed participants to speak in their own words (through their interview responses) about how and why they use social media, as well as give some degree of insight into potential different and similar experiences of Generation X and Generation Z participants.

The study has a few limitations that must be addressed. First, though only an exploratory study, the small sample size (ten participants) makes it impossible to generalize conclusions about entire generational cohorts based on the experiences of so few women. Second, each woman who was interviewed for the study was white and, at the time, living in Vermont. The focus on women in Vermont may have impacted the data because there may be geographic differences in social media uses and behaviors. Future research could select participants from a variety of regions in the United States, as well as expand the research to different racial /ethnic

groups and genders. The focus of this study on white women was intentional to limit demographic factors that could skew the data, though future work could examine other populations or seek more diversity in race, ethnicity, age, gender, and regionality. Third, this study was qualitative, though future research could include a survey to approach the question of generational differences using a quantitative research strategy. This would allow for more individuals to report their experiences with social media (and hence a larger sample size) and could lead to better understanding and generalizations about social media usage. Future studies also may wish to further investigate social media and generational differences, though explore topics not addressed in the present study-- such as mental health, happiness, social media and dating, among others.

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Appendix A: Recruitment flier

Volunteers needed for UVM research study on social media

Looking for participants to interview for my undergraduate honors thesis on generational differences in social media behavior. Interviews are held on Zoom or Microsoft Teams

Eligible participants match one of these two groups

- White women
- College-educated
- Born between the years 1965-1980 (members of Generation X)
- Use Facebook actively

OR

- White women
- Enrolled in college/university
- Born between the years 1997-2004 (members of Generation Z)
- Use Instagram actively

Participation includes a recorded interview between 30 minutes and 1 hour

If this description matches you or someone you know, please send me a message or email me astibora@uvm.edu to learn more information!

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: Connecting to Disconnect: Generational Difference in the Social Media Behavior of Educated White Women

Principal Investigator (PI): Annelise Stibora

Faculty Sponsor: Professor Nikki Khanna

Funder: Sociology Department

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you fit into the qualifications of an active social media user, educated white woman, and one of the two necessary age groups (born between 1965-1980 OR 1996-2004). This study is being conducted by Annelise Stibora at the University of Vermont.

Purpose

This study is being conducted to research generational differences in social media behavior in regard to creation and consumption of content among educated white women. The study will focus on the main topics of self-presentation and connection.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to take part in one recorded interview lasting approximately one hour that takes place on Microsoft teams. Recordings will be deleted upon transcription. You will be asked general demographic questions and then a series of questions concerning your personal experience with social media as well as your viewpoints on various facets of the platforms. You will have the option to decline to answer any of the questions, however none are anticipated to be overly personal or invasive in any way.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may not be any direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

We will not collect any information that will identify you to protect your confidentiality.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be stored with a code name or number so that we are able to match you to your answers.

Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through e-mail could be read by a third party.

Participant information will be kept secure and protected. The list of specific names attached to participant codes will be separate from the interview transcripts. At the end of the research study when the Thesis is defended and passed, all information connecting your participant code to your identity will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. If you choose to withdraw from this study all your information and answers will be discarded

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me, Annelise Stibora at the following phone number 216-970-1479. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at (802) 656-5040.

It is recommended you print this information sheet for your records before continuing.

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Interview Questions

- What year were you born?
- What is your religious affiliation, if any?
- What is your highest degree of education?
- How would you describe your or your family's socio-economic status based on the following categories(lower class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class)?
- How do you identify yourself racially?
- How do you identify your gender?
- At what age did you start using social media
 - Did you primarily use a smartphone, computer, or something else?
- Why did you initially join social media?
 - What platforms did you use when you first joined? (instagram, twitter, snapchat?)
 - Were these reasons consistent among different platforms (if relevant) or did you have a common reason?
- Do you think there is a good age to join social media?
 - What age would that be?
- What platform of social media do you currently use? [i.e. you previously said you first joined...what do you currently use?]
 - What platform(s) do you use the most?
 - Why do you think you have gravitated towards this platform? [is there a particular reason behind this?]
- What do you spend most of your time on social media doing?
 - I.e. posting about your personal life, posting pictures of yourself, connecting with friends posts, looking at memes, reading news, etc.
- How often do you use social media?(rarely, few times a month, couple times a week, once a day, multiple/several times a day)
- Would you say you use social media more to post or repost your own content or to consume/interact with other content?
 - I.e. active or passive (posting, reposting) vs (reading, looking)
- What influences you to make a post on social media?
 - How you look, what you're doing, travel, family, politics/news, pop culture etc.
- Do you believe social media has had an impact on your happiness in some way?
 - Is it impacting short or long term happiness, or both?

- Why do you think that is?
- Do you have peers or know of people who you think use social media in a negative way?
 - I.e. to get attention, to promote unrealistic versions of themselves, etc.
- Do you believe social media is addictive?
 - If yes, why?
 - Do you think you are addicted or have ever been addicted?
 - What platform(s) and was it something about that specific platform?
- Do you believe social media has a positive or negative impacts on you?
 - What about in general, (peers, youth, communities, etc)
- Do you believe your social media presence and the posts you make about yourself are an accurate representation of you and your life?
 - Why?
 - If not, could it be beneficial to make it more accurate?
 - Do you believe others are accurate?
- Do you look at how many likes or comments your posts receive?
 - How often?
 - What does it mean to you if they receive many likes vs less than usual?
- Thinking about engagement with social media (your posts likes, comments, shares), Do you believe people tie their self worth to these numbers? Do you?
- Do you have any secondary accounts on any of your social media platforms?
 - If so, Why? who is your audience and why do you use them? (for close friends / to post more "real" content)
- Do you think social media does more to connect or disconnect people?
 - Are the connections made via social media solely shallow? Or do they aid in fostering deeper connections as well?
 - Have you ever felt lonely as a result of social media?
- Do you follow people you don't know (celebrities, politicians, etc.) and why?
- Do you get any of your news from social media platforms?
 - If so, how much and which ones?
- Have you ever been banned from a social media platform?
 - Which one and why?

Question Key

Demographic

General

Presentation of Self

Fostering Connection