“WHEN I'M LOOKING AT THE WORLD...I TAKE A PHOTO”: AN EXPLORATION OF THE AFFECTUAL AND SOCIAL COMPLEXITIES OF SHARING AND SEEING IMAGES IN YOUTH DIGITAL CULTURE

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Abstract

"When I'm Looking at the World…I Take a Photo": An Exploration of the Affectual and Social Complexities of Sharing and Seeing Images in Youth Digital Culture

Madison Moore

This dissertation focuses on the intersectionality between images posted on social media and social rules in the lives of young people. The findings are based on thirty-four qualitative interviews with young social media users where photo-based methodologies were employed. From these interviews, three key themes emerged: 1) Posting and sharing images are connected to identity exploration and formation, 2) Social rules around embodied emotions affect how youth present their emotions in online photographic material, and 3) The conflation of private and public spaces in the digital sphere complicates how social media users interact with images. While the findings presented are clear, this dissertation aims to take a holistic approach to understanding youth digital culture and avoids coming to conclusions that view social media as "good" or "bad" for youth. This tactic allows the findings to acknowledge the complexities of communicative digital spaces and understand the intricacies of social media in the daily lives of young people (boyd, 2014; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). This dissertation discusses both challenges youth face on social media when posting and viewing images, as well as how images can be used to defy social norms.

Keywords: *Youth, social media, images, affect*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

During the process of writing this dissertation, I was lucky enough to receive media attention regarding my findings. I had multiple interviews with media outreach teams, journalists, and a newscaster. In each of these conversations, one dominant question stood out: Is social media good or bad for children/youth? Some individuals I spoke with asked me this question directly while others pondered multiple possibilities, such as one interviewer who remarked, "I always thought social media was bad, but maybe your research is saying it's good"? In Canada, 90% of youth now utilize social media applications (SMA), such as Instagram and Tik Tok, to conduct communication with their peers, families, and communities (Schimmele et al., 2021). As technology, social media in particular, is prevalent in the lives of children and youth, it is not surprising that social media and its impacts have been a prominent topic in current research. Current research on youth and social media focuses on the outcomes of participating in online communicative technologies and has identified both positive (social interaction and political participation) and negative effects (cyberbullying and association with declining mental health) (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2016; Papapanou et al. 2023; Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2021). While there is a purpose to understanding specific tech-based issues, such as cyberbullying, approaching the study of social media in the lives of youth with a dichotomous and simplistic perspective, good vs. evil, can hinder a researcher's ability to explore the experiences of the youth they wish to learn about in a more complete fashion (boyd, 2015). To expand, while youth may experience cyberbullying within virtual spaces, they may also use these technologies to be engaged citizens through activist movements or communicate with their peers. Taking a singular

approach to studying the topic of social media and youth creates the potential for missed information and disregards the complexities of youths' interactions with online communicative tools. Technology has become entangled in the lives of all people, not just children and youth, as it is deeply embedded in the way we interact with the world (Karppi, 2018). On a given day, youth may use social media to chat with friends, buy a product, or learn new information. Due to this, research attempting to understand the experiences of youth within digital spaces needs to be approached open-endedly to account for the complex and interconnected nature of technology and everyday life. Needless to say, the following dissertation does not answer the question: Is social media good or bad? Instead, it is an open inquiry into how youth visually communicate within digital spaces, specifically social media applications, and how what youth choose to post online connects to sociological rules regarding human affect.

Images dominate individual's and communities' worlds and contribute to the way in which they understand themselves and the society where they exist (Berger, 1972; Pink, 2012). One of the main aspects of participating in social media applications (SMA) is the taking and posting of photographs and interacting with the photographs of others. While some applications such as Facebook and X (formally Twitter) use a combination of images and text as communicative tools, others, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, predominantly rely on images in both still (photo) and moving (video) formats with a smaller amount of descriptive text. The visual aspects of technology are critical to examine because humans develop a cultural understanding of their world by witnessing photographs and, in turn, express their own consciousness when they create images (Pink, 2012; Rose, 2022). If the creation of a photograph is a site of conscious communication and reflection on cultural experiences, then studying how youths use photographs to communicate with their community in online spaces will provide

insight into how societal norms influence their online artistic decision-making (Vygotsky,1978). Within digital-social spaces, humans also interact with the images posted by other individuals or groups such as businesses, organizations, or governments. Both the taking of and witnessing of images can evoke an emotional response such as sadness or happiness (Hirsch, 2012; Horvat et al., 2015). When an individual encounters images online, they feel what they see and, therefore emotionally participate in their online community through photographs (Hirsch, 2012; Rose, 2001). According to Jill Bennett (qt. in Hirsch, 2012), "images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion" (p.39). This suggests that while taking an image entails emotions and embodiment, a person viewing an image draws from their own experiences to mimic the witnessed moment within their bodies. Karrpi (2018) states that connectivity is "the cultural logic of how people and things are bonded"(p. 2). This dissertation suggests that images found within digital spaces are interconnected with the embodied emotional experience of social media users and the cultural rules that surround, inform, and direct the expression of these emotions. My research will explore the following questions: 1) How do youth use photographic creation to express themselves emotionally?; 2) What sociological rules influence what a youth chooses to post in online spaces publicly?; 3) How does interacting with the photographs of other social media users affect youth emotionally and contribute to their understanding of their own identity?

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation will rely on two theoretical frameworks, affect theory and the new sociology of childhood, to shape discussions and arguments surrounding the use of images as communication in the lives of Canadian youth. In a general sense, affect theory ponders elements

of emotion, feelings, and the human body. It delves into discussions on the way in which a human body can be affected by encounters with "a body, an object, an idea, or an emotion" (Truran, 2022, p. 28). However, affect theory has been called "dynamic" and "undisciplined" due to the multiple trajectories of thought on the subject and the lack of a singular definition (Figlerowicz, 2012; Truran, 2022). Seigworth (2021) suggests that a definition of affect theory may be difficult to form because of the "ongoingness" of affectual experiences. To expand, while an encounter, also called a "point of intensity," may happen that causes an emotional reaction, forces that influence this experience exist before and after its occurrence, meaning that affect is not a singular event or definable moment, but a complex intertwining of multiple experiences and factors. (Seigworth 2021; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). While theories on affect and its applications are vast, there are two general trajectories most theorists take: 1) Theorists are influenced by early affect thinkers, such as Spinoza and Deleuze, who viewed affect as pre-personal and pre-linguistic, suggesting that emotional experiences are non-conscious (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Truran, 2022). For example, Brian Massumi (2002) was inspired by Deleuze's concept of "virtual," which assumes that at any given time, there are various possibilities for a person's responses to an encounter (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Truran, 2022). For example, when a youth looks at an image, there are many ways they could experience or react to the image (virtual), but the reaction they do experience is called the actual and is a non-conscious happening. In this train of thought, affect is seen as biological and autonomic in the sense that humans don't necessarily have control over their affects. 2) The second main theoretical route of affect theory explores the phenomenon of affect in correlation to cultural and political structures. Modern theorists such as Sarah Ahmed (2015) and Eve Sedgwick (2003) connect lived experiences with emotional experiences. A theory that is of particular interest in the context of

the dissertation is Arlie Hochschild's (2003) concept of "feeling rules" which suggests that social and political rules govern how people feel. A social system where people question what they should or should not be feeling creates a form of control over people's embodied experiences and actions. In the context of the dissertation, I must consider how "feeling rules" influence the photographic choices youth make online in terms of what embodied experiences they present in their images.

The second theory employed in this dissertation is the new sociology of childhood, which is an approach that is interdisciplinary in nature as it draws from various fields, such as psychology, education, and cultural studies, to engage in conversations around childhood (James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2005). It moves away from archaic conceptions of childhood that suggest children are "in progress" and recognizes them as active participants in their reality with the potential to affect the society in which they exist (James & Prout, 1997; Handel et al., 2007; Corsaro; 2015). Mayall (1994) speaks about children as a social group that is disadvantaged and oppressed by their lack of adulthood, and that power dynamics within relationships with adults affect children's social experience. However, this approach appreciates that children and youth can produce their own culture, contribute to social change and deserve to be included in research as their own area of focus (Corsaro, 2015; Lutrell, 2020). Children are not passive recipients of socialization as they are equipped with the ability to make choices, express opinions, and contribute to the world around them (Corsaro, 2015). Therefore, their perspectives should be valued and respected within research endeavours. The social construct of what childhood means and how it should look is a concept that shifts over time and geographical location (James & Prout, 1997). For example, in 18th century Canada, children often participated in labour, such as tending to crops, and were viewed as economic assets to a family, whereas in the 19th and 20th

centuries, with the development of the public school system, children began to be viewed as "learners" that could be shaped as adults saw fit (Barman, 2011; Gaffield, 2015; Lutrell, 2020). This social shift in the way childhood was viewed, from child labourer to learner, created an atmosphere where children are regarded as beings to be controlled and managed and concepts of the "good" child began to emerge (Lutrell, 2020; Matthews, 2007). Childhood within a specific time period is also not homogenous to all children (Matthews, 2007). Concepts such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status can also contribute to a unique childhood experience. The ever-shifting constructions of childhood within societies suggest that while each adult experienced a childhood, their experiences would be different from current child actors. Therefore, childhood is a concept that should continuously be researched and include the children's voices.

Bricolage: A Piecing Together of Theory

After completing a successful defence of the following dissertation, my committee asked me to add a small section setting up my approach to theoretical inquiry. The need for this section stemmed from my eclectic use of theories, woven together to think about how youth engage in photographic practices online. One of my committee members offered up the term *bricolage* to describe my approach. While I was previously unaware of this research method prior to my defence discussion, it suited my epistemological attitude toward knowledge-making perfectly. The concept of bricolage was first introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1966) to think about how multi-theoretical and methodological approaches had begun to emerge in qualitative research (Mateus & Sarkar, 2024; Rodgers, 2015). When a researcher, or bricoleur, engages in the method of bricolage, they are in a constant dialogue with the material and use a wide range of available

sources, in my case theories, to capture the “essence of events from different angles” (Lotteri et al., 2023, p. 2). By engaging with qualitative data through a vast range of theoretical lenses and sources, space is created to account for the complexities of people's experiences, where findings might overlap or contradict themselves (Denzen & Lincoln, 2000; Lotteri et al., 2023). Finlay (2002) suggests that reflexivity is an integral part of the bricolage approach where the researcher participates in a self-evaluation of their research processes. This is why I feel it is appropriate to acknowledge that this section, where I reflect on how I engaged with various theoretical approaches, was done post-defence.

While bricolage has been used in qualitative research methods since the 1960s, a more robust definition of the approach was not associated with it until the early 2000s (Lotteri et al., 2023). To expand, Denzen and Lincoln (2000) first conceptualized that bricolage had five dimensions, specifically “methodological, theoretical, interpretive, political and narrative bricolage” (Lotteri et al., 2023, p. 2). In this dissertation, I feel that I participated most in the theoretical and narrative dimensions. Within the theoretical dimension, researchers must be able to think about knowledge and information through multiple paradigms to account for the complexities of lived experience, whereas, in the narrative dimension, there is a recognition that text provides interpretations of reality, not objective truths (Denzen & Lincoln, 2000; Rodgers, 2015). In my opening paragraphs, I discuss how I avoid framing social media as bad or good because I felt that approaching social media from a dichotomous perspective could hinder my ability to understand the digital experiences of youth fully. From a methodological standpoint, I attempted to use open-ended questions during my interview process so that the youth told stories that most mattered to them, leading me to code a tapestry of stories. In the following pages, I remain open to telling the stories of the youth I worked with despite their contradictory nature.

For example, In Chapter Three, I discuss how youth define authenticity within digital spaces quite differently. While the opinions of the youth seemingly conflict, the "messiness" of this finding appropriately reflects the intricacy of experiences within the digital sphere.

To fully understand my participants' unique experiences and consider their stories from multiple perspectives, I chose to interact with my findings using a wide range of theoretical lenses such as cultural, social, and psychological. For instance, in Chapter Three, I begin by introducing both Erick Erickson (1968), who offers a developmental perspective of identity and Erving Goffman (1959;1986), who takes a symbolic interactionist approach to identity by thinking through the ways people manage expressions of the self. At first glance, these two theories seemingly don't belong in the same paper as they are taking contrasting stances on the topic at hand. However, by using a bricolage approach and including conflicting thoughts on identity, I am able to offer the reader a variety of options on how one could possibly approach the subject matter. Continuing with the above example, Erickson (1968), who categorized identity into stages of crises, one being specific to relationships (see p. 54), helped guide me in thinking about certain thematic findings and why developmentally connecting with friends and family might be important to a youth. Whereas Goffman's (1959;1986) theories facilitated my discussion on why youth might manage the photographic portrayal of their identity in various social spheres online. As I interacted with the theoretical dimension of bricolage within each chapter, it was a central theme throughout this dissertation.

Lastly, engaging in bricolage is well suited to one of my overarching theoretical and methodological frameworks, the new sociology of childhood. As social constructions of childhood and youth culture are ever-shifting (James & Prout, 1997), using a theoretical method that is stagnant in one line of thinking is inadequate. Bricolage accounts for unique and variable

experiences and acknowledges that reality is not something that can be "caught" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lotteri et al., 2023). This dissertation does not present facts on youth social media use that will perpetually apply, which is a notion rejected by the concept of bricolage (Denzen & Lincoln, 2000; Rodgers, 2015). Instead, it presents an illustration of the social life of youth, here and now, by interweaving the individual narratives presented by my participants into one story. My aim for this dissertation was to immerse my readers in various ways of thinking about youth, social media, and their photographic choices.

Position Statement

Many words describe who I am: white, female, mother, partner, bi-sexual, and non-religious. Typically, position statements entail addressing "an individual's values and beliefs that are shaped by their political allegiance, religious faith, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, and status" (Holmes, 2020, p. 2), and the way in which these aspects influence how a person approaches a research project. While these words are important to understanding my relationship to the work I produced in the following pages, the inspiration for this project came from specific experiences that are important for you, the reader, to know. Therefore, I would like to approach this section a little differently than what would typically be expected when addressing one's positionality. Instead of speaking about the pieces of my identity that influence who I am as a researcher, I would like to talk about two specific events in my life, one an elongated lifelong experience that is still unfolding and one that was a little blip. Both sparked my interest in understanding the role social stigmas around emotions play in how people feel and act on those feelings. These events are both my bias and my inspiration.

My mother has lived with mental health issues her whole life. I was first aware of the severity of her battle when I was eight. I had reached into her jacket hanging in the front hall closet to see if there was any candy and had gotten pricked by a needle instead. The needle itself didn't mean much at the moment because my mother was a nurse, but my grandmother's troubled reaction tipped me off that something was wrong. My mother had been stealing morphine from her work. Throughout my childhood, she shifted from addiction to addiction: drugs, alcohol, and eating disorders, leading to hospitalizations, rehab stays, and overdoses. While there were many traumatic moments stemming from the addictive personality of my mother, one of the most painful aspects of my experience was being told not to speak about what was happening at home and what was happening to me. The silence engulfed my world in shame, and I was unsure how to speak about my feelings. My father leaned into a facade of toxic positivity where any negative emotion had no place in his mind or in mine. Pushing "negative" emotions down eventually took a toll on my body. I began to experience panic attacks, which, to me, was my body's way of feeling something, even if it was fear. Eventually, in my adulthood, I was able to sit fully with my emotions attached to the experiences associated with my mother and accept them. The panic attacks stopped. However, this experience left me with questions. Why was my family so ashamed of my mother's addiction? Why did my father hold on to positivity harder than he fought to keep us safe? Was it, perhaps, his way of keeping us safe? Are emotions dangerous?

The second event in my life that had me question the relationship people have with emotions was when my son Elliot was born. After three days of labour, ending in a cesarean section, my son was born very ill. They moved him quickly from my body to another room to try

to help him breathe. I did not get to see him. He had inhaled meconium[1] while still in my womb, so when he tried to take a breath, he couldn't. With my labour being so long, his lungs had become severely infected. The doctors wanted to move him to a hospital with a specialized machine, an hour away, but questioned if he would make the ambulance ride. The first time I saw him was when they wheeled him into my room and told me it was "important to say goodbye." My sister-in-law snapped a photo of me staring at the incubator, thinking it may be the only photo we had together. At that moment, I had been given so many drugs that I couldn't process what had been said to me. I felt nothing. As the days passed, Elliot kept living, and I began to realize the emotional weight of the moment. Not only was I experiencing my own pain, both physical and emotional, but I was also a witness to Elliot's pain of fighting to survive. Some people who surrounded me during this time empathized with the moment's difficulty, while others told me that I should focus on the fact that he was still alive and be happy. Be happy? Ignore my pain; ignore his pain. Ignore. Was pain not valid at this moment? Sarah Ahmed (2015) states, "Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the bodily life of that history." (p.34). Both my body and Elliot's body held space for pain, but talking about it was taboo. While years have passed and both Elliot and I are well, the pain still exists in the memory of the event and the scars that it left. Why shouldn't this be acknowledged? Why can't I be both happy Elliot is well and alive and saddened by the fact that he had to experience something so immense in the first weeks of his life? While my dissertation does not unpack my own experiences further than this short retelling, it does show that these events shape the way that I view my research question. It highlights that understanding the connection between emotional expression and

[1] John Hopkins (2023) describes meconium inhalation as "the first feces, or stool, of the newborn. Meconium aspiration syndrome occurs when a newborn breathes a mixture of meconium and amniotic fluid into the lungs…Meconium aspiration syndrome, a leading cause of severe illness and death in the newborn, occurs in about 5 percent to 10 percent of births." (para. 1)

social ideologies is personal. During the conduction of the following research, I stayed open to any themes that came through. Some were surprising, and some were not.

Important Concepts and Definitions

The Digital Rights of Youth

In 1989, a document entitled the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNCRC, 1989). This was the first internationally recognized document that declared children, identified as those under the age of eighteen, as rights-bearing citizens (OHCHR, 2023). Within this document, fifty-four articles outlined the specific rights that children were entitled to, such as the right to life and the right to play (UNCRC, 1989). The outlined rights of the UNCRC are based on four defining principles: 1) children should have access to these rights in a non-discriminatory manner, 2) decisions about children should be made in the best interest of the children involved, 3) it is a government's responsibility to support children in growing to their full potential, and 4) children should be given the opportunity to participate and voice their opinion on issues and decisions that affect them (UNCRC, 1989; Government of Canada, 2021). In December of 1991, Canada ratified the agreement obligating Canada, as a country, to uphold the rights outlined in the agreement under international law. As the internet was only emerging as a technological tool at the time this document was produced, there are no distinct rights that speak to digital spaces (Tobin, 2022). However, in March of 2021, the United Nations released a statement called *General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment* that specified that governments should uphold the rights outlined in the UNCRC within digital spaces.

The document made several specific recommendations to achieve safe access to the Internet for children and youth, which was based on the opinions of various specialists as well as seven hundred and nine children (Tobin, 2022; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). For example, in correlation with Article 2, the right to non-discrimination, the document states that all children should have access to technologies without discrimination and that they should not face discrimination within digital spaces, such as through hateful language (Tobin, 2022; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Access to digital technologies can be particularly important for youth as a large proportion of their social communication with peers occurs within these spaces (Schimmele et al., 2021; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). When children and youth do not have access to digital methods of communication, they can be excluded from normal socialization and feel a sense of alienation that can be harmful to their overall well-being (boyd, 2015; Telleczek & Campbell, 2019). In Canada, individuals living in rural settings, as well as those with a lower socio-economic status, are less likely to be able to access digital technologies like the Internet, which puts these individuals at a significant disadvantage in terms of access to information and communication (Howard et al., 2010; Looket & Thiessen, 2003). While there has been a significant increase over the past decade in Canadian households that have access to the Internet, as of 2022, 6.5% of households still lack Internet access, meaning that some children are not having their rights met (Government of Canada, 2023)

Another interesting component to consider is Article 3, which states that decisions made about children and digital spaces, including design, regulation and management, must be made in the best interest of the children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021; Tobin, 2022). While youth are heavy users of digital technologies, specifically social media, these applications were not necessarily created with children in mind (Schimmele et al., 2021; Vogels et al., 2022).

For example, the image-based social media application Instagram, which was created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, encourages users to share images or reels (15-second videos) with their followers, as well as use filters to alter or enhance their images digitally[2] (Eldridge, 2013). According to the Instagram Help Center, users must be at least thirteen years old to use the application, although accounts for younger children are acceptable if the account is managed by an adult and management information is stated in the bio, such as for a child celebrity. Young people engaging with Instagram are subject to a number of issues, such as hurtful comments from other members or privacy issues via the use of their data. Yet, minimal attempts have been made by social media conglomerates, such as Meta Platforms, Inc., who acquired Instagram in 2012, to honour the rights of children within digital spaces. To elaborate, Meta states nine ways that they "promote safety, security and integrity," but all are extremely vague, such as "maintain the integrity of our products," and none of them are specific to young users. To give the platform credit, Instagram was working on a "kid-friendly" version of Instagram that would be available to users under the age of thirteen, but this project was shut down in 2021 and has not resurfaced (Mosseri, 2021a). Unfortunately, should the project have been completed, a heavy focus on parental control would have been implemented, where safer design, such as the removal of advertisements, may have been a more effective approach. Nonetheless, children have the right to engage with digital technologies without their rights being compromised, and it is the responsibility of adults, including larger entities such as governments and companies, to achieve this.

While my dissertation does not heavily focus on the UNCRC and General Comment 25, it is necessary to acknowledge the digital rights outlined in these documents for a number of

[2] Instagram was acquired by Facebook Inc. in 2012, now known as Meta Platforms, Inc. (Eldridge, 2013)

reasons. Firstly, recent news and media presentations of youths' uses of social media are presented in a way that ignites fear and anxiety. For example, the New York Times (2023) recently published an article that reads, "Surgeon General Warns That Social Media May Harm Children and Adolescents," and CBC Radio (2019) referenced social media as a "toxic space" for young users. Here, we can clearly see the "moral panic" surrounding young people's use of social media, a concept first introduced by Stanley Cohen[3] (2002). In the context of modern-day social media use, news outlets sensationalize the idea that youth are being irreversibly harmed by engaging in these types of technologies with the intention of inciting fear in child-rearing adults. Speaking about social media from a perspective that amplifies a solely negative perspective can send the public into a tailspin of concern. As discussed by Cohen (2002), when a "moral panic" arises, there is a social reaction to the perceived issue through entities of authority, such as policy makers. With youth in Western societies this had played out in terms of policies banning the use of social media in certain spaces. For example, Ontario has had a cellphone ban in schools since 2019 (Benchetrit, 2023), and the United States Senate has recently considered a complete restriction of social media for children under thirteen and heavily monitored access for those thirteen to eighteen (Jalonick, 2023)[4]. The way that media shapes the conversation around youth and social media as a perceived threat evokes a reaction from Western society, which creates real-life consequences that go against the rights children and youth have, such as the banning of specific devices or applications. The following dissertation acknowledges the digital rights of children and youth and recognizes that the removal of social media from the lives of children and

[3] This references the 3rd edition of the book. Stanley Choen's concept of "moral panics" originated in the early 1970's and focused on the youth subgroup of Rockers in the 1960's. Cohen (2002) speaks to how youth are often viewed as a "problem". In my use of "moral panics," I focus on the panic surrounding social media and what it might do to youth versus youth being the issue themselves.

[4] During the final stages of this paper, four Ontario school boards filed a suit against Meta, Snapchat, and TikTok for $4.5 billion in damages, claiming that the negative effects social media has on young users can cost the school board resources (Rana, 2024). It will be interesting to see how this plays out.

youth is not a viable solution to any specific issue or concern. While I may address concepts such as mental health or bullying, I reject the notion that we should approach social media from a fearful place. As boyd suggests (2014), taking a dystopian view of social media can be a hindrance to research on the topic and can be harmful for youth whose use of social media is enmeshed with their social behaviour. Secondly, this dissertation is based on the perspectives of youths who use social media, which is aligned with the UNCRC and General Comment 25 and encourages the voices of children and youth to be listened to on matters that involve them. The timeline of this project did not allow for denser rights-based approaches, such as the involvement of a youth advisory council. However, my methodological frameworks encouraged full and meaningful participation by my participants (see section on methodological framework), which supports children's rights.

What Can Images Tell Us?

As this dissertation explores images as a form of communication by youth in digital spaces, we must think about the multiple roles images can play from a social perspective. Paul Duncum (1993) argues that there were five social functions of images in the lives of children and youth: substitution, narration, personal expression, embellishment, and persuasion. Duncum (1993) believed that the desire to create images is deeply rooted in cognition, noting that children feel inclined to create visual images through artistic expression quite early in their lives. Beyond an individual's need to create, Duncum also remarked that images play a large role in culture, with images reflecting the experiences of societies. Based on this theory, it is no surprise that humans have found a way to consistently communicate through visual means by using social media applications such as Instagram and TikTok. All inventions come from a human need, and

therefore, the human desire to communicate visually may have been a contributing factor to the creation of image-based social media products (Carr, 2010).

I would like to turn to Duncum's (1993) social functions of images to understand the many reasons why a youth may share a specific image. The first function discussed by Duncum is substitution, where images are a stand-in for what they represent. For example, a youth may post an image of their pet to represent its presence in their lives. To elaborate, while the pet is not physically available to a hypothetical youth's friend network, the youth may post an image of their pet to show what the pet is doing. They substitute the pet's presence with an image-based representation. Family photos are also a very common example of substitution, where people post images of themselves to reflect the lives they are living. According to Duncum, substitutive images are often used as a way to celebrate and authenticate the lives humans live. Perhaps through images, youths are trying to say, "We are here, and our lives are great!" But what happens if lives are misrepresented through the images meant to be an authentic substitute? What does this mean in terms of understanding the world and oneself?

Narration is the idea that youth tell stories through their images as a means to explore and cope with the world around them (Duncum, 1993). Not only is storytelling pleasurable, but we can also use stories to develop a sense of identity and work through things like fears, desires, and belief systems (Duncum,1993; Kim and Li, 2021). The interconnected nature of images to culture allows humans to understand their world and themselves by viewing images (Duncum, 1993; Rose, 2022). With the emergence of social media, we can now share our stories with a vast network of people from all over the world. However, while some visual symbols are universally understood, such as the heart representing love, the way we use them to convey our stories can be idiosyncratic (Podobnik et al., 2021). For example, I may use a heart to represent loss, which

may not be immediately apparent to a viewer and differs from the typical use of the symbol. How a viewer looks at and makes sense of an image also varies as the cognitive processing of visual experiences is connected to personal knowledge and feelings (Berger, 2013). Therefore, the story behind an image can be easily misconstrued by an onlooking audience. This leads me to wonder: how does the misinterpretation of an image by an audience affect the original creator?

A youth may also use visual imagery to express emotions as well as their identity (Duncum, 1993). Duncum (1993) condones past perceptions by art historians that pieces of fine art were the only space in which expressions of deep human experiences exist and claims that children of all ages can produce artwork that stems from personal expression. That being said, children/youth may be restricted in their visual expressions based on available tools and culturally acceptable means of visual expression, which can shift based on geographical location and time. For example, in the context of photography, the early users of a camera were typically those deemed to be professional photographers (Rosenblum, 1984). In the late 1980s, the camera became more widely available and therefore, the act of photographing transitioned into a social practice, one that was particularly connected to photographing "the family unit" (Sontag, 2001; Rohrbach, 2013) (see the following section below to view a brief history of photography). In more recent years, the amalgamation of cellphones with cameras has created a social atmosphere where anyone with a phone can capture and share images, making this practice more accessible to the public, including children. Therefore, photographs taken and shared within digital spaces is an ideal space to understand human expressions of emotions.

Duncum's (1993) fourth discussed motive for visual creation is the use of aesthetics for visual pleasure, an act he called embellishment. Embellishment may be used for a variety of reasons, such as using more pleasing aesthetics to reduce fear, such as decorating a new room, or

to differentiate something special from the mundane, like garnishing a table for a birthday party. However, the most interesting subfunction of embellishment, specifically in digital spaces, is the intention to make "acceptable the otherwise unacceptable" (Duncum, 1993, p. 219). On social media, it is common to post photographs about one's life experiences, so in what way do youth aesthetically embellish? Perhaps it is through available tools such as filters that youth embellish their images. While this will be more deeply explored in chapters one (identity) and two (mental health), we must ask: If youth are using filters to embellish images of themselves and their lives, what parts of the image are deemed "unacceptable" to the creator and what affect would the act of embellishment have on the youth's understanding of their own identity?

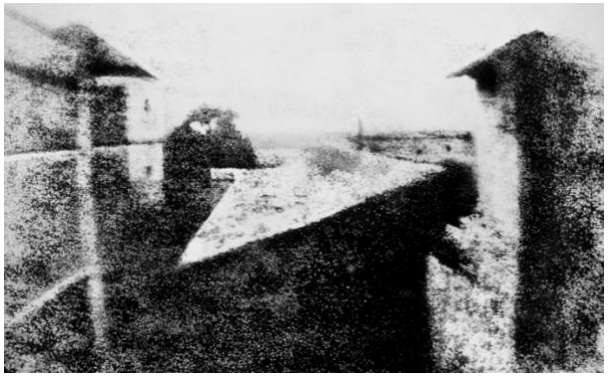
The last motive discussed by Duncum (1993) is persuasion, where visual imagery is used to convince others of something, such as a belief or an argument. The act of using visual images to convince others helps children/youth confront their own identity and produce a sense of power, as they must decide their own stance on a topic in order to form an argument (Duncum, 1993; Duncum,1989). While youth may use digital imagery to persuade others on a topic, humans can also be subject to persuasion through the images they view. To expand, on social media, youth have used images to engage in acts of activism for topics such as global warming and equality (Jenkins, 2016; Shresthova, 2016). In contrast, images are used against youth within digital spaces for various reasons, such as to convince them to buy a product through advertising (Rossi and Nairn, 2022; van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). I included this brief section as it's essential to address that youth may have various motives for producing an image, and the decisions behind creating an image can be complex.

A Brief History Lesson…

Humans are innately creative beings and have always ventured to communicate visually through various tools (Duncum, 1993; Hirsch, 2019). The origins of photography can be traced back to ancient China and Greece, where the concept of the camera obscura was first explored. In this device, a wall with a hole in the middle was placed inside a dark chamber, which projected outside images onto the opposite wall (Hirsch, 2019; Newhall et al., 2023). In the mid 1820s Joseph Nicéphore Niépce created the first photograph known as *View from the Window at Le Gras* using a camera obscura and a pewter plate over a period of three hours (Newhall et al., 2023). This image, produced in black and white with a rather grainy and blurred appearance, shows the tops of various buildings at Niépce's countryside estate. Showing this first image is significant to this dissertation not just because of the historical context but because it displays the human choice that is behind the images that are produced. Whenever we view an image, whether from the 1820s or 2023 the viewer bears witness to the creator's decision that a specific moment, item, or scene was worth remembering and showing (Berger, 2013). While significant time has passed since Niépce's first image, and technology in terms of image-making has progressed, the images discussed in this dissertation have not changed considerably, as many show the landscapes that surround humans during their earthy existence, such as trees and buildings. What this proves is that since the onset of photographic capabilities, people have tried to make sense of the world around them through the act of "capturing" it through an image (Berger, 2013; Sontag, 2001; Pink 2004). As said by Susan Sontag (2001) "to collect photographs is to collect the world" (p. 3).

Figure 1

View from the Window at Le Gras (Niépce,1826)



Shortly after the first image was produced by Niépce, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre perfected the photographing experience by shorting the processing time through a device called the "daguerreotype" (Hirsch, 2019; Newhall et al., 2023). The daguerreotype process was purchased and published by the French government, allowing countries all over the world to replicate the technology, making the daguerreotype the first commercial photography process (Newhall et al., 2023). Further developments were made to the method of image-making through the invention of print photography (also known as the "calotype process" and the camera, which was created by Fox Talbot in 1839 (Berger; 2013). Print photography has been used in many ways since the emergence of the camera, such as fine art, portraiture and journalism (Berger, 2013). However, one of the most important historical and social movements in conjunction with images, as it pertains to this dissertation, is the emergence of family and personal photography. In 1888, George Eastman released the "Kodak" camera with the slogan, "You push the button, we do the rest" indicating that "unskilled" people could now use photography technology

(Eastman,1888; Hirsch, 1997; Rohrbach, 2013). Families flocked to capture their members' lives and events in an effort to remember and represent those they loved, a tradition that still exists within digital spaces as social media is filled with images of families and their experiences. According to Marianne Hirsch (1997), family photographs are more than a direct representation of a family unit. She viewed family portraits as displays of socially embedded rituals of what it means to be a family, both in terms of how we see ourselves as a family unit and how we wish to be seen by onlookers. The Kodak camera also marked the onset of photography becoming part of the everyday (Hirsch, 1997).

The digitalization of photography began in the late 1980's but was initially marketed toward professional photographers such as photojournalists and portrait photographers (Sarvas, 2014). While computers, such as the PC, had become a domesticated product that was being purchased by individuals for their homes in the late 1970's, digital cameras were not marketed to the everyday consumer until the 1990s (Hemmendinger et al., 2023; Sarvas, 2014). However, in 1990, cameras such as the Fotoman cost about a $1000 USD, making them inaccessible financially to the average consumer until 2002, when digital cameras became available for $200-$300 USD (Sarvas, 2014). Digital editing technology, such as Adobe Photoshop, was also released in 1990s giving people the power to not only capture an image but also manipulate it aesthetically (Sarvas, 2014). The invention and public launch of the World Wide Web in 1991 opened up new possibilities for the sharing of digital images with others around the world (Sarvas, 2014). People were no longer constrained to only showing their images to viewers who were physically present to hold and gaze at a print but could share their photographs world-wide by posting or emailing them. The marriage of digital photography, phones, and the internet came to be in 1997 when Phillipe Kahn jerry-rigged his mobile phone with his digital camera during

the birth of his daughter in order to send out an instantaneous image of her to two thousand of his friends, family, and colleges (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2023). Nicholas Carr (2010) claimed that inventions always come out of human needs or desires. The birth of the camera phone is a perfect example of this statement because Phillipe Kahn's desire to capture, share, and celebrate a moment in his life influenced the development of a world-changing invention. With the merger of cellphones and cameras and the creation of social media application such as Instagram that allows rapid image sharing with large networks of people, the sharing of images has become enmeshed with the everyday. The average consumer has 2,100 images on their smartphone as of 2023, and billions of photos are shared daily on social media applications through posts, stories, and chats (Broz, 2023) Much like social media, photographing our daily lives has become an act that has become embedded in the very fabric of how we exist as modern subjects (Sarvas, 2014).

Aesthetics

Bodies[5] use their senses, such as sight, touch, and smell, to experience and understand the world around them. In the context of this dissertation, the sense of sight is of particular interest as receiving sensory information portrayed in images is typically a visual experience[6]. When a person views an image, they respond to it both cognitively and affectively and use their past experiences to understand the visual information they interact with (Berger, 1972; Fox and Schirrmacher, 2013). A component of a person perceiving an image is evaluating the aesthetic components; does the person enjoy the sensory experience they are having when they view a

[5] In the interest of this dissertation, I am referring to human bodies, but acknowledge that the senses are used by many species to navigate worldly space.
[6] For bodies that experience the word without sight, images can be experienced through audio description or tactile versions of the images. From a digital perspective images on social media applications, such as Instagram, may be experienced via screen readers that can describe the image.

specific image or not? This dissertation will explore aesthetics from both a technical and affective angle. Aesthetics, from an affective perspective, acknowledges that the human body, sensory experiences, and emotions are interconnected (Highmore, 2010). As human perception is based on individual experiences, there can be varying aesthetic reactions to a singular image (Berger, 1972). For example, one person may experience satisfaction or joy from viewing an image, while another feels sadness or shame (Highmore, 2010). While aesthetic experiences shift from person to person, Nanay (2019) also suggests that an individual's aesthetic preferences can shift over time. To elaborate, an image that disinterested a person five years ago may presently cause an affective reaction such as shame or desire because the image connects to new experiences they have had during that time span. Aesthetic experiences connect to a person's identity, their likes and dislikes, and what they think and feel, but much like parts of our identity can shift over time, so can the way we experience and judge sensory information.

While personal reactions to visual stimuli are individual, we must also consider how aesthetics and standards around what is beautiful or not can be socially connected. This is important to think about in the context of digital imagery because while youth have individual experiences with each digital image (they view the image, judge it aesthetically, and perhaps choose to digitally interact with it by clicking a like button or commenting) there is also a network of people interacting with the same image. Discussions around aesthetics in a Western context often boil down to a binary of agreement or disagreement, where one takes a side either for or against the aesthetics of an image (Nanay, 2019). A 2015 viral image of a dress known as #TheDress, is a prime example of this phenomenon. Cecilia Bleasdale took a photograph of a dress and posted it to her Facebook account to gather the opinions of her friend circle on the dress. Surprisingly, a debate broke out internationally, not about if the dress was "beautiful", but

if the dress was white and gold or blue and black. Millions of internet users flocked to online forums to debate the "correct" colour of the dress. From a scientific perspective, the reason that viewers had two different colour experiences is that our brains assign colours to objects based on presumed lighting conditions (Corum, 2015; Devitt, 2017). Those who cognitively perceive the dress to be in a shadow will interpret the dress as white and gold, while those who assume a bright light is hitting the dress will see it as black and blue (Corum, 2015; Devitt, 2017).

Figure 2

Image of #Thedress Dress (Bleasdale, 2015)

Our cognitive interpretation of the image affects the way that we perceive and understand it. The viral nature of this image creates a social-emotional component where there is a divide in the community on the aesthetic information of the image. The issue with this is that it creates a perceived normative aesthetic experience and assumes that humans should all see images the exact same way when, in reality, aesthetics are subjective (Nanay, 2019). In physical reality, the dress is black and blue, but, to me, the digital image above shows a gold and white dress; suggesting that my brain has assumed the dress is backlit and resting in a shadow. Am I wrong? I

would argue that when peering at a digital image, I cannot be wrong, and neither is anyone else, as we are simply interpreting what we see on the screen before us.

When humans create images, they use aesthetics as a type of photographic language. Whether the photographer is considered professional or domestic, many choices coincide with composing an image, such as what to photograph and how a particular moment in time should be captured (Berger, 1972; Sontag, 2001). Aesthetic elements such as colour, line, or lighting can be used to communicate a message to a potential viewer (Manovich, 2017). The motivation behind visual communication is a personal endeavour and can be broad in nature. For example, a photographic message may attempt to emulate a feeling, such as the awe someone felt when looking at a mountain, or it can signify one's membership with a specific group or subculture (Manovich, 2017). An instance where this may occur is when images posted on digital platforms like Instagram are used as a form of participatory culture where people post similar images in support of a political topic. There have been many cases of this, such as *The Odds in Our Favour Campaign* where people photographed themselves showing a three-finger solute to protest against economic inequality (Kligerler-Vilenchik et al., 2016) or when the African American community took to social media using the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown to show images of various personas of themselves, such as home clothes vs. professional, to bring attention to how images used by the media can shape public perspectives in a negative way (Jenkins, 2016). Therefore, when aesthetic choices are made by a person, there are both personal and communal influences that can simultaneously exist. This dissertation asks how youths' visual sensory experiences connect with who they are and how they want to be seen. To assist in reading this dissertation, I have created the following table that outlines some aesthetic elements that will be addressed.

Table 1

Aesthetic Elements Chart

Aesthetic Element	Questions Explored
Colour	Are the colours in an image vibrant or is the image black and white? Do various colours contrast each other? What is the emotional tone of the colours used? Are they warm colours or cool colours? What filters were used?
Lighting	Is the image bright or dark? How does the lighting affect the colours of the image? Where is light coming from (above or below the subject)? What is the light source? (natural light, flash etc.) Are shadows used in an intentional matter?
Focus (Depth of Field)	Are certain areas of the image blurred? How close or far away is the object/subject? What is the angle of view? (Is a wide area photographed or a small area?) What is the point of view of the photographer?
Framing	Where in the frame is the object/subject? How close or far away is the object/subject?
Points/Lines	What points of the photograph are my eyes drawn to? How are lines used to connect various elements of an image?

(Cox, 2022; Prakel, 2010)

COVID-19 and Children

As the images discussed in this dissertation were taken or shared by the youth between 2020-2022 it is important to acknowledge the historical events of COVID-19 that took place during this time period. While upcoming discussions on youth and visual communication in online spaces take a more generalized stance, the happenings and repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are clearly evident in some of the images that were shared, and therefore, this short

introductory section is essential. On January 25th, 2020, the first COVID-19[7] case was reported in Canada by a person travelling from Wuhan, China (The Canadian Press, 2021). By March 11th, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared that COVID-19 was considered a pandemic, meaning that the virus was spreading internationally (Rodgers, 2023; The Canadian Press, 2021). Following this announcement, Canadian provinces began to declare states of emergency and enacted lockdown measures such as mask-wearing, the shutting down of in-person operations of certain businesses, and the prohibition of gatherings we used. The specific measures chosen and the length of time they were in use varied based on province (Cyr et al., 2021). In December 2020, vaccines against COVID-19 became available in Canada, with specific rollout plans being dependent on provincial governing bodies (CBC News, 2020). In Canada, sixty-one children between the ages of 0-19 died from contracting COVID-19 (Elflien, 2023), and the impacts on children from physical, mental, and social perspectives are still being realized.

Due to COVID-19, 1.5 billion children globally experienced a massive disruption to their education (Burns et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). In Canada, due to lockdown orders, classrooms were shifted online where children experienced reduced learning hours, a high prevalence of screen time, a lack of recreation and social interaction time, and educators were forced to focus on online technicalities vs. adequate delivery of the content (Burns et al., 2023; Daniel, 2020). This was particularly challenging for children and families residing in rural areas or who had a lower socioeconomic status where access to technology may have been inadequate (Burns et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2022). While there is a general consensus that online education negatively impacted learning experiences for Canadian children and youth, some found that they enjoyed

[7] COVID-19 is an infectious viral disease often causing mild to severe respiratory symptoms (WHO, 2023)

online learning and felt they were able to focus better in an online format (UNICEF, 2022). During this time, it was also difficult to access social and therapeutic services such as mental health support, housing, recreation services, and nutritional services (Whitley et al., 2021; Raising Canada, 2020). Much like with online education, marginalized groups of people, such as those with disabilities or lower socioeconomic status, were deeply impacted by not being able to access necessary services (Whitley et al. 2021). While the virtual delivery of some services became available, there are mixed reviews in terms of the effectiveness of teletherapy models (Battistin et al., 2021). Although each individual experienced the COVID-19 pandemic differently, this time period presented challenges to basic necessities such as education and social services.

With physical distancing and lockdown measures in place for most of 2020 and sporadically during 2021 and 2022, youth needed to use various technologies to engage with the world. Statistics Canada found that "75% of Canadians 15 years of age and older engaged in various Internet-related activities more often since the onset of the pandemic" (Bilodeau et al. 2021). Although there was an overall increase in digital engagement, the specific reasons for the use varied, such as for school purposes or video calling family and friends. In general, my participants agreed that their social media use increased due to the pandemic. Consider the following quotes:[8]

> **Rahim:** I will say I've gotten more frequent, especially during the beginning. I was more frequent on social media in terms of communication. I was in my room all day for a good chunk of 2020, but I was very communicative over Instagram. Just checking on if my

[8] Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

friends are okay because I haven't seen them. Especially because with online school, you don't see anyone. So that was mostly why I increased my communication. But in terms of the posting in terms of Instagram, I'll just use Instagram as an analogy. I don't post, like, posts too much, like the big posts that you see on your feed too much, maybe like a monthly or like a couple per month thing, but like a story is like a daily or weekly deal. And because I haven't been going anywhere, I couldn't really post anything in my stories.

Olivia: I think, yes, I've been spending way more time on social media, yeah, and with the creation of TikTok, it has been even worse, and I understand that I spend a lot of time and hours scrolling through pictures and videos, but it's really addictive.

Olivia, a nineteen-year-old female, felt that her platform choice, TikTok, in combination with pandemic-related protocols, contributed to her increased use. While Rahim, an eighteen-year-old male, felt that his use varied based on the specific tools within the Instagram platform. While he communicated with friends more directly during the pandemic using features such as direct messaging to check on their well-being, he felt that his ability to post was hindered by his lack of interaction with the outside world. Oliva also mentions her heavy interaction with "pictures and videos" which amplifies the importance of research on visual communication in youth culture. Multiple research studies have suggested that youth have been affected by the pandemic-associated increase in social media use in both positive and negative ways (Ramsey et al., 2023; Rouleau et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022). While there was a rise in certain mental health issues, such as a decrease in self-esteem, social media allowed youth to maintain interactions with family and friends, which may have mitigated the detrimental effects of social isolation

caused by the pandemic (Ramsey et al., 2023; Samji et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). In a global context, youth also used social media creatively during the pandemic to participate in protests, mitigate misinformation, and provide support to those in need (Sundararajan, 2021). Social media has become an integral component of the social lives of youth, allowing them to feel connected with the world around them (boyd, 2014; Tilleczek and Campbell, 2019).

Summary of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into three main sections (starting at Chapter Three), each exploring at length the conversations I had with my participants about the role images play in their online communicative activities. The first section, *A Curated Self: Youth Identity in Online Spaces*, thinks about how ideas of the "self" are connected to the images youth produce and publish online. The participants in this study are in a pivotal developmental period in their lives where their identity is forming (Erikson, 1968; Furlong, 2013). As the establishment of relationships is crucial to identity development (Erikson, 1968), the Chapter explores how images intersect with building connections between family and friends. This Chapter also thinks about identity from a symbolic interactionist angle, where youth perform their identities through images to give off specific impressions based on the audience who is witnessing the photograph (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). Beyond identity development, this Chapter also thinks about how the "self" influences what young social media users want to see on their feeds as well as youths' understanding of concepts such as authenticity and beauty.

The second section, *Emotion Rules in the Social Media Practices of Youth,* explores how social rules around emotions are embedded in the way young people express their feelings in photographic material. This Chapter is heavily inspired by the work of Arlie Hochschild (2003),

who believed that while emotions are physiological in the sense that they help a person respond to situations they encounter, there is also a social component where people learn to manage their emotions to align with communal expectations of what is appropriate to feel and when. In this section, I examine why youth avoid portraying specific emotions through images and how this connects to learned "rules." I also highlight how when youth do want to publicly express an emotional experience they do so strategically through unembodied artifacts, such as memes and emojis, in order to distance themselves from the original emotion. I also reflect on how social expectations to strive for happiness (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2010) impact the emotional goals of youth and how this is illuminated through photographic choices.

In the last section, *Private moments, public spectacles, and more: Exploring the various roles of images in digital spaces,* I address how the muddiness of private and public spheres in digital spaces intersect with image-making and witnessing. This Chapter tells an eclectic mix of stories brought forward by my participants that each connects to the overarching topic. To expand, there are sections that think about how youth use the networked capabilities of social media to build businesses, the experience of encountering "difficult" images, how public ideals of the female body impact girls' private relationships with themselves, and how youth are influenced by and impact celebrity culture. While each subtopic is unique on its own, they are all connected by their manifestation in digital spaces. Although section two focuses most heavily on emotions, each findings Chapter recognizes how affect branches out into many digital happenings. Connecting with friends and family, creating identity, and interacting with celebrities all lead to emotional experiences. What do these experiences tell us about youth digital culture?

Chapter Two: Research Methods

Methodological Framework

Various visual-based research methods were used in the implementation of this research: auto photography, photo elicitation, and some concepts from photovoice. In my research, I consider the images taken by my participants and acknowledge that their photographs can convey meaning and reveal truths (Barone & Eiser, 2012; Leavy, 2018). There are many benefits to using arts-based methodology that make it appropriate for my project, such as the fact that it's participatory, it can create a critical consciousness around social issues, and it can help make connections between lived experiences and macro elements of society (Leavy, 2009; Leavy, 2015). While Leavy (2015) argues research that utilizes arts-based methods is separate from qualitative research, a paradigm of its own, I use both images and interviews to understand my research question and, therefore, feel I fit best into the qualitative category. As mentioned above, I pull from a variety of photography-based methods, one being auto photography. In my research, I asked my participants to bring three images they posted on a social media platform and also showed them six of the most widely shared images on Instagram during the year 2020. The practice of choosing images that they wish to share is both participatory and deeply connected to their identity (Noland, 2006). As images are a reflection of humans' understanding of themselves and the world around them, visual methods can be highly useful in terms of illuminating discussions around the "self" (Noland, 2006; Pink, 2004). As one of my research questions seeks to understand how youths' identities are shaped by images, auto photography is a suitable fit.

Photo elicitation is the process of interviewing a participant about their image or series of images (Harper, 2002; Shaw 2021). There is debate in the literature as to whether photo-

elicitation methods should be specific to when a researcher takes images and uses them as an interview tool versus being inclusive of participants' photographs as well (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Shaw 2021). For the purpose of my research, I consider photo-elicitation methods applicable as I use my participants' images to have deep discussions about their experiences, feelings, and memories, as well as images brought by myself to facilitate interview questions. Photo-elicitation has been noted to be a more comprehensive interview technique than other traditional styles of interviewing as it is a collaborative communication process between the interviewer and interviewee (Shaw, 2021; Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation is also considered extremely appropriate in the field of cultural studies as produced images allow the information to be grounded in the experiences of the culture users (Harper, 2002). Using photo-elicitation can also reduce power dynamics that exist between adult interviewers and children interviewees by basing the interview on artifacts chosen by the participant (Harper, 2002; Mayall, 1994). In the below section, I will provide further details on the interview process.

I also borrow specific techniques from the methodology *photovoice.* Photovoice was first introduced in the 1990s by Caroline Wang and Anne Burris. There are three goals of photovoice, which are to empower participants, engage individuals in critical conversations about issues, and educate and influence policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is also rooted in Freire's idea that "one means of enabling people to think critically about their community and to begin discussing the everyday social and political forces that influence their lives was the visual image" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p.370). The concept of *photo novella*, brought forward by Wang and Burris (1997) will be utilized in this section as it indicates that while an image itself is important, it is the story behind the photograph, the novella, that is most essential to understand as a researcher. I will also lean on the concept of stadium versus punctum during the interview portion of my research.

Every photograph contains a stadium, which is the overall image, and a punctum, the element of a photograph that is of particular importance or stands out (Barthes, 1980; Latz, 2017). It is essential that while I am interviewing participants about their photographs I allow the youth to identify the punctum within the image so that my own biases and views do not skew how the participant speaks about their photograph (Latz, 2017). For example, I may be more attracted to certain elements within an image due to my own artistic preferences, and it is important that I avoid steering the participant towards only speaking about the portions of an image that interest me, as I risk distorting the stories the participants wish to tell. Overall, my research will be rooted in visual methods that will provide rich discussions on photographic material produced by youth in digital spaces.

Lastly, while the new sociology of childhood was discussed above as a theoretical framework, it will also be used from a methodological standpoint as I aim to acknowledge the valuable voices of my participants by doing research "with" them through participatory methods. Typical research methods may exploit the children or youth involved by gaining information without actually involving their voices or opinions (Anselma et al., 2020; Gomez, 2016). Children are marginalized due to their generational order, and therefore, research techniques that view children/youth as social actors who are capable of sharing their own views are most appropriate (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Mayall, 1994). As noted in this section, I will be using visual-based methods that will create a participatory atmosphere for the participants. While even greater participatory methods with children and youth are available, such as youth-led methods, which are projects facilitated by youth and supported by researchers (Delgado & Staples, 2013), or youth-advisory councils that include youth in the research design (Young et al., 2023), neither of these formats were accessible for the current project. However, I will uphold a commitment in

the design of my research to avoid adultist research practices and empower the voices of the youth involved by listening to and illuminating their opinions.

Research Design and Implementation

Recruitment

After gaining ethics approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board (REB), I began the process of recruiting participants. I chose to recruit youth that were between the ages of 16-21 who participated in social media and resided in Canada. The ages of 16-21 were appropriate for my project as, at sixteen, they would have been immersed in the world of social media for a few years as most applications restrict those thirteen and under (boyd, 2007; Tilleczek & Campell, 2020). The ages of my participants were also warranted because this time period is an integral moment of identity formation, making this age group best for exploring the connection between identity and social media posts (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2019). I chose to speak with participants who resided in Canada to capture the specific cultural nuances of emotional expression in the area. At a future time, an international comparative study would be useful.

I recruited participants through social media advertisements on both Instagram and Facebook Platforms. Social media advertisements using a "call to action" feature can be an effective method for recruiting diverse participants (Folk et al., 2020; Schlupp et al., 2020). In order to achieve this, I created both a Facebook and Instagram account called *Youth, Feelings, and Photography Project*. On these platforms, various posts were created that informed onlookers about the project, such as what the purpose was, what the interview would look like, who I was recruiting, and how much they would be compensated for their time(See Appendix

A).[9] I used Meta to run advertisements on Instagram posts that would drive potential participants to my page. In total, I ran three advertisements: One ran from July 27th, 2022, to July 30th 2022, cost $21.84 and resulted in 1,296 impressions; the second ran from Jul 31, 2022, 1 to Aug 4, 2022, cost $39 and resulted in 5,012 impressions; and the third ran from Sep 2, 2022 to Sep 12, 2022, cost $33.89 and resulted in 4,669 impressions. In total, $94.73 was spent on 10,997 impressions in order to recruit participants.[10] If participants clicked on the advertisements, they were taken to a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix B) that asked them their age, if they currently lived in Canada, and if they participated on social media. It also supplied information about the project. If the individual interested in participating in the project was eligible based on the requirements noted above, they were provided with my email address in order to proceed with receiving a consent form and booking an interview time. If the participant was not eligible, they received a message thanking them for their interest. In total, seventy-three people engaged with the Qualtrics survey.

Individuals who met the requirements for participating in the project and expressed interest by sending the researcher an email were sent a further explanation of the project goals and a consent form. Within the email, I re-iterated the requirements for participating in the project, described what the interview process would look like, and requested that they send three dates that worked for their schedule in terms of booking an interview. See Appendix C to view the email sent to each person. I invited them to read the included consent form (Appendix D) and reply with any questions or requests for clarification. Forty consent forms were sent out to interested individuals. If no response was heard within one week, one follow-up email was sent. Once a certain number of interviews were reached, I decided to stop booking interviews, as more

[9] Participants were compensated with a $25 gift card from either Starbucks or Amazon.
[10] Impressions are the number of times the advertised posts showed up on someone social media page or stories.

would have been an unrealistic amount for me to work with, given the timeframe of a doctorate degree. However, the enthusiastic interest from youth in participating in this project leads me to believe that it could be conducted on a larger scale in the future.

Participants

In total, thirty-four participants were included in the study. As noted above, seventy-three people filled out the Qualtrics form, and forty consent forms were sent out via email. Three individuals stopped contact with the researcher, me, after the consent form was sent out, and three interviews were omitted from this study as it was suspected that they were "imposter participants" (see ethical considerations). Although there is immense debate in qualitative research in terms of how many participants are adequate, the general consensus is that 25-30 participants are enough to attain saturation, whereby themes are clear to the researcher, and further interviews are unnecessary (Dworkin, 2012; Saunders et al., 2018; Tilleczeck & Campbell, 2020) At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked a series of demographic questions to understand better who my participants were. There was a diverse range of individuals that participated in the study. The genders of my participants were dispersed fairly evenly between males (14) and females (20). There were no participants who identified as non-binary, which could be considered a gap in this research. My participants were predominantly from Ontario (27), with some participants from British Columbia (3), Alberta (3), and Quebec (1). While my sample does show perspectives from multiple provinces, some provinces were not included (ex., Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, etc.). If a large-scale version of this project were to be conducted I would expect to see more provinces being represented. While the age parameter for my study was 16-21, no participants were sixteen years old. The ages of my participants were otherwise present and were as follows: three seventeen-year-olds, five

eighteen-year-olds, twelve nineteen-year-olds, seven twenty-year-olds, and seven twenty-one-year-olds. This meant that while some participants were high school students, the majority of my participants were early post-secondary students. Lastly, ten participants identified racially as White, five as Southeast Asian, eighteen as Black, and one as Indigenous. Out of the possible options, no participants identified as Latino, Middle Eastern, South Asian, other or preferred to not disclose their racial identity. While there are clear gaps in terms of who participated in the research, such as non-binary individuals, those residing in specific provinces, and some racial identifications, this research was formed by a generally well-rounded group of individuals.

Table 2

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

	n	%
Gender		
Male	14	41
Female	20	59
Other	0	0
Location		
Ontario	27	79
Quebec	1	3
British Columbia	3	9
Alberta	3	9
Age		
16	0	0
17	3	9
18	5	15
19	12	35
20	7	20.5
21	7	20.5
Racial Identification		
White	10	29
Southeast Asian	5	15
Black	18	53
Indigenous	1	3

Note. N=34

Interviews

Each interview began with an informal and unrecorded conversation to increase the comfort level of my participants (Swain et al., 2022). I then transitioned into discussing the consent form with each participant to ensure that they understood and gave full consent to participating in the interview process. The participants would have read and signed the consent form prior to the interview, but as youth are a vulnerable group due to the power dynamics that exist between myself, an adult, and the interviewee, I wanted to be meticulous in ensuring that they were comfortable with what was being asked of them. I then asked permission to begin recording our interview. Once the formal interview had commenced, I started by asking a series of demographic questions to better understand who my participants were (see Table 2). I then engaged in a semi-structured question set that was divided into four sections: general social media questions, questions about the images the youth brought with them, engaging with the images the researcher brought, and viewing images on their social media feeds in general (see Appendix G for full question set). Semi-structured questions is a common method used when designing interviews that combine a set of pre-existing questions while allowing the researcher to engage in follow-up questions as needed (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Hana et al., 2016).

In total, thirty-seven interviews were conducted; however, three were removed from the data set (see ethical considerations). The interviews ranged between 30-90 minutes in length. The digital conferencing software *Zoom* was used to conduct all interviews. Digital conferencing was chosen as an interviewing tool as it allowed youth all around Canada to participate without having to engage in travel and to ensure the safety of all participants, as COVID-19 was a concern at the time the interviews took place. There were, however, some challenges that arose due to engaging in digital methods to conduct the interview. Technical issues, such as loss of

internet or audio did occur in some interviews, which is a common occurrence with video conferencing (Khalil & Cowie, 2020). Some participants also did not wish to turn their camera on, which is a feature of digital conferencing. However, this could have negatively affected my interviews in two ways: 1) I was not able to confirm the identity of some participants (see ethical considerations), and 2) Non-verbal cues, which can be an important component of qualitative interviews, were lost (Weller, 2017; Lobe et al., 2020).

As part of the interview process, the participants were asked to bring three images that they had taken and shared on a social media application during the time period of 2020-2022. This time period was chosen as the images would have been shared recently and, therefore, be pertinent to the current experiences of the youth being interviewed. Interestingly, while some youth brought images that they took and posted as requested, others brought found images, such as memes, that they had seen and shared online. Out of the one-hundred and two images discussed during the interview process, sixty-six (65%) were found images that were not taken by the participants but shared by them during the timeframe mentioned above. This speaks to the fact that youth not only communicate through images that they take but instill new meaning into images that are not their own. This will be discussed further in future chapters. Also, as part of the interview process, I showed the participants six images that were some of the most shared images on Instagram during the year 2020 (Appendix F). This was based on the number of likes obtained by the images, which ranged from approximately 22,000,000 to 66,000,000. It is important to note that the selected images and the number of likes they received were not specific to young users of Instagram but to all users of the platform. Although the choice to include the photos was based on the number of engagements it is also essential to acknowledge the power that I hold in this project as the curator and selector of the images being discussed

during this section of the interview. As I construct this collection of images for my participants, I am making choices that will affect the way in which knowledge through photographs is discussed, and this is something that should be acknowledged (Finn, 2012). Both the discussions of the images brought by the participants and by the researcher were thoroughly discussed using photovoice and photo elicitation methods. As mentioned previously, I was meticulous in ensuring that I did not reveal the punctum of the images, which are the parts that stand out or are of importance to the creator (Barthes, 1980; Latz, 2017). This was important so as to not manipulate the way the participant spoke about their images. To appease this methodological technique, I used open-ended questions to discuss the images, such as "Tell me about your image.", "Why did you choose to share this image with me?", "Can you walk me through how you captured the image and why?" and "What are you communicating through this image?". I ended each interview by asking the participants if there was anything that they wished to talk about that was not addressed during the interview. Some participants did respond to this question, while others wished to end the interview. I completed the interview by thanking the participant for their time and ensuring them that their thoughts were valuable. While minimal risk to my participants were anticipated I sent every participant an email, post-interview, outlining various free mental health services in Canada should they have felt triggered by the interview process.

Data Analysis

All the interviews, once complete, were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. The images provided in the interview were coded both in conjunction with the interviews as participants spoke about their images verbally, as well as on their own. I used grounded theory to

code my data, which is a common method in qualitative studies (Urquhart, 2013). This method was first introduced in the late ’60s by Glaser and Strauss (1967), as they desired to develop a method for data analysis and theory production that was grounded in the data itself (Urquhart, 2013; Oktay, 2012). Therefore, I did not enter into coding my data with pre-determined codes in mind but allowed themes to emerge from the data itself. I followed a three-stage process to code the data, which is recommended in grounded theory (Urquhart, 2013; Glaser, 1978). The first step is *open coding,* where I read through the transcripts line by line and attached codes as they emerged using NVivo. Prominent themes began to emerge, which moved me to step two, *selective coding,* where I looked for data that fit with the key themes, such as discussions on motivation, the effects of COVID-19 on social media use, and identity. Lastly, I used *theoretical coding,* which considers relationships that may exist between the codes. For example, how might codes about identity and emotional expression intersect?

Analyzing images can be complex in qualitative research as there are concerns about authentically representing the data (Hand, 2016). This was somewhat mitigated by speaking to my participants about their images during the interview process so that I understood their creations in both a visual and verbal manner. To fully understand each image, I needed to consider how the image was produced, the image itself, as well as how the image was perceived by an audience, which was taken into account in my interview questions (Hand, 2016). To understand all the images as a whole I coded the images in a similar manner to my transcripts by first creating codes as they emerged and then looked for key themes and larger connections (Urquhart, 2013; Glaser, 1978). I also analyzed each image individually to further ponder the information within it, based on Suzanne Everly’s (2021) model for interpreting visual data. Everly (2021) suggests that three questions should be asked: “1) Who and what are included [in

the image]" 2) "How is the content being depicted?" and 3) "Why is the content being depicted in this way?" (p.93). As this study was a part of a doctoral dissertation, the information was only coded by one person, the author. In future studies, separate coding by multiple people would be ideal to reduce bias and ensure that no potential codes are missed.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent/Withdrawal

The Trent Research Ethics Board approved the ethical conduct of this research prior to its commencement. However, there were various ethical challenges that occurred as the research unfolded. The first was obtaining informed consent from all participants at various stages of the research process. The practice of revisiting opportunities for consent is especially essential with younger participants as a social power dynamic exists between the adult researcher and youth participant (Mayall, 1994). It is important to me that the rights of the young participants, as stated by the UNCRC (1990) are respected. Article 12, the right to form their own views, and Article 13, freedom of expression, are best fitting for concerns of consent. The participants were sent a consent form as soon as interest was expressed (see Appendix D) (Greig et al., 2007). The consent form outlined the purpose of the study, what would be asked of them during the interview process and explained processes of confidentiality and withdrawal from the study. Along with generally consenting to participate in the research project, the participants were asked for additional consent to be audio recorded during the interview process and for their submitted images to be used by the researcher in publications. Once the form was signed an interview was booked with the participant. At the beginning of each interview, the consent form was restated verbally with the participants, and an opportunity for questions was given. I ensured

the participants that they could choose to answer or not answer any question that was asked during the interview and that they could end the interview at any time. The participants were informed that if they withdrew from the study, all information provided to the researcher would be destroyed, and contact would cease. Participants could ask to withdraw from the process at any point during the conduction of the research and up to three months after an interview was complete. This deadline was put into place as removing certain images or quotes after dissemination of the findings would be difficult. No participants withdrew from the study.

Confidentiality

According to the UNCRC (1990), Article 8, children have the right to privacy and to protect their identity from being known. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym, which will be used throughout this dissertation. While Zoom interviews were recorded for transcription purposes (with the permission of the participant), they were immediately destroyed following transcription by myself. I plan to retain the transcripts for two years after the completion of the study and then destroy them. All data, including coded information, is kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer. The visual dimension of this research complicated confidentiality protocols. In the consent form, I discouraged the participants from bringing images that contained their faces or identifying features of both themselves and other people. This was problematic in two ways: 1) It may have skewed my data as my attempt at maintaining confidentiality for all participants could have hindered them from bringing the images that best reflected their online experiences. 2) Multiple participants ignored these requests and chose to bring images that portrayed their faces, typically in the form of a

"selfie."[11] When the images containing the faces of the participants were presented in the interview, I discussed with the participants how they wished the photo to be represented in the dissemination processes. I gave them the option of their image being verbally described, of using the image with their face blurred out, or of keeping the image as is. All participants asked that their images not be altered in any way and shown as they presented, with their faces revealed. This created a predicament between maintaining my participant's confidentiality and listening to their request that they wanted their images to be shown in a particular way. Alderson and Morrow (2011) suggest that while confidentiality is an essential component to conducting research with young participants, "over-protection can lead to children being treated as passive objects of concern, rather than as active moral agents in their own right" (p. 36). I felt as though allowing the photos to be published unaltered and fully visible was best supporting the participant's rights, as they were well-informed of their options and were old enough to understand the implications of sharing an image. It was my duty as an adult to assist them in participating in the study in a way that best fit them and to listen to their voice and take their opinions seriously (Article 12). I sought approval from the Trent Research Ethics Board to include the image containing the faces of some participants, and they supported this as consent from the participants was given to me through a signed consent form as well as verbally.

Compensation

In research, there are multiple ways a researcher can pay participants for their time, such as through reimbursement for costs associated with participating, incentives, which are payments

[11] According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013) "selfie" is defined as "an image that includes oneself (often with another person or as part of a group) and is taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks".

given during the recruitment process, and compensation, which is a payment for the participant's time after an interview is complete (Afkinich et al., 2019; Gelinas et al., 2018). I chose to use the method of compensation where my participants were given a $25 gift card after they participated in an interview. This amount was chosen as it reflected the rate of minimum wage ($15.55) in Ontario at the time the interviews were conducted. I believe that the participants should be properly compensated for their time and knowledge. However, compensation can be a complex ethical issue for young participants as they may not have substantial income on their own and, therefore, may feel pressured to participate in order to receive a financial reward (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). It is possible that my offer for compensation, which was stated in both my recruitment advertisements and the consent form, compelled participants to participate instead of having a true desire to share their knowledge. It is also possible that the compensation I advertised led to several "imposter participants," which ultimately put the trustworthiness of my data at risk (see Imposter Participants). Despite this, I stand by the amount of money sent to each participant ($25) and the method in which it was distributed (gift card), as the voices of youth are valuable.

Imposter Participants

As mentioned above, three participants were removed from my data set because I suspected that they were "imposter participants." The concept of an imposter participant was first discussed by Chandler and Paolacci (2017) to describe participants falsifying information in a pre-screening questionnaire for a quantitative study. Qualitative studies have recently faced issues with individuals using personas and fabricating experiences during interviews (Roehl & Darci, 2020; Ridge et al., 2023). While the issue of imposter participants brings great risk to the validity of qualitative data, there are minimal resources on how to handle this issue (Roehl &

Darci, 2020). When I first suspected that I had encountered imposter participants, it was a highly emotional experience for me as a PhD student. Although notably an overreaction, I felt as though I was a victim of sorts: that my time, money, and resources had been stolen from me and that my dissertation was at risk. I experienced a sense of overwhelm and debated stopping the continuation of my research because, at the time, I was unsure of how to handle the situation. Although I spoke to many researchers I look up to, none could provide specific information as they hadn't experienced the phenomena themselves. This leads back to Roehl and Darci's (2020) call for more procedural support for researchers confronted with participant fraud. With qualitative interviews being conducted more prominently in online spaces, imposter participants are something that should be discussed more openly and thoroughly so that all researchers can benefit. My reaction also speaks to a systemic issue within academia where doctoral students face an immense amount of pressure to produce and publish "good" research (Mutongoza, 2023). I was lucky enough to have a support system of mentors who helped me continue with my research and come up with solutions on my own, but my fearful reaction that my career would be in jeopardy came from a larger gap in the academic community as a whole, where there is a need to support one another in various issues that may arise when conducting research.

I first suspected that a participant was falsifying their identity when a participant logged onto Zoom for their interview and their screen name was the same as a participant from a few days before. The participant changed their screen name within the first minute of being logged on and did not turn on their camera for the interview. I decided to confront the participant by asking them if I had spoken to them before, as the screen name had previously been used. The participant replied that they were using their friend's laptop, which is why the name had been repeated. Satisfied with their response in the moment, I continued on with the interview.

However, after the interview, I remained doubtful that the participant was eligible and decided to remove them from the data set. This interaction itself was a large ethical dilemma because it is possible that they were telling the truth and that I removed their voice from the study. On the other hand, if I was correct in assuming that they had participated more than once, then the inclusion of the data would invalidate my results. The second incident I experienced was when an individual sent me a consent form with the wrong name on it, which matched another participant. I immediately stopped communication with the prospective participant and removed the other participant whose name had been used twice from my data set. In this situation, I did not give the participant an opportunity to explain, which was unethical. However, I was again confronted with the dilemma of validity. Lastly, during an interview with the third removed participant, they made a reference to their university, which is not located in Canada and gave general responses in regard to their location (ex., stating that they live in Ontario but not indicating a specific city or location that would speak to their knowledge of the area). They also did not put their camera on. I was unsure of how to proceed at the moment, so I continued with the interview and did not confront the participant. In all three cases, I believe my hesitation in including their interviews is valid, but I could have given more opportunity for explanation versus making a decision based on suspicion. Other than the three participants discussed here, there was also a pattern of emails that would come in at the same time, one or two minutes apart. I realized that these emails were likely fraudulent, so I did not respond. I acknowledge the amount of power that I held over the data as I chose who remained in the data set.

One thing that I could have done significantly more competently is to have a procedure for verifying identity. I stated the eligibility requirements multiple times: in the welcome email, the consent form, and at the beginning of each interview, but otherwise relied on the honour

system that the participants were representing themselves accurately. If an individual was interested in participating they did fill out a screening questionnaire on Qualtrics, but individuals can lie or complete the survey multiple times until they provide the accurate information (Saberi, 2020). Roehl and Harland (2022) had initial procedures similar to my own, where the participants would self-identify as being eligible for a research study through a screening questionnaire. However, once imposter participants began to surface, they changed their procedure to ask participants to provide social media account information as a verification step. This procedure was approved by their ethics board. While I would include a step like this in future studies, it is possible that individuals can create fake accounts on social media applications to continue to falsify their identity. Roehl and Harland (2022) also speaks about the fact that many of the suspected imposter participants did not turn on the camera for their interview. This was reflected in the three suspect interviews I participated in, but other participants who did not raise concern over their identity also did not have their cameras on. Therefore, the lack of turning on one's camera does not automatically indicate falsified identities, but it does raise an ethical predicament over whether or not a camera should be required to be on during online interviews.

While it is clear that imposter participants are a current issue in qualitative research, it is important to dialogue about why the participants are choosing to engage in this type of behaviour. In my opinion, there would be two reasons: 1) The participant is ineligible to participate in the study but wishes to have a voice on the matter, and 2) They are motivated by the financial gain offered through an incentive such as a gift card or cash. It is possible that financial compensation causes *undue influence,* which is when a participant is encouraged to "lie or conceal information in order to participate or prompts participants who otherwise would not participate" (Williams & Walter, 2015, p. 2). In the past, this has been a significant ethical

concern with individuals from lower socio-economic status (Williams & Walter, 2015). However, with the emergence of video conferencing software, the demographics and geographical location of these individuals need to be investigated further. In conclusion, imposter participants are a complex ethical concern in qualitative research and would benefit from increased attention from the academic community.

Conclusion

While this project faced ethical issues, such as imposter participants and dilemmas with consent vs. anonymity in connection with shared images, the project associated with this dissertation succeeded overall. Based on the standards associated with qualitative projects, I had enough participants (34) to achieve clear themes and concepts (Tilleczeck & Campbell, 2020; Saunders et al., 2018; Dworkin, 2012). As the use of images within social media platforms is a dominant component of my research questions, my application of photo-based methodology was appropriate. This project sought to understand how youth use images online to explore their emotional experiences, and this was investigated by asking youth to bring their own images shared on social media platforms to an interview. Asking my participants to select their own images is aligned with the methodology of the new sociology of childhood, as my project supported the youth in having autonomy over what was shared. This also allowed for deep discussions on each of the images included in this project to understand their connection to the participants. I coded both the textual (interviews) and visual data using grounded theory to allow for themes to emerge without premeditation from myself. The following chapters reveal the complex world of visual communication in digital spaces from the perspective of thirty-four youth.

Chapter Three - A Curated Self: Youth Identity in Online Spaces

Who am I to tell me who I am – AJR

Introduction

When the World Wide Web first emerged in the mid-1990s, it consisted of an environment that supported the anonymity of its users (Chun, 2016; Carr, 2010). Internet users could engage with websites and communicate with strangers in chatrooms and forums without confirming their identity (boyd, 2014; Chun, 2016). The removal of social identity through anonymity was seen as freeing, creating the potential for one's most authentic self to shine through in faceless online interactions (Chun, 2016). Chun (2016) speaks about Web 1.0 as being viewed as a utopia where discriminatory factors such as race and class no longer existed because bodily characteristics that held socially constructed connotations were inaccessible. This promise was unfortunately unfulfilled, and issues such as child pornography and phishing scams garnered concern that the anonymous nature of the web made way for an "uncivilized" space that could cause harm to its users (Chun, 2016; Casanova et al., 2000). These undesirable elements of the World Wide Web made way for a massive shift in Web 2.0, where a focus on transparency and tracible identities developed with the intention of fostering "trusted social interactions" (Chun, 2016, p.108) and also facilitated the monetization of data. Social networking sites, such as Facebook and Instagram, require their users to authenticate their identity through verification steps when setting up an account and threaten to remove accounts that are "misrepresentative" from the platform (Meta, 2023a). Meta's (2023a) policy on transparency reads:

> "Authenticity is the cornerstone of our community. We believe that authenticity helps create a community where people are accountable to each other, and to Facebook, in

> meaningful ways. We want to allow for the range of diverse ways that identity is expressed across our global community, while also preventing impersonation and identity misrepresentation. That is why we require people to create a Facebook account using the name they go by in everyday life. Our authenticity policies are intended to create a safe environment where people can trust and hold one another accountable" (para.1).

It is a requirement of social media applications to represent yourself in your interactions within the space authentically, but why does this matter within digital spaces? Based on the statement above, Facebook cites safety and community as the reasons why one must be "authentic" online. However, given that individuals' digital habits and movements are monetized within social media platforms, could it have more to do with financial acquisition than safety (Chun, 2016; Pettman, 2016)? Also, as social media applications are visual in nature, I must ask: How does someone represent themselves authentically through photographs, seeing as it's presented as a requirement for accessing these types of social technologies?

This chapter explores how youth understand notions of authenticity within social media spaces and how their identity is connected to the visual imagery they publish. As we can see in the following quote by Juan, youth understand images as a reflection of their own experiences:

> **Juan:** You know, the images, most are reflection of my life, what I have gone through.

This chapter questions how elements of "self," such as our likes/dislikes, beliefs, social circles, and personal and cultural histories, merge into still images to be shared in a public space. These are particularly complex questions to ask because, by definition, identity is multifaceted

and fluid. Who a person is, or better yet, who they believe themselves to be, is socially constructed and influenced by the time and place in which a person exists (Fearon, 1999; Furlong, 2013). In my dissertation introduction, I spoke about how a person can gain an understanding of their world through the act of viewing images and can respond critically to their environment through visual communication (Rose, 2022; Pink, 2012). It is because of this I argue that the "self", as a socially constructed entity, can be shaped through the experience of sharing and viewing images. While I acknowledge that identity is formed vastly beyond the walls of social media, our identity is shaped by what we see. In return, how we see ourselves is illuminated in our photographs (Rose, 2022; Pink, 2012). This means that identity, as understood by current cultural notions of self, can be examined through visual communication performed by youth in online spaces. The following pages will examine how identity merges with photographic concepts such as authenticity and aesthetics and how images portray a youth's multidimensional understanding of both their individual and collective selves. It will also examine how the process of expressing one's identity through images is an emotionally complex experience.

A Brief Discussion on Relevant Identity Theories

Developmental Approach (Erikson)

Given the age of the participants in this study, it is important to acknowledge theories around identity development from the ages of 16-21. Psychological theorists have traditionally viewed identity as a form of psychosocial development, with individuals progressing through various stages of growth, an approach that is often critiqued for its lack of acknowledgement of diverse experiences (Furlong, 2013; Ferro-Wreder & Kroger, 2020). Understanding identity as a staged process where identity is achieved by moving through various pre-established phases can

be traced back to Sigmund and Anna Freud, who introduced five stages of identity development, each where a child focuses on an erogenous zone (Furlong, 2013).[12] Erik Erikson (1968), another early thinker on identity development, worked closely with the Freuds but disagreed with the sexual emphasis of the theory (Furlong, 2013). Instead, Erikson (1968) produced a model that focused more heavily on various crises a person goes through in their lifetime that contribute to the formation of their identity. While there are eight total stages in this theory, two are specifically affiliated with the age range of the youth in this study: 1) Identity versus role confusion, which is the fifth stage and occurs between the ages of twelve and eighteen and 2) Intimacy versus isolation, which is the sixth stage and occurs during the ages of eighteen to forty years old (Ferro-Wreder & Kroger, 2020; Furlong, 2013; Mcleod, 2023).[13]

During the identity versus role confusion stage, youth explore various aspects of an identity, such as values and interests, to shape a foundation of their core identity. This period of time is often looked at as a moratorium where youth experiment with a range of potential identities until they become comfortable with themselves (Furlong, 2013; Côté, 2006). Adolescents who "fail" at this stage by inadequately forming a strong understanding of self will presumably be unable to form successful relationships with others during the subsequent stage that focuses on intimacy (Ferro-Wreder & Kroger, 2020; Furlong, 2013; Mcleod, 2023). Côté and Allahar (2005) bring forward a valid concern of inequity within the phase of identity exploration because youth who are part of marginalized groups, such as racial minorities or those

[12] Erogenous zones are areas of the body that are sensitive to sexual pleasure. In the fifth stage of the theory introduced by the Freuds, which occurs between 13-18, youth are focused on the genital region and their growing attraction to potential partners (Furlong, 2013). If a youth in this stage successfully works through their sexual desires in a "healthy" manner, then they will achieve meaningful relationships (Lantz & Ray, 2022).

[13] There have been many critiques of stage-based developmental theories, including Erickson's (1968) model, such as the fact that it assumes children/youth develop at the same rate and they often don't take into consideration cultural and social variables (Babakr et al., 2019; Enright, 2021). While Erickson's model may be imperfect, for the purposes of this dissertation, it acts as a framework for some of the identity-based issues youth in this study may be experiencing.

with a lower socio-economic status, may not have equal access to experimentation practices. Both boyd (2014) and Turkle (2017) speak about digital spaces as being conducive to identity exploration and formation, especially in more liminal sites such as gaming, where youth can shed their everyday identity and investigate themselves through the formation of characters. In my dissertation introduction, I highlighted that youth with lower socioeconomic status often face barriers to accessing technology, which could negatively affect their ability to explore their identity through digital means (Howard et al., 2010; Looker & Thiessen, 2003). I also emphasized how crucial it is for young people to have access to digital technologies because a significant portion of their social interactions with peers take place in online spaces (Schimmel et al., 2021; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). When children and teenagers cannot communicate through digital means, they may become excluded from socialization rituals and experience a sense of alienation, which can be detrimental to their development, an issue that bleeds into Erikson's (1968) sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation. It is important to acknowledge that children have the right to equitable access to digital technologies where they can explore their identity and form meaningful connections with others.

While eight of my participants fell into the later portion of Erikson's (1968) fifth stage involving identity confusion, the youth I spoke with did not deeply discuss confusion about their identity. Although I lack the qualifications to recognize a potential identity crisis in a professional manner, my participants seemingly had formed a foundational understanding of who they were and how they wanted to be seen. However, conversations around relationships with others were abundant in my interviews, which fits into Erikson's (1968) sixth stage, during which youth begin to form intimate relationships with others. This is unsurprising given that twenty-six of my participants fit into the age group of this phase, and the other eight were on the

cusp. Later in this chapter, I will address various forms of relationships, such as friendships and family, and how identity is shared through visual representations of these connections on social media. In subsequent chapters, I will explore more intimate relationships experienced by the youth I spoke with and how these emotional connections exist within a complex space straddling private and public spheres. According to Erikson (1968), when a person is within the sixth identity phase, they must make strong relationships with others; otherwise, they are subject to a crisis of isolation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, government-controlled isolation measures made face-to-face connections difficult to experience. Earlier in this dissertation, I introduced Rahim and Olivia, who spoke about the fact that their social media use had increased with the onset of the pandemic. Here, I would like to turn to Eva, a twenty-one-year-old female from Vancouver, and Zara, a nineteen-year-old female from Ottawa, who underscored how the pandemic not only amplified their usage but influenced the way that they connected with others.

> **Eva:** I suppose something about the pandemic has changed this too because we've been so isolated, you know, you kind of needed to find a way to connect that goes beyond physical touch because we couldn't have that at the time…I mean, those were the worst parts of the pandemic, so it became really important for me to be able to share anything. So there's the aspect of posting, I think also from the perspective of interacting with people before the past two years, like before the pandemic kind of hit, I basically would just scroll through, but I never interacted with other people's posts. But especially during the pandemic, because again, of that need for contacting people. I am becoming a lot more comfortable with liking people's posts and leaving comments, even if it's for the public. Before, I couldn't have done that because of my personality.

> **Zara:** I will say I've gotten more frequent because, especially during the beginning, I was more frequent to social media in terms of communication. I was in my room all day for a good chunk of 2020, but I was very communicative over Instagram just checking on if my friends are OK, because I haven't seen them. Especially because with online school you don't see anyone. So that was mostly why I increased my communication.

For both Zara and Eva, the imminent threat of seclusion caused by the pandemic triggered them to alter their behaviour. Pre-pandemic, Eva sparingly posted images on social media and disliked engaging in the images of others through digital actions such as liking or commenting. However, once the option of physical connection was taken away, Eva altered her online behaviour and began to use platform-based tools to connect with her friends. If we return to Erikson's (1968) theory on identity formation, Eva might have inherently needed to remain connected to others to shape relationships and, in turn, her identity and used social media to accomplish this. Zara had a similar experience where she maintained connections with her friends by checking in on them online despite the fact that she was spending most of her time in her bedroom.

In danah boyd's (2014) text *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens* she speaks about the work of Paul Hodkinson and Siân Lincoln who connects "bedroom culture" to online social media spaces. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) argue that similar to past generations of youth who personalized their bedrooms as a space to hang out with their friends, social media platforms have become current youth's "bedrooms" where they form a space to gather with friends digitally. However, achieving privacy within a digital "bedroom" is much more

complicated than a physical one, an issue that will be discussed more in-depth in chapter five. Nonetheless, Zara was able to use social media as a meeting ground to maintain relationships with her friends when physical spaces, such as a bedroom, were inaccessible. Given the importance of relationships in Zara and Eva's developmental stages, their social media became a clear tool to continue practicing meaningful connections with others.

Symbolic Interactionist Approach (Goffman)

Above, we thought about how social media could connect to developmental theories on identity, particularly the staged approach by Erik Erikson (1968). I would like to turn now to thinking about identity from a symbolic interactionist approach, which assumes identity is a social product that is shaped through interactions with others (Furlong, 2013). This train of theoretical thought began with George Mead (1934, as cited in Furlong, 2013), who separated the self into two dimensions, the "I" and the "me." The "me" is the identity that one forms through social interactions with others, sometimes referred to as the "looking-glass self" because our idea of our own self becomes a reflection of how others around us see and react to us (Mead, 1934; Furlong, 2013). Meanwhile, the "I" is formed through our internal response to others and their recognition of us. Inspired by Meads' work, Erving Goffman further developed symbolic interactionist theories of identity, diving into the profound bond between social interaction and the self. This dissertation is particularly interested in two of Goffman's texts: 1) *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1959) and 2) *Stigma: Notes on the management of a spoiled identity* (1986), which will be used more heavily in chapter four. In *The presentation of self in everyday life,* Goffman (1959) introduces the idea of dramaturgy, where he views people as actors in everyday life who control their social interactions and the way that they act in public in order to

leave specific impressions or ideas of their "self" with those they intermingle with. Goffman (1959) uses the analogy of a stage where, in public spaces, people are "frontstage" and must act according to social situations, and in private or "backstages," people can more authentically be themselves as identity performances are not employed.[14]

Although Goffman's (1959) text pre-dated social media, the concepts of dramaturgy have been applied to discussions surrounding digital-based social interactions (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010; Lewis et al., 2008). For example, Lewis et al. (2008) thought about private and public Facebook accounts in comparison to back and front stages. The selves that a person might perform in online spaces might directly conflict with the self they impress upon people in other spheres of their lives, so we might think about private accounts as a backstage where the need to perform is minimized due to the curated associates gazing at one's posts, and public accounts as more performative for a wider audience. However, Lewis et al. (2008) found that people are sometimes willing to "pull back the curtain" within digital applications to share more intimate parts of themselves, such as obscure music tastes, in public spaces. This leads to questions about how the modality of the digital can blur the lines of public versus private and how this might impact how we perform our identities.

This dissertation will continue to explore this question by pondering how youth control their emotional performances online in further chapters and will lean on Arlie Hochschild's (2012) work, where she uses Goffman's theories on performative identity to think about the "deep acting" associated with emotional expression. It is also important to mention that Hogan (2010) differentiates between "performances" and "exhibitions" of self within online spaces. According to Hogan (2010), social media would fall into an exhibition space because people

[14] Goffman actually refers to these spaces as "regions", but given the analogy of interactions as a performance, "stage" seemed a more fitting term. The use of the term "stage" over "region" is often used by academics who use Goffman's work (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010).

submit artifacts that present their self versus performing in the moment. I agree that photographs, which is more the focus of this dissertation, would fall under the exhibition category as digital images are still fixtures indicating the "self" which often sits on the wall of a profile page. However, social media applications have progressed with features such as live mode,[15] where users can broadcast videos of themselves in real-time, and the lines between performative and exhibition-based behaviour become muddled. In either case, Goffman's discussion of the functioning of the self in social spaces can be useful in dialogues on the digital.

danah boyd (2014) uses Goffman's (1959) idea of impression management to think about context collapses that can occur when youth post images online. When we try to manage how others see us, we follow a series of social rules, meaning that online management of our identities is both an individual process (what we choose to put forward) and a social process (the rules that influence our actions) (boyd, 2014; Goffman 1959). Goffman (1959) differentiates between impressions that are "given" and those that are "given off". Impressions that are "given" are actions that are curated and chosen for specific social situations, such as choosing a profile picture. While those that are "given off" are more implicit information that is picked up by our audience, which are often unintentional and a consequence of our actions. When a person makes a performative decision about how they want to be perceived, they do this based on their prior understanding a specific social situation or audience (boyd, 2014; Goffman, 1959). Youth might make decisions about how they want to be seen online, such as happy, athletic, or creative, but it is possible that the information they "give off" can be taken out of context, thus instigating a context collapse where the intended impression fails (boyd, 2014). Digital spaces make this particularly complex because the networked nature of social media means that multiple social circles can be interacting with a person at the same time, even sometimes without one's

[15] Live mode is available on most platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok.

knowledge, such as a friend of a friend being able to see a youth's profile (boyd, 2014). To expand, a youth may create an impression of themselves intended for friends, such as posting pictures of themselves participating in behaviours like consuming alcohol, but they may not wish to be seen this way by adults such as family or potential employers. If an unintended audience views the profile, then a context collapse occurs. One way youth may try to navigate the complex waters of impression management in digital spaces is by creating multiple accounts or having public vs. private accounts. Eva, who we met earlier in this chapter, discusses how she manages various versions of her identity within online spaces. In the first quote, she discusses how she uses two different applications to separate her interactions with her Canadian and Chinese.

> **Eva:** I think only the Rose one I shared on WeChat, which is with my Chinese friends, but also I think I did not share all the images on Instagram to my accounts and also vice versa…I'm not quite sure why.[16] I think sometimes it's because I'm interacting with different friend groups who I know people wouldn't really care that much about that. And I think I consider Instagram a bit more presentation-heavy that says it's almost like I'm going to an exhibition of a gallery almost, whereas WeChat I'm a bit more comfortable sharing even random things that I like that I want to share, for instance. For me, it's like I have a group which I consider you are my friend and I know who you are. I think [I am] a lot more comfortable posting life images, things that I found funny. Like if there's a funny meme that I saw then I would post it…but on Instagram, I don't think these things are worthy to put in that hypothetical gallery exhibition setting.

[16] See page 90 to view the image Eva is referencing.

Eva manages how she interacts with different social circles of friends, not just with various accounts but with different applications. WeChat, owned by the tech company Tencent, is a popular messaging application with predominantly Chinese users (Kharpal, 2019). Similar to Facebook, WeChat has grown to be multifaceted, where users can do tasks like paying bills or booking a flight on top of the ability to communicate (Kharpal, 2019). While it is not common for those outside of China to use WeChat, it can be particularly useful for people living internationally who have friends or family in China that they want to keep in touch with. For Eva, who is an international student studying in Vancouver, WeChat became pivotal to connecting with loved ones in China. What is fascinating about Eva's experience is her segmentation of various friend groups. Returning to Goffman's (1959) theories on the self, it seems as though Eva uses WeChat as a hypothetical "back-stage" where she can be more herself and share posts she likes. In contrast, she describes her identity management on Instagram as curated, where she meticulously decides the "worth" of a post. Eva's understanding of a worthy post would be based on her prior interactions with the space and community. While authors such as Hogan (2010) and Lewis et al. (2008) have used ideas of dramaturgy to think about the complexities of singular digital spaces, given the vast range of applications a user might engage with, future research should consider how performative identities shift across applications. Eva continued to converse about the complexities of interacting with various social spheres in online communicative spaces. In the quote below, she speaks about how she systematizes what posts her Chinese relatives see versus a more Western audience.

Eva: Things that I like have in Canada, sometimes I don't want my relatives to know. Like, for instance I think I didn't send a picture of me going to my grad prom because I

> know they wouldn't get it. So, I think I selectively excluded some photos out of that equation because I don't want them to have the bad connotation anyway. Even though it was perfectly fine that I was there. They're entirely very Chinese culture. And so I think that that culture mix that I have makes it hard to maintain kind of who I'm interacting with and what self-image I'm portraying. Am I the funny girl?

In both situations, we see how Eva avoids context collapse by carefully choosing what to post to different groups she interacts with online. In the above quotation, Eva is concerned that her Chinese relatives would not culturally understand the images of herself at prom as this tradition is specific to Western practices (Tinson & Nuttall, 2011) and, therefore, chose to omit them from spaces where this group could see them. She mentions that the "culture mix" of social circles on her social media applications makes it difficult to decide which "self" she wants to present through images. Because the social context of the self can be shaped by culture (Furlong, 2013), Eva struggles to negotiate how to portray herself within two social spaces that conflict. Eva has a surprising amount of self-awareness within our discussion, as she clearly acknowledges the existence of performative self-images for varying audiences. She even wonders out loud about the version of herself she should portray: is she the funny girl? While Eva leaves a definition of her identity at a ponderance which reflects the instability of people's understanding of "self," her discussions highlight the complex identity negotiations that happen in social media spaces.

Identity and Aesthetics

Viewing Images and the Self

Viewing an image involves both cognitive and affective responses, and a person's past experiences help them to comprehend the visual information presented to them (Fox and Schirrmacher, 2013; Berger, 1972). One aspect of perceiving an image is assessing its aesthetic qualities; whether the sensory experience it provides is appealing or not. Because human perception is subjective and is also affected by experience and culture, there can be different aesthetic reactions to the same image (Berger, 1972). For instance, one person may find an image pleasing or uplifting, while another may feel melancholic or embarrassed. Nanay (2019) also argues that a person's aesthetic preferences can alter over time, much like their sense of identity. In other words, an image that once held no interest for someone may now elicit an emotional response such as shame or longing because it resonates with new experiences they have had since then. Barthes (1980) expands on the aesthetic experience of witnessing a photograph through his discussion of the “studium” and “punctum” (p.27). To Barthes (1980) the studium of the image is where someone generally engages with a photograph, perhaps enthusiastically, but the relationship doesn’t move past a mundane interaction. When there is a punctum there is an “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (p. 26). This element causes a profound emotional reaction within the viewer; it can cause elation or deep sadness. However, what “punctuates” a person is highly personal, accentuating further the individuality associated with aesthetic experiences when viewing images. We could think about the idea of the studium vs. punctum within the digital sphere, where studium represents a person scrolling through images versus when a person feels emotionally attracted to an image and chooses to engage with it through liking or commenting, which is more like the punctum. Let’s consider the following statements:

Zara: So yeah, technically, the fact that I've just been scrolling through them just means I don't feel for them to begin with right now. I don’t have any problem with the content itself, but I'm not individually opening [the images], which just means I don't care for them to begin with. So, yeah, the better test is just what am I actually opening up to read more into? So like a lot of the stuff, I've been going through are beauty…A lot of cooking related meals, I'm scrolling through them, I don't care for them, a lot of desserts again.

Hannah: So the thing that I like is that you can just scroll and find what you enjoy. Keep scrolling until you know something that interests you pops up and makes you laugh or cringe or feel or whatever. It makes you feel it's nice, you know, and you keep going, and there's always something to watch.

Elena: I have to relate to it [in order to comment or like the image]. It just can't be an image, I have to relate to it.

Sebastian: I'm a soccer fan. I listen to the players, I relate to them. That is connected to my identity because I'm a fan.

In my conversations with Zara, Hannah, and Elena, I asked them what types of images they liked to engage with online. During our interview, Zara began an exercise where she scrolled through her Instagram home page in search of images that caught her attention. She described that posts related to beauty products and cooking flash across her screen, giving her no emotional reaction. In response to the mundane experience, she continues to scroll through the

application in search of new images. Though no specific image captured her attention during our time together, she explains that when she experiences an emotional connection to an image, she will click on it to engage with it further. Her actions could go beyond simply clicking a like button into a robust engagement with information about the image, such as what it represents or who published it. Hannah echoes Zara's focus on the action of scrolling to move past images that don't attract her emotionally. To Hannah, the hunt for an image that captures her emotionally seems like a game she enjoys playing. Elena provides a more straightforward answer to my question: in order for her to engage with an image, it has to relate to who she is on a deeper level. My discussion with Sebastian was more specific to the images I brought to the interview (see Chapter 2). To expand, Sebastian was attracted to the image of Lionel Messi and stated that he interacted with this image in his feed prior to our interview because it connected to his identity as a soccer fan. In all of the above scenarios, the youth needed to experience a "punctum" or an emotional attraction to the image to want to engage with it through tools available on social media platforms.

While our identities affect how and when we engage with images, they also influence how platforms present images to their users. Chun's (2016) concept of "N(YOU) media" (p. 3) suggests neoliberalist ideals gave birth to technological networks that focus on the "self". Through algorithms, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram provide content that is specifically curated for "you" by collecting information on your habitual use, such as which images or videos you click on (Chun, 2016; Pettman 2016). Although it may seem convenient to users that their social media experiences are tailored to their preferences, an economic trade is happening behind the scenes. Social media users are valuable because data about their habits can be used for economic gains, such as presenting an advertisement for beauty products to a young

female, as we saw with Zara (Chun, 2016; Pettman, 2016). While the blurring of the lines between private and public will be more thoroughly analyzed in chapter five, it is important to acknowledge in this chapter the personal and emotional connection to what images algorithms show youth on their home pages of social media applications. Algorithms show viewers not what is most relevant to them but what they are emotionally attached to and what they are more likely to engage with (Karppi, 2018). Social media sites analyze when a youth may experience a punctum in an image and use this information to show them similar images so that they remain emotionally engaged with the platforms. A youth's identity and what they are drawn to aesthetically can become a tool used by companies to sell products.

Beauty and Nature

While people's individual reactions to visual stimuli may vary, societal norms and beliefs about beauty play a role in how a person views and assesses an image. This is especially relevant in the context of digital images, where young people may view, evaluate, and engage with them through actions such as liking or commenting. It is worth noting that there is typically a larger community of individuals interacting with the same digital image. Discussions around aesthetics often involve a simplistic binary of agreement or disagreement, which tends to oversimplify the complexity of aesthetic experiences (Nanay, 2019). Many youths discussed specifically sharing images because they deemed them as beautiful and wanted to share the “beauty” with their followers. However, what's even more fascinating is that all of the youths’ associations of beauty, in terms of images they want to share, are connected to nature. The following are some examples of these conversations.

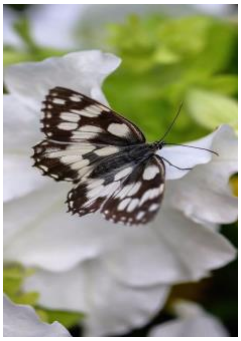
Figure 3

Image of a beach submitted by Olivia

Olivia: The image was actually not from my camera, so my friend took the picture, and she sent it to me. We went to the beach, and I was like, wow, that looks so beautiful and so clear.

Figure 4

Image of a butterfly on a flower submitted by Mia



Mia: It's just for my profile. It's actually beautiful. I was like, okay, this makes sense. It's beautiful and colourful, and, you know, people magically feel like this is beautiful.

Chloe: Oh, I think, yes, I like to take pictures of myself, but also I like to take pictures of my surroundings, the flowers, for example, that I see on my way somewhere or like the things that I find pretty.

In Olivia's image, the viewer is shown a beach free from human figures. The colours are very vibrant, with blue and green hues predominantly shining through. A palm tree swoops in from the left side of the image, with its leaves becoming the main focus. In Mia's photo, fairly muted in colour (although intriguingly, Mia describes it as colourful), a butterfly gracefully sits on a white flower. Olivia and Mia both chose a specific moment to capture when they experienced nature and found it "beautiful." Chloe makes a more general comment about the fact that she often takes pictures of flowers because of their aesthetic attraction. The connection these youth make between beauty and nature is obvious here, but we must ponder what this means about the human-nature connection. On the one hand, Susan Sontag (1997) argues that people often put a camera in between themselves and a scene that they don't know how to react to, a method that acts as a buffer to avoid a deep in-the-moment experience. One that might be too overwhelming emotionally. It is common in Western society to think about nature from an anthropocentric perspective, whereby humanity is separate from nature (Lumber et al., 2017; Vining et al., 2008). One could look at the images submitted by Oliva and Mia and note that the lack of people in the images almost acts as a separation between the self and the nature in which they capture photographically. On the other hand, the youth could use social media and photography to connect with nature. According to Lumber et al. (2017), the human species has an innate biological need to connect to nature and expressing a bond with nature can be an important part of a person's self-concept. If we maintain this line of thinking, the youth may be

expressing their own identity and their biological enmeshment with nature through the act of photographing it. I would like to submit one more quote expressing the emotional element of sharing nature-based images.

> **Nina:** I think this is interesting because, my eyes, when I'm looking at the world, I think I see something pretty and I took a photo. It looks very, very not pretty in the image, and I think I wanted to try to replicate what I saw from my point of view to my audience, wherever they are. And then like, for instance, looking at the Moon, I think that's the most common thing people find. Oh, look at the moon. It's so beautiful. So whenever possible, I, try to create photos that many people feel like, oh, this is kind of that moment. And also another thing is not just replicating that view, but also trying to treat our emotions as if it's something that makes me too happy about wanting the people to know that I'm trying to share that happiness with them.

Nina expresses great difficulty in accurately capturing the aesthetic beauty she sees with her eyes in an image. However, the desire to share nature with others photographically is soaked in emotions. For Nina, it’s not just about showing nature to others but making them feel it. While I mentioned above the possible stance that youth use cameras to separate themselves from nature, Nina's statement makes me feel otherwise. While none of my participants spoke specifically about participating in environmental activism online, youth, in general, have used social media to partake in speaking out against anthropocentric mindsets and calling for environmental change (Boulianne et al., 2022). I believe that, like the youth I spoke to who used social media and images as a means to connect to their social circles, they also practice

connecting to nature through digital tools. Via image sharing and activism, youth may be able to bond with nature through digital technologies.

'More or Less True' The Self and Authenticity

A person's identity and past experiences can affect how they view and experience a photograph, making reactions to images personal and unique (Berger, 1972). In the introduction of this chapter, we looked at a statement put forward by Meta (2023a) claiming that authenticity is of utmost importance in their platforms and that those who are inauthentic risk the greater good of the "community." In boyd's (2016) text, *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens*, she quotes a remark made by Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, who states, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity" (p. 50). Here, users are pressured to ensure that the self they put forward accurately represents their identity. However, as we saw in Eva's case above, presenting oneself to an audience can be complex because the impressions we wish to put forward shift depending on to whom we are performing. Zuckerberg claims that youth like Eva, who present varying identities on different accounts and applications, do so because they lack integrity. But is this true? Managing the identity which we impress upon others is something that occurs in both physical and virtual spaces, so how do we determine what level of authenticity is needed for social media? In this section, I would like to focus on two things: 1) How the visual decisions that a photographer makes with a camera can reflect and even shape their identity, and 2) How youth understand the concept of authenticity within social media platforms. I would also like to note that while I begin this section by looking at various theorists' perspectives on authenticity (ex. Barthes, 1980; Berger, 1972; Benjamin, 1969), I do

not aim to come to a specific conclusion about authenticity. Rather, I explore how authenticity is an individual conception, theorists' and youths' alike.

Many early thinkers on photography (Barthes, 1980; Berger, 1972; Benjamin, 1969) addressed concepts of authenticity when it comes to photographs, particularly images of the "self". For Barthes (1980) the process of being photographed, of being observed, creates a lie in itself because the person being photographed shifts themselves into being presented in a certain way. To Barthes (1980), the person being photographed starts by wanting to maintain their identity during the portraiture sitting, but the act of posing makes this impossible. He states, "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality" (p.11). He continues on to say that "myself never coincides with my image." (p.12). By posing, we lose the ability to be authentic and represent the "self" through images. Barthes (1980) describes photography as the "advent of myself as other" (p.12). This concept of the self as other is also echoed in the work of Hirsch (1997), who introduced the term "allo portrait." For Hirsch (1997), autobiographical images are somewhat fragmentary in nature as they are a constructed version of a person's self. The term "allo portrait," in particular, refers to "the portrait of the other, defined as the other within" (Hirsch, 1997, p.85). Suppose I am peering at an image of myself. In that case, I automatically become the "other" through the process of viewing, and the image can only represent "previous, subsequent, (or) anticipated" (Hirsch, 1997, p.89) versions of myself.

In Berger's work (2013), he distinguishes that lies within images are formulated by a person, not the camera or photograph. He states that the camera "quotes rather than translates, that is said that the camera cannot lie. It cannot lie because it prints directly" (Berger, 2013, p.

69). While the way a person expresses themselves can be affected by the tools that they use, Berger (2013) makes clear that if a photo projects a lie, it is because it is "quoting" from the person taking the image. Portraits of the self, therefore, are never authentic from the viewpoints of Hirsch (1997) Barthes (1980), and Berger (2013). A way that we can apply these thoughts to modern technology is by thinking about the "selfie". The term "selfie" was first used by an Australian social media user in 2002 who was describing injuries to his face after a fall (BBC News, 2013). By 2013, the term "selfie" was so widely used that it was entered into the dictionary and named the word of the year (BBC News, 2013). The "selfie" is a prominent type of image displayed on digital platforms such as Instagram and typically features at least a person's entire face and is a style of self-portraiture (Manovich, 2017). When a person takes a "selfie," they do so to project a specific public image to their network of followers and may make decisions about the image, such as framing, clothing, facial expressions, location, editing, etc., to maintain a specific narrative (Leary, 2013).

Walter Benjamin (1969) questions the authenticity of images, but not from the perspective of "self" within the image. Instead, Benjamin (1969) feels that the commodification of art through the invention of mechanical reproduction caused a piece of art, such as a painting, to lose its original essence or "aura." In terms of photography, Benjamin (1969) argues that there is no authentic print in the context of an image and, therefore, no aura (p.224). To Benjamin (1969), the "aura" of art was deeply connected with the idea of the original presence of a piece of art. Because a photograph is an instant reproduction of a moment and can be replicated an infinite number of times, the image is never available to be viewed in its original form. However, if we take the logic that one must be present with an original piece of art to witness its "aura", and not with a reproduction, could someone be privy to a photographic aura if the person who is

witnessing the photograph was present at the exact time the image was captured? If we were to assume this to be accurate, then an image can only be authentic in connection with memory. Benjamin does call photography a “cult of remembrance” (p.226) through the capturing of portraits to commemorate loved ones. He also acknowledges the use of photography as “standard evidence for historical occurrences” (Benjamin, 1969, p.226). That being said, the current technological and mechanical capabilities for capturing and editing images do bring the authenticity of images back into question.

As mentioned above, people can “create” images that are posed or contain a fabricated memory. For example, when I was a professional photographer, I could synthetically create a moment where a family was laughing together to mimic the essence of a happy family memory. Technology also allows photographers to change an image digitally, such as removing blemishes from a person’s face, nullifying that photo’s dependability as evidence of a moment. Sontag (2001) claimed that the “news that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular” (p. 86). She gave the historical example of a photographer who showed two versions of a portrait, one original and one retouched, at the 1955 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Sontag (2001) felt that the fabrication of an image through editing and retouching had the consequence of falsifying reality and could potentially shift the very way people experience reality. The launch of Instagram in 2010 was a massive development in modern image-making because it made editing and publishing images in a public format accessible to the masses (Manovich, 2017). Now, Instagram users can use filters and tools to shift the aesthetic appearance of their image before sharing it with friends or a wider audience. However, Manovich (2017) points out that identifying an authentic versus a staged or edited image can be challenging to achieve. He questions, “If the author does some basic edits to the captured photos, increasing a bit of

brightness, contrast, and sharpness, at what point do we declare this photo to be calculated rather than authentic" (Manovich, 2017)? A clear framework for what constitutes an authentic image from an editing standpoint has yet to be developed, but many of the youth I interviewed spoke about choosing to edit images. Let's consider the following comments:

> **Nina:** I primarily directly do it on the platform, if there is any, if there is no filter function, I just leave it alone. I rarely go to professional software to do it. So, for these ones, I just plug the original photo into Instagram, and I find it. I feel like, oh, still looks better than I do.

> **Rahim**: If it's like me and my friends, sometimes we try out filters, or sometimes it looks better, especially with lighting to put a filter on.

Rahim and Nina both mention that they use editing and filter functions available within social media applications to make their image "better." If we turn to Sontag's (2001) theory that editing a photo can potentially be seen as a manipulation of reality and, therefore, nullify the legitimacy of it, then through editing their images, Rahim and Nina were presenting something that was "inauthentic." Given the heavy emphasis on authenticity proclaimed by Meta (2023a), it seems highly contradictory to offer editing and filter tools to its users. However, I would prefer to view Rahim and Nina's manipulation of their photos as a way to explore their identity in a digital space. One could construe their desire to make things better as a "true" aspect of their identity; the altered image is, in this sense, the "real" them more so than an unaltered image. As mentioned above, Turkle (2017) and boyd (2014) take the stance that through interactions on

social media, such as posting and viewing images, youth can form their identities by trying out various versions of themselves. To me, Rahim and Nina are not being inauthentic but are exploring presentations of the "self" through tools available to them. Later in our conversation, Rahim reflects on his own understanding of how his friends present their "true selves":

> **Rahim:** Some of my friends, they post everything, and I know that they are their true selves. And, like, they're not catfishing. I can tell by their profile who they are, but there are some that don't even post, which I respect. It's not like you have to post on social media to have a personality but to share your personality. There are a lot of people I know who don't post for whatever reason, and they're still great people. And there are also people who post maybe too much for my liking. And so you could say, for example, kind of controversial take, but a lot of people my age, you have a spam account where they post maybe like every day, like how their day is going or like, maybe like how work was. And sometimes, I don't want to know that.

Rahim mentions the act of catfishing, where someone creates a fake identity with the intention of luring someone, usually into an intimate relationship (Chandler & Munday, 2020). He makes sure to quickly differentiate between his friend's altered state of identity and a completely fake one. Rahim speaks about the complexities of expressing oneself online through images and the option to post a lot or not at all. To Rahim, a person's personality does not exist within social media but is simply a space to share certain chosen elements of an identity with an audience. We can apply Goffman's theories (1959) to Rahim's quote to think about how people curate and perform elements of our identity to impress an idea of themselves to different online

audiences. According to Rahim, how people in his social circle approach this may vary. For some, refraining from posting about themselves might allow them more control over how they are being seen or viewed, or perhaps they lack the desire to perform for their digital audience. For others, social media is used as a tool to "draw back the curtain" (Lewis et al., 2018) and allow their followers to see consistent details of their day. However, Rahim claims that sometimes this level of intimacy is too much. While he acknowledges that the people he is specifically referencing are being their authentic selves, he simply doesn't want to know consistent details of their lives.

While the framework of social media challenges its users to show their authenticity by revealing intimate and consistent artifacts of their lives, we might ponder if accounts that constantly post go against in-person social rules where what we reveal to another is controlled and specific to the situation. Since the audiences of the people steadily posting may vastly vary, from friends to employers, the context of the impression they put forward may collapse (boyd, 2016). To expand, a youth who gives negative updates about their workday might be viewed as relatable by another youth but unreliable to an employer. In either case, the amount of photos a person posts may not directly be related to their authentic selves; posting a lot or a little doesn't mean that someone is more "true," but it does affect the impression they "give off" (Goffman, 1959) to others. Another participant, Zara, expands on the conversation around posting images on social media and authenticity by distinguishing between stagnant images on a feed and stories.

> **Zara:** I think mainly just because it's more like in the moment, right? Yeah. And also, I feel like it's easier to just be a bit more authentic in that it doesn't have to be as curated.

> So, just like a snippet of your life as it goes along. Being real is a thing now… because it's not permanent, right? It's only permanent if I pin it to my profile; otherwise, it's just there, and you can comment on it… what I mean by authentic is just that there's less pressure to curate it because when you're doing a post, it stays there, right? It goes to all of your followers. So I don't know why, but it's like to me, my profile is a lot like a portfolio, but a more informal one. Right? Well, the stories is more of the actual casual side of social media for me. So, like the actual nonchalantness of a story is what makes it a bit more authentic because I don't have to be like, Oh, well, you know, you're not really posing or anything…and it's very much like a stereotype of like, you know, this of the different types of stories you're probably having food, you know, there's a certain shot, your friends, you take a group photo together, right? Well, I feel like having those as posed just like doesn't make sense to me because one is like, again, this whole portfolio sense.

Zara offers some fascinating insight in her statement into how she perceives authenticity online. I would like to first address the fact that Zara felt stories on social media, which allow users to post photos and videos that appear for twenty-four hours only, were more authentic than posts that stay on someone's feed permanently. Zara views her permanent profile as a portfolio that she has to curate for her audience, therefore minimizing the authenticity of those posts. However, when photos are only available for a short amount of time before they disappear, the pressure to maintain a specific performative self is reduced, allowing someone to be more genuine. Zara referred to stories as the more "casual side of social media," which could also be thought of as the "backstage" (Goffman, 1959) of social media where performative behaviour is

less warranted. We might also return to Benjamin's (1969) concept of the "aura" here, and my argument above that photographic auras could exist if someone was present for the moment of capture. Is it possible that story-based images could possess an aura, given the transient nature of the technology? A person witnessing the story only has a short amount of time to click on it and view it, and therefore, the viewer is in some way "present." They do not passively come across the image but choose to engage with the post. Zara's comment on the expectation of specific posing is also essential to acknowledge. Above, we think about Barthes's (1980) belief that when a person poses, they automatically lose the authenticity of their captured "self." Zara seems to agree with Barthes (1980) that the posing of oneself or a group of people is reminiscent of a complied portfolio that is staged for a viewer. As mentioned by Zara, the social expectations of posing have seeped beyond the presentation of a person or persons in an image into inanimate objects such as food. How and what we choose to present within photographs is socially constructed. Although typically applied to linguistics, Foucault's theory of discourse, where language and the social meaning placed upon any given word are part of a community's social structure, is useful for thinking about visual discourse (Malpas & Wake, 2013). Language is governed by sociological rules that control the way in which people use and understand words in their lives, but the same could be said for visual communication. Zara clearly identifies that there is a structured way to visually communicate human experiences through photographs. There is a predetermined position in which concepts, such as friends (ex., smiling at the camera with arms around each other) or food (photographed from above before it's been eaten), are captured and shared online. As much as youth might perform their identities within the images they share online, how they present themselves visually is shaped by the social rules to which they are subjected and the material circumstances that drive the presentation, such as social media.

Friends

Social media has become a space of togetherness for youth, where they can gather and socialize with their friends (boyd, 2014). Youths' online spaces are a reflection of their physical ones, as a majority of youth only socialize digitally with friends they also interact with in offline spaces (boyd, 2014). Most of my participants fit into a developmental stage, intimacy versus isolation, where the formation of strong, meaningful relationships is critical to their understanding of self (Erikson, 1968; Furlong, 2013). Turkle (2011) argues that the public nature of digital landscapes has shifted what it means to be intimate with another person. While past generations may have formed friendships through a series of private in-person meet-ups, phone calls, and letters, youth today connect with their friends both physically and digitally, which gives birth to new methods of connectivity. In this section, we will see multiple youths who capture in-person moments and share them online to forge friendships more deeply. For young people, friendships can also act as a form of capital where they can receive social recognition for being well-liked by their peers (Bélanger, 2017). According to Pettman (2016) there is a social desire to fit in by being constantly connected to the network, a "will-to-synchronize" (p. 49), both in the sense of being available to our online friends and of acquiring information in "real-time". As discussed previously in this dissertation, the threat of being removed from connectivity can feel distressing and reduce a young person's social standing (Chun, 2016; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019; Bélanger, 2017). If social media applications have changed the landscape of making friends, how does the act of taking and sharing photographs influence this experience?

Connection Versus Isolation

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where everyone, including youth, was subject to isolation from their community. We looked at conversations I had with Eva and Zara, who spoke about how they used social media to maintain communication with their social groups. The pandemic had a profound effect on the way in which they used social media as a communicative tool, both claiming that they consciously chose to increase their digital engagement with friends to avoid seclusion. This was likely developmentally driven as forming relationships was pivotal to their identity development (Erikson, 1968). Below is Rahim's comment regarding how he used social media to stay connected to his peer group during the pandemic, which corresponds with Eva and Zara. However, Rahim offers further insight into how this connects to visual communication.

> **Rahim:** I haven't seen a lot of my friends in like two or three years. So, we would just take a picture of our food or take a picture of ourselves or take a picture of the place they're going. And that's because they're sharing that with us, and we're really like sharing it online with each other. And it's just very happy, you know, and it just feels like a community with my friends.

Rahim not only increased his online communication with his friends during the pandemic but did so photographically. Shared images of food, a physical location they visited, or selfies became a language in which Rahim's group used to stay interconnected. Sontag (1977) suggests that photographs become a form of visual code in which people establish what is "worth" looking at. It is almost as if Rahim is saying, "I am worth looking at; see me." This might be best explored through Hegel's theory of recognition, which suggests that humans need recognition

within a social system, and they achieve this by being culturally addressed as a subject (Changfoot, 2021). While Hegel's theories are not typically applied to friendships, it has been argued that recognition in the form of friendships can affirm a person's self-worth and be affectually charged (Williams, 2012; Iser, 2019). In Rahim's social circle, there is reciprocal recognition that occurs when images of their everyday lives are mutually shared. Because they participate in the act of photo sharing together and recognize each other's images as "worth" looking at, they become a subject of value within their social circle, ultimately affirming their identity. For Rahim, this caused a positive emotional reaction, and he felt happy to be part of his online community of friends.

Now, I would like to move to Chloe, who used photography post-pandemic to work through her experience of loneliness and to generate new relationships.

Figure 5

Image of a couple embracing at a concert submitted by Chloe

Relationships and connection are dominant components of image sharing for youth

Chloe: So, it was taken in a backyard show in my friend's backyard. I tried to portray calmness and people actually meeting other people finally because of the covid. A lot of musical shows had been cancelled or postponed. And it was a way for me to portray that

> we can finally meet again with people, make friends, and enjoy and listen to some music. I was sitting in the audience with my friends, and this couple was the only people who were standing up. There was a really emotional and sad song playing in the background. And I just felt that I needed to capture this moment. After I took this picture, I actually had a chance to talk to this couple personally, and now we're friends. So I'm really happy that I actually took it. I decided to share this on social media because I knew that I wasn't the only one who was feeling that way because all of my friends were isolated from everyone.

In Chloe's case, capturing an image of friends gathering post-pandemic became a way to celebrate the physical togetherness of friends. This is a clear example of the "life mix" (Turkle, 2011, p. 160) that occurs within digital spaces, where digital and physical experiences become intertwined. The sharing of the above image on social media was not only a visual expression of the happiness felt by the ability to physically gather with friends but was also used to connect digitally with other youth who had also been isolated during the pandemic. Through sharing her photograph, Chloe is attempting to "recognize" the experience of loneliness within her social circle and validate them by saying, "I've felt this as well". Interestingly, the taking of the photograph itself also became a means to connect with and make friends. Is it possible that because Chloe recognized the couple as being "worth" photographing, they chose to build a friendship?

Friendships and Social Capital

As mentioned above, being well-liked by friends and having a high number of friends or followers in digital spaces can be a form of social recognition or capital for youth (Bélanger, 2017). Pierre Bourdieu (1989) identified various forms of capital that exist within a society: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Social capital refers to a person's network of social relationships and affiliations that are used as a source of power that can be leveraged in various ways, such as a person receiving a promotion because they are friends with their boss (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu views society as a series of fields, or groups of people, that can present as either a societal field, such as a youth identifying as Canadian, or a specialized field, such as taking on specific hobbies that interject youth into certain groups (Bottero & Crossley, 2011; O'Hara, 2000). An individual can be a part of multiple fields that bleed into one another. There is a continual struggle within each field, and between fields, to gain capital and, therefore, power. The social struggle for power within fields is determined by various factors that affect an individual's hierarchal positionality. These factors include 1) a person's habitus, which is made up of an individual's social practices, background, lifestyle, etc., 2) their understanding and use of social rules within their field, and 3) their personal capital in its various forms. Although Bourdieu did not speak about youth to great lengths, Bessant et al. (2020) highlight that "youth" is a field on its own where those who belong to it experience immense power struggles with adults who represent them. Within the field of youthhood, there would be many sub-fields that stem from specific friend groups that form. Below, I would like to think about two statements made by my participant, Zara, that highlight how social media and images can act as a form of social capital in connection to friendship.

Zara: Yeah, it goes both ways. Like for me as well is like, I don't want to give you my number directly, but also it's like you just met someone, and you're like, Oh, we're the same crowd we should have each other's contacts, right? But it's just way more natural to ask for a social media profile than it is to just, “Oh, I just met you. Can I have your number, right?”. It just makes both parties more comfortable…[One thing I do] with my friends who have developed over time is sharing reels or memes you see on the internet; you can't really do that via SMS. It's a very clunky process. By social media, it's like you don't always have to have a conversation with people, you know? Right, right. And so instead of saying, “Oh, I just saw something interesting”, I'll just say, you know, easily just send it to them, and it's like, oh, so you're sharing like a little moment without really it being about you is also just a way to be, “Oh, I'm thinking of you. When I saw this, you know, it reminded me of you.” And it's really quick. So it's not like you're obligated to always just having a conversation like, Hey, what's up? Because that can run stale pretty easily, right? And so, you just send those things to just, like, keep in touch. And then when you have a topical conversation, it's not like, oh, we haven't interacted in ages because it feels like you have just haven't really been actively talking about anything.

In the above statement, Zara discusses how social media acts as a distancing measure for those in the same social circle she wants to connect with but doesn’t want to provide her number to as this would allow too much access to herself. Digital communicative access to Zara becomes a form of capital that she gives out based on social interactions. If you are within a specific social circle or field, she will exchange social media profile information, but you must work towards receiving her number. The withholding of certain information seems to be a common social

practice. Zara mentions, “It just makes both parties more comfortable.” Zara also uses visual artifacts such as memes to continue to connect with friends whose relationships have more robustly developed. This can be viewed as a capital-based social exchange in two ways: 1) A person must be within a certain social field with Zara to receive images from her in a private context, and 2) Zara uses the act of sending images to friends as a way to sustain the relationship. In exchange for receiving the image, it is expected that the friend won’t forget about her, and the relationship will be maintained even if they go through long periods of time without physically interacting. In the next quote, Zara explains how only select social circles of friends will understand certain images she posts online.

Figure 6

Image of a frog submitted by Zara

Zara: The first one has to do with a school trip we had. We were at a nature conservatory. So, you take samples of the animal and they release them back into the wild. Well, the reason I posted it was because as the inside joke goes, my friend, the person you know, caught the frog for the entire day was like married to this frog. They had a name and everything. And then, yeah, so that was the joke, right? This is someone's

husband. But also, the image itself was like, “Get me out of here"?...And so it was just like a funny image to me… Yeah. In my case, my friend circle really enjoys frogs.

The image of the frog above was posted in a public setting, but only certain viewers would have the power to understand the meaning behind the image. The posting of contextualized images acts as a form of power exhibitionism where it becomes clear to Zara’s wider circle who was and was not present at a certain moment. As discussed above, one of the potential risks of posting photos available to a wider circle is “context collapse” (boyd, 2016). While specific friends understand the meaning behind the photo, other onlookers could misunderstand the image, which could negatively hinder how they view Zara’s identity. To elaborate, while Zara’s friend group connects this image to the funny moment that further solidifies Zara as their friend, someone else outside of the social circle could assume that Zara is capturing animals and view this as negative, even if it’s inaccurate. The sharing of images online is clearly coupled with the building and negotiating of peer relationships in both physical and digital spaces, which contributes to the understanding of one's self within the wider social context.

Family

Connection

In conjunction with peer interactions, family connections are also an essential part of identity formation from both a developmental and social perspective (Erickson, 1968; Benson & Johnson, 2009; Furlong, 2013). While youth use the information they receive from peers to build their understanding of “self,” their initial comprehension of their identity is received from their parents or guardians (Erickson, 1968; Benson & Johnson, 2009). The concept of family has been

explored in multiple spheres that are of interest to this dissertation. For example, Hochschild (2012), from an emotional perspective, argues that feeling rules govern the family structure, such as the expectation that a parent will love a child. While this will be more deeply explored in the following chapter, it is useful in thinking about how family identities are formed through visual means. Family photographs can reflect the emotional expectations society places on a family: that they are happy and exist harmoniously (Hochschild, 2012; Lutrell, 2020). This section will investigate how youth use images to connect with family and how photographs become a means to reflect or even challenge social constructions of what it means to be related.

Throughout this chapter, we have explored how social media is often used to connect with others via the sharing and witnessing of photographs. While I have mostly addressed connection from a peer perspective, connection to one's family is also important socially and developmentally. In terms of technology and family, there have been differing opinions on whether social media hinders or supports familial connection. For example, the concept of technoference (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016) has been used by academics to suggest that technology has interfered with our ability to spend quality time with people in an in-person manner, such as youth being too distracted to form healthy bonds with their parents (Kushlev & Dunn, 2019; Jiang, 2018; Vaterlaus, 2022). Vaterlaus (2022) argues that engaging in social media-related practices can act as a means for youth to gain autonomy from their parents, which is essential for their own development of self. However, parental desire to have authority over how a youth uses social media can hinder this process (Jiang, 2018). It has also been debated that social media can produce a deeper connection between parents and their children, especially when families engage together, such as the collective viewing of a photograph or video (Vaterlaus et al., 2019; Padilla Walker-et al., 2012). Earlier in this chapter I discussed Eva, who

used various accounts to separate her interactions between her Western and Chinese social circles. Below, she describes how she used the mediums of photography and social media to connect to her physically distanced family.

Figure 7

Image of a rose in a window submitted by Eva

> **Eva:** I took that photo and this is happening in my house. But actually, I was there for a winter break because I was actually alone in my house and also in my student house. So essentially, by that time over the pandemic, there was barely anyone that I was talking to in person. Also, my family wasn't even there, so it was just an empty house, me and myself. So, I think it's also that at the moment, I wanted to share that with my parents. You know, saying, "Oh, look, it's snowing over here. How about you guys?" Because they're in China, so they're all the way there.

For Eva, the physical distance between herself and her parents became a source of intense loneliness. In order to manifest a sensation of connection, Eva took a photograph to capture what

she was seeing and share the sight with her parents. The shared viewing of an image within a family structure is called co-orientation and can contribute to bond-making and connection (Keorner & Fitzpatrick, 2006; Padilla Walker-et al., 2012). By sharing a photograph with her parents, she was co-orienting them with what she was witnessing, essentially drawing them into her life through visual means in order to have a shared experience. While parent-child relationships can be complex, especially in association with social media, the visual nature of the technology can clearly allow for connection to occur despite physical distance through the practice of co-viewing.

Family Photos

While this dissertation focuses on the photographs captured and shared by youth, it is also important to acknowledge photographs posted by parents, as well as how societies' understanding of family influences the aesthetic choices made when displaying a family visually. Parents often share photographs that reflect happy moments and may go to great lengths, such as hiring expensive photographers or bribing their children to smile, in order to capture a moment that represents the way they want their family to be viewed by society (Brosch, 2016). Family photography became accessible to the masses with the introduction of the “Kodak” camera in 1888, integrating the camera into everyday life. Its slogan, "You push the button, we do the rest," implied that anyone, even those without photography skills, could now use the technology (Hirsch, 1997; Eastman, 1888). This led families to capture their loved ones and their experiences, a practice that continues today on social media. Family photos, according to Marianne Hirsch (1997), are more than just a representation of the family unit. Hirsch (1997) uses the term “familial gaze” (p. 11) to suggest that families exhibit socially embedded customs

of what it means to be a family, both in terms of how the family sees themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others. While individuals present their ideal identity within images, families "frame" themselves according to these specific customs to present a desirable collective identity. According to Hirsch (1997), the dominant group producing family photographs is middle-class families with similar posing structures to fantasize that "everyone's the same" and thus supporting the dominant desire to veil inequality" (p. 47). The concept that familial class affects how we want to be photographed has also been explored through children's photographic choices. For example, working-class youth are more likely to wish to appear on camera, whereas middle-class youth desire to be in control of what is captured (Lutrell, 2020; Chalfen, 1981). In either case, who we are affects how we want to be seen.

When a family cannot produce an image that exudes visual signifiers of a happy nuclear family, they risk being othered. Sara Ahmed (2015) speaks about the struggle of gay families to be socially recognized in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions,* where she states, "Gay relationships are valued and celebrated insofar as they are 'modelled' on the traditional model of the heterosexual family" (p.150). Images that embody a specific familial gaze may perpetuate social and cultural ideals of what a family should look like. It would be the hope that mass image-sharing capabilities on technological platforms like Instagram would create an environment where a variety of visual imaginations of the family are shared. However, according to Moignan et al. (2017), who analyzed the aesthetics of family images on Instagram, this is not the case. They state that digital family images are "ordinary, repetitive and highly mundane snapshots of elements of family life. This represents an exaggeration of the visual tropes found in family albums, as opposed to a deviation from them." (Moignan et al., 2017, as cited in Manovich, 2017, p. 20.). The idea of family life is "entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped

by the pubic" (Hirsch, 2012, p.35), and the digital age has only exacerbated this fact by making "normative" family structures a prominent image within public spaces.

"Sharenting," which refers to parents who extensively post photographs and commentary about their children's lives through social networking platforms, is another element of the familial gaze that is important to examine (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019; Hirsch, 1997). Sharenting images may contain a whole family or a singular child but perpetuate familial fantasies in either case. Parents want their families to be seen by their community in a way that matches their ideology of what a perfect family means (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019; Hirsch, 1997). One reason parents choose to share photographs of their children is to participate in self-presentation to show their community that they are competent parents (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019). The practice of using images of children to perpetuate notions of being a "good" parent is a more predominant practice for female mothers (Lazard, 2022). This is particularly problematic because these types of photographs project harmful ideals of what it means to be a parent or family. Parents may also indirectly shape the way their child is represented in their community through these photographs, which may not align with the way the child wishes to be seen and ultimately have a negative impact on their sense of identity. (Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019).

To provide an example, a parent may pose their child based on the embodiment of a specific gender of which the child may not identify. Hirsch (2012) uses the term "preformed image" to describe how cultural ideas of gender come into play within photographs. How parents represent themselves and their children in images may relate to "gendered familial figures we retrieve from our storehouses of expressive forms" (Hirsh, 2012, p.48). Parents may choose to share images online of their children that reflect socially constructed gender stereotypes (ex. a picture of a female wearing pink and playing with dolls). In adolescence, the age that many

children begin to engage with social media platforms, youth are developing a sense of self (Erickson, 1968). It can be harmful if youth enter into a public digital space where their identity is preconstructed for them, particularly in a way that doesn't align with their own ideas of self. Eva highlights this:

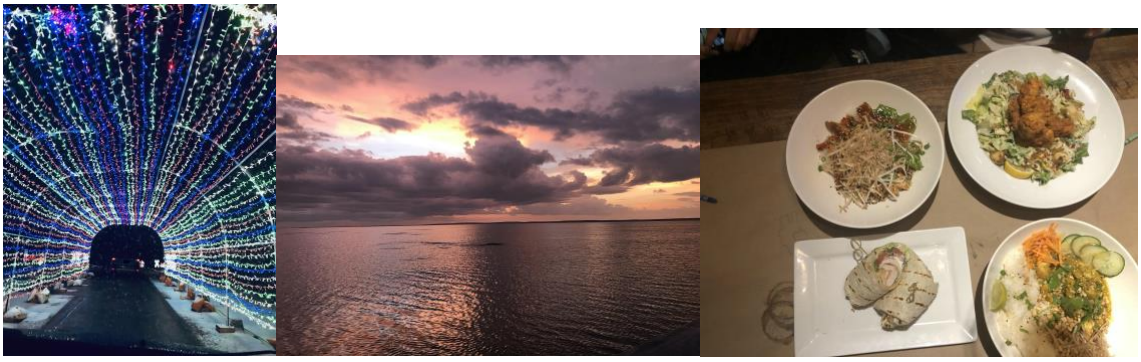
> **Eva:** I was very against my face [as a child] on social media, just because I feel like it's not what I feel like. I don't really associate myself with that.

Eva felt that the photographs posted by her parents did not reflect the image she had of her "self." The posting of images can be a means by which youth explore and form their sense of self, but when there are images that contradict how they want to be seen by their audience, that process might be hindered. The sharing of a child's image without their permission also brings to light issues of privacy, explored more in Chapter Five. While a specific legal framework for who owns an image of a child (the child or the parent?) does not exist, many images posted on social media applications that contain young children are typically not done with the consent of the child (Cai, 2023). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990), children have the right to privacy (Article 16). Therefore, parents are going against the rights of the child by posting images of them without consent. While parents may create an imagined identity for their child within their digital display of family images, children can push back through their own photographic creations. Lutrell (2020) argues that youth can refuse the "adult gaze" that has been placed upon them by creating their own images of self through "countervisuality". By using images as statements of identity, youth can grapple with the complexities of what it means to be seen in public images and reconstruct an identity that

connects to who they are. In all of the photographs submitted by Rahim, he shares images of family moments, but in a way that contradicts the typical photographic displays of a family.

Figure 8

A series of three images of family moments submitted by Rahim



The first image, taken December 2020, was of a Christmas light show Rahim experienced with his family during the pandemic. Rahim explains, “There's a lot of stress around Christmas time because a lot of people thought they couldn't see their relatives and it is not going to be as special as Christmas is. So, what my family did is we got together, at least our close family, and we went to like a drive through a light show.” Rahim’s family not only found a way to connect during a time when they had to physically distance themselves, but Rahim commemorated the closeness of his family by capturing the moment. The second image was taken in Florida in July 2021, when Rahim was visiting his ill grandmother, who has since recovered. In our conversation, Rahim mentioned that he felt his presence was helpful in the recovery of his grandmother and felt positive about his trip. This image acted as a way to remember his trip and time with his grandmother, but also his connection with nature. He describes:

> **Rahim:** We went to a bit of like a park, like a bit of a beach, and we came out just at the right time as the sun was setting. It was after a long day it felt very rewarding just to see the sunset. And I just thought it really does look really beautiful how the sun reflected on the water, it was very mesmerizing when you saw it in person.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how youth use photographs to witness and reconnect with nature. Much like the other youth who photographed and spoke about nature, Rahim uses the term "beautiful." In Rahim's case, there is an interconnectedness between the natural happenings he is witnessing and the travel experience he is having with his family. His family is able to connect through co-orienting in the real moment and through re-witnessing the photograph (Keorner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). It is possible that the image allowed for a strengthening of Rahim's relationship to both his family and nature. The last image shows a meal that Rahim shared with his cousins and nieces in a typical aesthetic fashion of photographing food from above. Rahim described that he had a fun day mini golfing with his family and shared this meal together afterwards. He wanted to share this photograph because "I just really like the experience I had with my own family." Rahim mentioned that his family thanked him for sharing the photograph so that they could all remember the day. Here, again, Rahim's family was able to bond over the co-orienting of a physical moment captured in an image. While Rahim's series of images continues to prove the idea that youth can connect with their families through images shared in online spaces, Rahim also created a "countervisuality" of how families should appear online. Although the three photographs above are associated with "happy" memories that continue the ideology that families should be displayed as harmonious (Lutrell, 2020; Hirsch, 1997), Rahim challenges how families are typically framed: bodies huddled together, smiling at

the camera. None of Rahim's images show bodies that are physically together; instead, they focus on moments that are co-visualized with his family members. This removes the need to embody the concept of family through specific posing structures. Though this needs to be studied further, today's youth are reframing how families are captured through images given the new "frames" of digital technology.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the complex ways in which youth shape and express their identity visually in digital spaces. The pandemic has brought about significant changes in the way people interact with each other. As demonstrated in the cases of Zara and Eva, the loss of physical connection has led to a shift in online behaviour, where social media platforms have become crucial tools for maintaining relationships and connections. In the context of Erikson's (1968) theory on identity formation, the need for social connections is an essential aspect of shaping one's identity. Social media has become a virtual "bedroom" for many young people, providing a space to gather and connect with friends digitally (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008). Chloe and Rahim used images to "recognize" (Bourdieu, 1989) their friends and, therefore, form and solidify relationships through visual and digital means. Images were also used in friendships as a form of social capital where one could only view someone's images on their profile if they were granted access (Bourdieu, 1989; Bélanger, 2017). Youth can also perform their social circles visually by posting photos where only certain people would understand the context. Family is additionally an important component of the network of relationships formed in online spaces. Although social media is often looked at as a medium that causes disconnection between families (Kushlev & Dunn, 2019; Jiang, 2018; Vaterlaus, 2022), the youth I spoke with challenged this

notion by connecting with their relatives through witnessing the same images and commemorating shared moments with photography. They also challenged typical physical orientations of how families should look in online spaces, happy and smiling at the camera Lutrell, 2020; Hirsch, 1997), by removing physical bodies from how they represented their families online and instead focusing on sharing memories with their online audiences.

As shown at the beginning of this chapter, authentically portraying oneself visually is an expectation set forward by Meta (2023a) platforms. However, what authenticity means exactly is unclear. With editing software embedded within the applications youth use, they frequently alter their images, bringing the legitimacy of the photograph into question (Sontag, 2001). The youth I spoke with formed their own understanding of authenticity within digital platforms. For example, Zara felt that presenting images in stories was more authentic than posts because they were temporary and didn't hold the same pressure to control the narrative behind the image in the same way that posts on profiles do. Meanwhile, Rahim felt that friends who posted too much risked inauthenticity because they were constantly performing their identity for their audience versus people who don't post often. In either case, the expectation that youth be "authentic" online is imprudent because the self is constantly controlled and performed, in both physical and digital spaces, based on the social setting a person is in. Through Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionist approach, we thought about how youth perform their identities to various audiences. We looked at the example of Eva, who navigated the "culture mix" she experienced online by separating her Western and Chinese audiences in differing applications because they would understand the context of images differently. Context collapse is a threat to all people, including youth, who use social media because their audience may misinterpret the images they post, affecting the way their audience sees their identity (boyd, 2016).

A reflection of the self is not only present in the images youth capture and post online, but also in the images we view online. Witnessing images shapes the way we understand the world and, therefore, ourselves (Pink, 2004). However, connecting with images is an individualized experience where youth need to feel an emotional connection to what they see in order to interact with it through digital tools, such as liking or commenting. As we move into the next chapter, which focuses on the influence of emotion rules on the images youth create, I would like to acknowledge that producing and viewing images is emotional and can arouse affective responses. The rules that govern how youth portray emotions in their photograph also affect their understanding of "self" and how they perform their identity in online spaces.

Chapter Four: Emotion Rules in the Social Media Practices of Youth

Oh, listen to me, children and you will hear about the eliminatin' of the negative and the accent on the positive and gather 'round me children if you're willin' and sit tight while I start reviewin' the attitude of doin' right – Bing Crosby

Introduction

In Western society, there is often immense fear that surrounds the topic of young people and social media use, particularly in connection to their mental health. Statistically, there has been a significant drop (22%) in Canadian youth identifying their mental health as being "good" and a rise in self-harm and suicidal ideation since pre-pandemic times (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; Government of Canada, 2022; Boak et al. 2018). While there is no denying that the mental wellness of young people is in decline, is social media to blame? Current research on the association between social media and mental health has not been definitive because while some research suggests that after two hours of social media use happiness levels decrease and issues such as cyberbullying can negatively impact mental health, social media can also provide positive possibilities such as an increase in communication and feelings of connection as well as provide opportunities for political engagement (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; boyd, 2014; Jenkins, et al., 2016). In the introduction of this dissertation, I spoke about the fact that real consequences, such as cell phone bans and lawsuits, have stemmed from negative discourses surrounding social media and youth. Terms such as "toxic" and "harm" are used in media articles to sensationalize young people's interactions with social media and incite fear in child-rearing adults (Richtel et al., 2023; Moran, 2019). I want to begin this chapter by thinking more specifically about the term

"addiction" in connection to social-based technological applications and the harm this term may cause in terms of how adults and young people understand social media use.

Much like the terms noted above, "addiction" is a term frequently equated with social media use by young users (Thompson & Hadero, 2023; Moyer 2022). This notion was echoed by nineteen-year-old Olivia, who referred to social media as "addictive" in our conversation for this project (see page 27). Dr. Ivan K. Goldberg coined the term "Internet Addiction Disorder (I.A.D.)" in the mid-90s as a joke on an online bulletin for psychiatrists and did not predict that the term would become widely developed and used as an actual diagnostic term (Flisher, 2010; Wallis, 1997). Goldberg condemned the use of the term addiction in connection to the internet during an interview with The New Yorker, where he stated, "To medicalize every behaviour by putting it into psychiatric nomenclature is ridiculous." (Wallis, 1997, para. 2). Today, someone is considered addicted if they engage in internet technologies for more than thirty-eight hours a week (Flisher, 2010). Based on these parameters, numerous academic studies suggest that an increasing number of youth are "addicted" to the internet and social media platforms, which causes a number of symptoms such as a decrease in sleep and an increase in depression and self-harm behaviours (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017; Caner et al., 2022). However, it must be acknowledged that what is considered an addiction is heavily connected to social ideas of what a person "should" be doing, and medical terms like addiction can be used as a form of bodily control (boyd, 2014; LeFrançois et al., 2013). To expand, addiction isn't associated with socially acceptable behaviour even if a youth spends an abundance of time doing one action, such as practicing a skill or reading. The term addiction, in its early 90s origin, specifically referred to drugs and alcohol, but, as shown above, has transformed into a way to pathologize any behaviour that goes against social order (boyd, 2014).

Biopower, a concept brought forward by Foucault (1990), is applicable here. Those in power, typically political figures, use the rationale that they must control their population in order to sustain life (Foucault, 1990). It is the attainment of control over a population of human bodies that Foucault (1990) saw as biopower. Foucault (1990) believed that this politically derived power over the bodies of individuals was present at "every level of the social body" (p. 141) and gave rise to capitalism and institutions, such as the police force we see today. The power that the government can exert over their constituents' bodies has created the society that we live in today and continues to control how we experience life. We can see this play out in societal reactions to youth engagement with social media. In order to “save” children from social media, federal and provincial government bodies incited restrictions on technology use, affecting young people’s rights to access digital technologies (see *The Digital Rights of Youth*). This approach is amplified by the current Western sociological view of young people, that they are in an “incomplete” state where they need to be protected and controlled (Luttrell, 2020; Matthews, 2007). When the term “addiction” is used, it triggers the assumption that a body is at risk and institutional control, such as medical or political, is warranted (LeFrançois et al., 2013). boyd (2014) argues the rhetoric of addiction paints technology as something bad and youth as incapable of having agency in connection to social media, ultimately hindering productive conversations on how to best support youth to use these types of technologies.

boyd (2014) comments on youths' engagement with social media by stating, “Most teens aren’t addicted to social media; if anything, they’re addicted to each other” (p. 80). Perhaps a more effective word for youths' connection to technology would be “entanglement” over addiction. Youth’s habitual entanglement with media creates a situation where to be disconnected is to be lost (Chun, 2016, p. 2). The idea that technology has become ingrained in

the very essence of who youth are is shared by both Tilleczek and Campbell (2019) and boyd (2014), who both state that social media is the main framework in which youth socialize. A participant from Tilleczek and Campbell's (2019) study associated being excluded from social media practices with being a "ghost" (p. 75). Here, not being a part of the network was, as Chun (2016) described, a crisis where removing oneself or not updating would result in a user's digital death. Therefore, the framing of social media as something one can be addicted to is inadequate because it is deep-rooted in the social fabric of people, youth and adults alike. It is here that I deviate from the discussion of addiction into a broader exploration of mental "wellness" within digital spaces. If social media is profoundly intertwined with the social lives of people, then it shouldn't be thought of as something you can be addicted to because it's simply a part of everyday life. However, looking at interactions on social media can contribute to discussions on mental health because it can provide insight into social rules surrounding emotional expression.

As images are a dominant form of communication within social media and a reflection of the human experience (Berger, 1972; Pink, 2007), photographs can act as a clue to how youth understand and express their feelings. This echoes the work of Arlie Hochschild (2003), who suggests that feelings act as clues to how a person emotionally interprets their experiences. Hochschild (2003), whose theories I rely on immensely in this chapter, defined emotions as a biological sense that helps people understand their relation to the world and is critical for their survival (p. 229).[17] Emotions work both cognitively, where the body signals to the brain how a person is responding to an environment through various emotional states, and physiologically because emotion is often the precursor for action (Hochschild, 2003). For example, I feel shame, so I physically bow my head in response (Ahmed, 2015; Hochschild, 2003). However, despite

[17] In this Chapter, I will use the terms "biological" and "physiological" interchangeably. This refers to the relationship between emotions and bodily capabilities.

the fact that emotions might provide clues to how a person interprets their environment, people can also disguise, hide, and control these clues (Hochschild, 2003). We might ask, why would someone want to alter the emotional signals that their body provides? Hochschild (2003) believed that people purposefully manipulate their feelings, both internally and externally, to align with social rules around "appropriate" emotional expression. This chapter aims to understand how emotions are portrayed in the images of youth in digital spaces and how youths' digital choices connect to social "feeling rules" in Western society.

Eliminating the Negative

Performing emotional expressions based on our environment is something that begins in infancy through emotional mimicry (Salvadori et al., 2021; Hess & Bourgeois, 2010). From the age of five months old, babies begin to mimic emotional expressions that they hear and see from others around them, such as smiling to indicate happiness (Salvadori et al., 2021). Notably, infants are much more likely to respond to and impersonate positive emotions like happiness over negative emotions such as sadness or anger, which is a trend that continues throughout childhood (Salvadori et al., 2021; Datyner et al., 2017). Silvan Tomkins identified several negative emotions a body is capable of feeling: shame, anger, fear, contempt, disgust, distress, and dissmell (Frank and Wilson, 2020). Tomkins claimed that emotions themselves are not something that can be learned but are an innate part of a person's psyche (Frank and Wilson, 2020). However, Tomkins noted that people are highly motivated to reduce the experience of feeling and expressing these "negative" emotions. From the emergence of a person's life as a social being, we are taught to favour the performativity of positive emotions.

Hochschild (2003) suggests that not only do parents/guardians of a child play a dominant role in their understanding of emotional performance, but that the specific manifestations of emotional control that a parent teaches their child are connected to socio-economic status. While in all levels of social class (working, middle, and upper), children are taught the importance of managing emotions, each of these subgroups prepares their child slightly differently for the emotional demands of life, with middle-class children being the most likely to be expected to control their emotions (Hochschild, 2003). Although Hochschild (2003) can be reductive in some statements, she believed that middle-class children learn that a superior's emotional needs are more important than theirs and that "feeling is tied to power and authority because it is the reason adults often give for the decisions that they make" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 158). This shows that emotion rules can be tied to class. As discussed in Chapter Three, the participants in this study were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, meaning that developmentally, they are solidifying their own understanding of their identity in both individual and collective spheres (Erikson, 1968). Unfortunately, socioeconomic status was not a demographic question I asked the participating individuals. Therefore, I cannot confirm or deny Hochschild's observations. However, this section will show that the desire to conceal negative emotions continues to be deep-rooted in the social decisions of the youths interviewed for this project. The following quotes highlight youths' responses to an inquiry about whether they are comfortable portraying negativity in images they post online:

> **Nina**: I'm kind of trying to always paint it in somewhat of a positive light or somewhat of a thing that makes sense to people, not just saying I'm angry today. I think that that's not something valuable enough for me to share with people that I care about.

Jack: No, I really like to hide that [images portraying sadness or anger].

All participants in this study indicated that they either felt less comfortable or not comfortable at all, embodying negative emotions in the images that they shared on social media. Jack provided a very direct answer in which he clearly stated that not only does he not want to post negative images, but that he likes to "hide" images that portray those feelings. The word "hide" is particularly interesting because it suggests that he is, in fact, experiencing negative feelings, but a specific choice is made to remove them from the view of his audience. Hochschild (2003) speaks about a concept called deep acting, which connects well to Jack's comment because it suggests that people act in their everyday lives in order to manage their emotions in accordance with emotion rules indicated by a social environment. Hochschild (2003) was very much inspired by the work of Irving Goffman (1959; 1986), who I introduced in Chapter Three in connection to identity performance. Goffman (1959) also equated people to actors who managed impressions of their identity by acting and performing versions of themselves depending on the specific social group or audience present. Goffman (1959) differentiated between "frontstage," where people are in a high-performance social setting, typically in public and a "backstage," which reflects a more private setting where people can act more authentically. Where Hochschild's (2003) and Goffman's (1959) theories diverge is that when it comes to emotions, people might not only perform behaviour for an audience, but they might also deceive themselves. To elaborate, a person may manipulate their own internal feelings to be more reminiscent of socially acceptable emotions within a given situation. An example provided by Hochschild (2003) is that of an unhappy bride on her wedding day who convinces herself that

she is blissful because there is a social expectation that brides are happy. While it doesn't appear that Jack is manipulating his own understanding of his emotions as the word "hide" indicates he is self-aware of potential negative feelings, he is clearly managing the display of his emotions to a public audience.

Nina's comment also produced a word of particular interest, "value." To Nina, negative emotions were not valuable enough to share with her online audience, and she feared that they might not understand her negative emotions. What this suggests is that emotional expressions can have value and can act as a form of social capital amongst a group of people. Earlier in this dissertation, I introduced Pierre Bourdieu (1989), who believes that various forms of capital work as methods of power within various groups of people in society. Many young people use images as a form of social capital to identify individuals who are a part of their inner circle by sharing pictures where only specific people can comprehend the meaning. In connection to emotions and value, symbolic capital would apply to the complexities of feelings and power within a social field.[18] The concept of symbolic capital refers to a form of capital where the value of something is socially recognized by a specific community (Bourdieu, 1989; Mead, 2020). The assumed value is placed upon the object, person, or idea by the group, and the value only exists because of the obtained recognition (Bourdieu, 1989; Mead, 2020). While emotions, at their core, are simply a part of human physiology to help people react to our environment (Hochschild, 2003), additional meaning is placed upon the performance of certain emotions. To Nina, positive feelings held significantly more value to her social group, so she chose to focus on portraying happy emotions versus negativity, which potentially could have been seen as

[18] According to Bourdieu, society can be viewed as a collection of various fields or groups of people (Bottero & Crossley, 2011; O'Hara, 2000). An individual could belong to multiple fields that overlap with each other. These fields are in a constant struggle within themselves and with each other to gain more capital in various forms which ultimately leads to more power.

devaluing to her audience. Jack and Nina were both engaging in deep emotion work tied to learned obligations around emotional expression or "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 56). Jack's attempt to hide certain feelings and Nina's proclamation that certain feelings hold more value than others show that both youths understand that there is a certain social expectation of emotional expression and that there might be a differentiation between what they actually feel and how they externally present what emotions they are experiencing. As previously stated, all youth who participated in this project expressed some disdain towards expressing certain emotions. Throughout my conversations with my participants, I found that the specific reasons why youth chose not to share certain feelings fell into two categories. One, they felt negative emotions were stigmatized, and two, they worried about their social circles, including friends and family.

Stigma

As noted above, infants mime the facial expressions of dominant adults in their lives, which forms a stepping stone to understanding social norms surrounding emotional expression (Salvadori et al., 2021; Hess & Bourgeois, 2010). As children cognitively develop, they begin to cultivate specific stigmas toward others and heavily rely on parental and adult beliefs to form these stigmas (Aboud, 2005; Whal et al., 2002). Stigmas occur when stereotypes and negative assumptions are formed about someone's identity based on observable cues and can be created on a societal level or can be an internal personal belief (Corrigan and Kosyluk, 2014; Heary et al., 2017; Goffman, 1963). In the text *Stigma: notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963) explores how stigma works in a social context. He discusses how "normals," or people who do not possess any stigmatized attributes, construct a "stigma theory" (p. 9) whereby

an ideology is constructed around stigmatized attributes that view those attributes as inferior and a threat to themselves/society. Social capital is also connected to this notion because certain attributes act as a "stigma symbol" (Goffman, 1963, p. 45), which can socially devalue and marginalize someone or a group of people. In contrast, "status symbols" are recognizable markers that increase a person's social capital, such as possessing a degree from a university. It is, however, important to note that the specifics of the stigmatic categories and symbols created might differ from social group to social group. In order to avoid being stigmatized by their social group, a person may try to hide any attributes or behaviours that are viewed negatively in order to maintain a "normal" identity. Goffman (1963; 1959) suggests that people do this by creating a virtual identity that is used in specific social situations that reflect social norms and expectations and may differ from their actual identity. This is also reflective of the prior concept discussed in this dissertation, where Goffman (1963) uses the analogy of the stage to show how people perform their identities differently depending on the audience. In either case, some people might attempt to embody specific behaviours so that they are seen as "normal," as their social audience defines it. In connection with this dissertation, expressions of sadness were viewed as an undesirable behaviour by the youth I spoke with, and they avoided expressions of negative emotions in public settings. While Nina and Jack's comments in the previous section show the desire to hide negative emotions and the value associated with positive emotions, the following quotes emphasize the role of the audience in this decision:

> **Hannah:** Yeah, it's difficult because people are going to judge you, so it's hard to showcase that side of you.

Eva: Sometimes my coping mechanism is more trying to resolve the problem, trying to overcome it myself. You have to sort of think through what you want to post a little bit more. You curate it a little bit more.

Hannah highlights the connection between the feeling of judgement from an audience and the desire to hide symbols that are stigmatized. Within Hannah's social circle, it is clear that negative emotions are viewed as a devaluing attribute and that a judgment will occur from her public audience if she shows "that side" of herself. In order to maintain a "normal" portrayal of her identity, Hannah classifies emotional expressions within digital spaces as appropriate or inappropriate and chooses which embodiments of emotions will maintain her desired social image. Eva mirrors Hannah's experience by noting that she curates what she posts to control what her audience views and how her identity will be perceived. Interestingly, Eva expresses that she handles difficult emotions and situations by dealing with them herself. If she were to display a negative emotion/experience to her public audience, then she risks being judged and devalued because of this. To negate this, she not only controls what her audience sees, much like Hannah but also makes sure to resolve the "problem" so that the stigmatized signifier no longer exists. Stigma is problematic regardless of the specific category in question because it holds direct consequences for the stigmatized, such as social isolation and marginalization (Ping et al., 2008).

While this dissertation focuses on negative emotions in a more general sense, it might be useful to think of ideas of madness and how this connects to the above comments. Foucault (1984) speaks about madness as being embedded in social morality and that social communities categorize people who transgress against socially desired attributes as mad (p. 149). The definition of what insanity or madness means shifts alongside the everchanging moral desires of

society, which are formed by those in power. For example, religious entities, such as Catholicism, once held the majority of power over determining societal values and casting away those who didn't oblige (Foucault, 1984). In the classical period, the idea of madness was strongly connected to the bourgeois agenda and the values that coincided with this group (Foucault, 1984). Acts such as resistance to work or theft were seen as performances of insanity because they violated certain social morals. Foucault (1984) argues that the idea of the asylum is the "essential nucleus of madness—a structure that formed a kind of microcosm in which were symbolized the massive structures of bourgeois society and its values" (p. 162). Although Foucault looked into the past to address the correlation between bourgeois ideals and madness, this connection still exists today. Hochschild (2003) speaks about the idea of emotional labour, which suggests that employees in certain occupations create a workplace self, controlled by both their employer's and their community's expectations of emotional conduct. For example, a barista in a coffee shop is expected to exude happiness and hospitality regardless of their authentic feelings on a given day. If that barista were to perform their job while embodying emotions of anger or sadness, they risk being considered mentally unstable and losing their means of employment.

Foucault (1984) states that "the iconographic apanage of the judge and the executioner must be present in the mind of the madman so that he understands what universe of judgement he now belongs to." (p.155). However, I argue that the idea of the judge and the executioner is not just in the minds of the insane but in the minds of all people, including youth. Hannah's proclamation that she will be judged if she shows negative emotions proves this point. The fear that someone will make negative assumptions about her identity if she posts portrayals of certain emotions and that this judgement will result in consequences is very real for Hannah and

influences how she conducts herself in online spaces. Again, while this dissertation is not specifically dealing with mental illness, it does show how the social fear of being labelled as "mad" causes youth to avoid negative emotions altogether, heavily altering what they post in digital spaces.

Photographs play an important role in the maintenance of dominant ideologies within a society. Sontag (1977) suggests that in a capitalist society, an image-based culture is a necessary component. While on the one hand, advertisement-based images push viewers into a perpetual purchasing loop, images can also subjectivize reality in a way that defines the social desires of ruling groups. Sontag states, "Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)" (p. 178). Sontag's (1977) statement is useful in connection to emotions because images put forward by users in social media applications can propagate the curation of certain feelings that align with capitalistic ideals. If a viewer only sees images of positive emotions on their screen, then they might assume that feelings of negative emotions are not normal, causing them to alter how they perform their identity online. Images also act as a form of surveillance in connection to capitalist desires because companies can look at a person's profile to assess if they will be a good worker who can control their emotions. Hochschild (2003) connects emotion work to capitalism because she suggests that "positive" emotions are a commodity within specific workspaces and controlling one's emotions to match expectations becomes a form of labour. In a LinkedIn article, it is suggested that social media images are essential in obtaining work, and they recommend that a person seeking work should "ensure that you wear a good, sparkling smile that makes you come along as a person who is more approachable, tolerant and compassionate." (Madhan, 2016, para. 3). The concept that negative emotions are to be feared

essentially stigmatizes everyone because people experience a vast array of emotions on a daily basis. From birth, children are visually influenced to favour positive emotions, which is a concept that clearly continues into youthhood through the way youth emotionally portray themselves in online spaces (Hochschild, 2003).

Family, Friends, and Social Circles

As discussed in Chapter Three, most participants in this study were within a developmental stage where deep relationships with others began to form (Erikson, 1968). Social circles, both in the context of friends and family, contribute to a youth's sense of self and digital applications are often used as a way to amplify communal connection (Erikson, 1968; boyd, 2014). Above, it was discussed that children mimic their parents' portrayal of emotions, suggesting that the control of negative emotions is a learned behaviour (Salvadori et al., 2021; Hess & Bourgeois, 2010), I would now like to dive deeper into the role personal relationships play in the omission of negative emotional expressions in images on online platforms. Family and friends play an important role in the way a person understands feeling rules within a social context (Hochschild, 2003). Through various forms of social communication, we receive reminders about feeling rules from our social circles when we are asked to account for our feelings, especially when a person's feelings don't align with social expectations (Hochschild, 2003). You may recall in my position statement that I spoke about a difficult time in my life when my son was very ill and stayed in a NICU in Toronto. When I expressed sadness to family members, they quickly reminded me that I should be happy because he was still alive. This is an example of the ways people close to us remind us of feeling rules a person is expected to follow within a social setting. In these situations, family and friends suggest the ways we "should" be

feeling and unwittingly undermine authentic emotions that stem from situations (Hochschild, 2003). Jack and Miguel's commentary speaks to peer and family interaction when it comes to displaying emotions in online image-based posts:

> **Jack:** Sometimes I just don't want my peers to know what I'm thinking sometimes, especially when it comes to sadness and frustration. Of course, I don't want to be asked a lot of questions.

> **Miguel:** I don't like sharing those things because most of my friends are adults. So whenever I post something sad they come into my DM's [direct messages] and say "What's wrong with you"?

In both scenarios brought forward by Miguel and Jack, they feared that their social circle would involve themselves in their personal emotional experiences. Jack avoided images that portrayed sadness and frustration for two reasons: 1) He didn't want his peers to know what he was thinking, and 2) He didn't want his peers to inquire deeply about his experiences. Negative emotions were a part of Jack's identity that he wished to hide from his peers and online audience. This connects back to the previous section, where I spoke about how youth control certain emotions because they fear being judged, which is a sentiment that stems from capitalistic ideals of how people should conduct themselves to be a "good" worker. For Jack, there is a need for certain emotions to be private and hidden from others, possibly because they might alter how others view him and devalue his identity. Miguel echoes Jack's comments but within the context of family. Similar to Jack, Miguel worries that if his family members or other adults within his

social circle see a post that shows a negative image, not only will they inquire about his experience, but they will question what is “wrong” with him. This shows that there is a preconceived notion that negative experiences will be viewed as “wrong” by Miguel’s' close social circle and that specific feelings will be judged. To protect his identity, Miguel avoids posting images of negative feelings at all.

Sara Ahmed (2010) speaks about families as being an object of happiness in her book *The promise of happiness*. Ahmed (2015) feels that bodies have the ability to affect and be affected and that emotional experiences are driven by social norms and “shared perceptions” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 208) that are situated within a larger cultural context. The idea of the happy family is one of these shared social conceptions that make the family itself an object of happiness and causes families to produce further affective objects that perpetuate the idea of happiness, such as family photographs. The family is considered “necessary for a good or happy life” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 46), and because of this, there is a cultural orientation towards a happy family being “good” and something one should strive for in order to achieve happiness. Parents might also push children to have a similar orientation of feeling that a good life is achieved through a happy family (Ahmed, 2010).

Hochschild (2003) also speaks about families as being a site of affective control and expectation. Hochschild (2003) challenges the notion that families act as a “relief zone” (p. 69) where one can show authentic emotions, which is similar to Goffman’s (1959) idea of the “backstage,” where in private or trusted groups, one is their more authentic self. Instead, Hochschild (2003) feels that families produced emotional obligations that can cause immense emotional work to be needed. This can be tied to cultural ideals of the “happy family” because people may engage in emotion work in order for their feelings to be more aligned with these

social expectations of how their family should be emotionally oriented (Hochschild, 2003; Ahmed, 2010). Hochschild provides the example of a parent who knows they "should" love their child because of social feeling rules. These rules cause the parent to curate their emotions in order to perform love, which is deemed an appropriate affect in this situation (Hochschild, 2003). My participant, Nina, depicts how the concept of the happy family affects her online photographic choices:

> **Nina:** I have my mom on my Instagram, so I don't post about my depression at all, even if I want to, you know.
>
> **Interviewer**: So your desire not to do that is very specific to that one relationship?
>
> **Nina:** Yeah.
>
> **Interviewer:** Would you feel comfortable telling me a little bit more about that, like why you don't want your mum to know?
>
> **Nina:** Because it's mostly from her.

Nina chose to avoid posts that depicted sadness or depression specifically because it would dismantle the idea that her family was happy. She expressed that she would be interested in posting images that communicated a range of emotions but instead curated her posts so that her mom would remain unaware of the negative feelings she was experiencing. In our conversation, Nina divulges that this is because her mom is the cause of her depression, meaning that if she posted images that showed negative feelings, she was essentially publicly outing her family as unhappy. This shows that Nina felt an emotional obligation to her family, one that she may or may not be unconscious of; in order to uphold social expectations that her family exudes

happiness, she participates in deep emotional work where she curates how she portrays her feelings online. Whether family and friends remind youth about social emotion rules or cultural orientations of the happy family drive how youth conduct themselves emotionally, close social circles clearly play an important part in upholding social expectations of emotional display.

Posting The Negative…Kind of

Although I have established that my participants generally felt uncomfortable sharing negative emotions online and that this is deeply connected to feeling rules established within a social setting, there are some exceptions to this finding that need to be explored. Hochschild (2003) speaks about "inappropriate affects" (p. 59) to describe when a person reacts to an event in a way that is not expected by their social circle. While thus far we have talked about youth participating in a general avoidance of negative emotions, there are certain circumstances where a negative emotion, such as sadness, would be considered appropriate. For example, at a funeral, it would be expected that the people in attendance would display sadness and not happiness. In regard to both negative and positive emotions, there are social codes that stipulate when certain emotions are appropriate to display (Hochschild, 2003). Hochschild (2003) speaks about correct emotional performances as being a form of "tax" within a social group (p. 224). In order to maintain membership, in good standing, and in a greater community of people, then one must portray the appropriate emotions in each experience (Hochschild, 2003). If one goes against the emotional expectations of the social group and does not pay the emotional tax, then they might be stigmatized and lose social capital.

As discussed above, emotions can act as a "stigma symbol" (Goffman, 1963, p. 45), whereby a person is devalued because this symbol is displayed to the community around them.

However, while positive emotions are typically more desirable for participants within a social group to display, technically, there is a complex dance that is performed where social actors must show different emotions but they must do so at the right time (Hochschild, 2003). Some participants spoke about the fact that while typically they don't show negative emotions on online platforms, there are certain situations where they feel showing emotions, such as sadness, would be appropriate. This section will unpack these varying "appropriate" situations as spoken about by the participants in this study. First, if there are shared emotional experiences within a social group where the negative emotion is felt collectively, then the display of this emotion would be appropriate. Second, much like the funeral example above, negative emotions exhibited in the context of death are also acceptable socially. Finally, in situations where a young person wishes to convey a negative emotion yet feels uncertain about its appropriateness, they may resort to concealing their message through the use of memes and emojis. This allows them to distance themselves from the emotion by removing its physical manifestation. The first case I would like to consider is Chloe, a nineteen-year-old female from Vancouver.

Shared Experiences

Figure 9

An image of a lonely birthday party submitted by Chloe[19]

Chloe: This photo was taken on April 3rd of 2020. It is a couple of months into the pandemic and me finally realizing that it is actually a serious situation in the world because when the COVID started, I was away. I was in Korea, and I didn't realize how actually serious this disease would become in a couple of years. And when I got back home, it was my birthday. I couldn't celebrate with my friends, so I stayed home alone, and I decided to betray my sadness and all of the thoughts that had been going in my mind through this picture of me just surrounding myself with my comfort things that I had in my house… I was mainly inspired by the works of Melanie Martinez. She's an artist, and she has a song that is called Pity Party. It's about having a birthday party without anyone around. So, I set this all up in my kitchen. I asked my mom to help me, so she bought this wonderful cake and some balloons for me. Even though I was lonely on

[19] The participant requested that I use her original image in my research and that I not alter it. She provided permission for her face to be shown.

my birthday, I could feel a little bit happy. I set up my tripod and my camera, and I was just taking the pictures using the self-timer.

Chloe's image creatively shows her loneliness on her birthday during the quarantine caused by COVID-19. With pink hues setting a contradictory tone, she sits solum-faced at a table with stuffed animals surrounding her. In our conversation, Chloe speaks about how creating this photograph acted as a way to work through her loneliness and experience happiness by doing an activity she enjoyed. Art can be used in a therapeutic fashion to not only express feelings but also help a person identify and work through personal struggles (Richardson, 2016; Malchiodi, 2005). Creative emotional expression can also open up the possibility of expressing oneself more authentically than through verbal means alone because there is a wider range of communicative tools that can be used (Malchiodi, 2005). Chloe discusses below the role aesthetics played in her quest to express her loneliness:

Chloe: Usually, if I'm trying to portray something negative, I would make use of negative space and a minimalistic style. Maybe, or sometimes no colour at all in the photography and really simple facial expressions

While creating the above photograph was generally a positive experience for Chloe and acted as a means to communicate and express herself, her aesthetic choices provide insight into how feeling rules unconsciously play a role in the visual choices youth make in online digital images. In the introduction of this dissertation, I spoke about Paul Duncum (1993), who suggests that there were various ways that children and youth used images socially, and two of these

apply to Chloe's image. The first applicable motive is emotional communication, which Chloe was able to do by using digital tools to express herself and share her feelings with a wider audience. The second motive is the use of aesthetics for visual pleasure and to reduce fear. Aesthetic choices can act as a type of language through which the creator attempts to communicate a message to their audience (Manovich, 2017). Chloe speaks about hypothetically using negative space, or the absence of an object/subject, to portray sadness as well as minimal colour. Seemingly, Chloe would choose to express this emotion through a visual "lacking" in the picture: no colour, no subject. However, the image above contradicts this statement. There are visually appealing elements in most spaces of the image, with a banner and balloons at the top and a beautifully decorated table with a cake adorning the bottom half of the image. Colour is also present with pinks, purples and blues, setting a warm visual tone. So, if Chole claims to express sadness by removing objects and colour from the image, then why are these elements so present in the above image? I believe this is connected to Duncum's (1993) proposed motive that youth use aesthetics as a way to embellish the experience of negative emotions, to make "acceptable the otherwise unacceptable" (Duncum, 1993, p. 219). In my conversation with Chloe, she notes that she wants to "betray" her sadness by surrounding herself with her comfort items, such as her stuffed animals and cake, and also by creating an image which makes her feel "a little bit happy." Is it possible that Chloe used aesthetic elements that exuded positive cues to purposely contradict her deeper message of sadness? Could this choice have been driven by feeling rules whereby Chloe used aesthetics to make a socially unacceptable emotion (sadness during a birthday party) into an acceptable one by embellishing the image with colour and physical presence? It is possible. However, in our continued conversation, Chloe also reveals that the timeline may have also played a role in her willingness to share elements of negative

emotions within a public setting. The below quote suggests that because the experience of sadness and loneliness was more communally shared during the COVID-19 pandemic, performances of these emotions may have been deemed more socially acceptable.

> **Interviewer:** I have a follow-up question a little bit. So, did you find that the pandemic and kind of knowing that other people are going through a similar experience opened up the possibility of sharing those kinds of emotions like loneliness a little bit more on social media. Or were you just comfortable doing that before?
>
> **Chloe:** I wasn't comfortable sharing how lonely I am and sad, and I think it definitely changed with the pandemic because all of us, me and my friends started to spend more time on social media. And now we're not only sharing how happy we are in our lives, but also the difficulties that we are facing because we're spending more time on social media. So, we post more pictures. I think that's what happened.

As shown in the above quote, the experience of COVID-19 and the difficulties of this time period shifted Chole's perspective on her comfort level in sharing negative emotions online. Chole felt that this was both because her social circle had shared trauma from facing the isolation and fear that enveloped the pandemic and because this drove them to use social media as more of a communicative tool. The COVID-19 pandemic can be classified as a collective trauma whereby a large-scale event negatively affects a population of people and impacts their identity both personally and communally (Garfin, 2020; Alexandar et al., 2004). People can be affected by a collective trauma in both a direct manner, such as by contracting COVID-19, and through

indirect means, such as viewing people being ill in images on media outlets (Garfin, 2020; Holman et al., 2014). While viewing images of the pandemic on social media can contribute to psychological distress (Garfin, 2020; Garfin et al., 2020), youth also used social media to continue communication with their social circles during the crisis to reduce loneliness during the pandemic (see Chapter Three). Chloe agreed with the other participants discussed in previous sections, who felt that social media became a source of social connection during the pandemic. Although the pandemic may have been experienced differently from person to person, such as rural and homeless youth having less online access to education and health tools (Samji et al., 2022; Noble et al., 2022; Chaiton et al., 2021), the event was generally seen as challenging across the world. Because sadness and loneliness were experienced on a large and known scale, it was socially deemed that expressions of these emotions were appropriate and, therefore, acceptable when posting about the pandemic online. It would be worthy to further explore if this has shifted post-pandemic or if there is a lingering effect in terms of more widely accepted emotional expressions of negative emotions. This also shows that it is possible for a society to shift its cultural acceptance of negative emotions, but that it must be done on a collective scale.

Death

Above, I spoke about death as being a unique event where negative emotions are deemed socially acceptable and are actually expected to be experienced (Hochschild, 2003). Much like COVID-19 discussed above, death and the loss of loved ones is a collective experience in the sense that everyone will face this event at some point in their lives. The shared relatability of loss may contribute to the orientation toward the acceptance of negative emotions in connection to death events (Hochschild, 2003). Social media applications, such as Facebook and Instagram,

offer a unique lens for understanding people's emotional reactions to death because digital spaces have become a part of the Western death ritual (Karppi, 2018). Karppi (2018) estimates that approximately three million users of social media die every year, and the digital tools available within social media applications mediate the way living people interact with elements of death and loss. Karppi (2018) uses both the concept of biopower, which emphasizes the control political parties have over the bodies of their constituents (Foucault, 1990) and noo-politics, which focuses on the politics of cognitive capacities such as information and communication (Lazzarato, 2006), to speak about the political complexities of death within social media applications. Karppi (2018) argues that social media entities hold an immense amount of power in terms of controlling the way people grieve and memorialize the deaths of others.

Facebook allows for accounts to be memorialized after a person dies so that their friends and family can engage in a communal grieving process (Karppi, 2018; Sandberg, 2019). Metas website states that "Over 30 million people view memorialized profiles every month to post stories, commemorate milestones and remember those who have passed away" (Sandberg, 2019, para. 4). Karppi (2018) highlights that it is significantly easier to memorialize an account after a person dies than to have the account taken down because social media conglomerates want people to stay engaged with the application. [20] To expand, If the social act of remembering and grieving a person occurs within social media platforms, then people will be obligated to remain a part of the network in order to participate in this process. But why would companies such as Meta need to control how an individual or group of people grieve? Karppi (2018) claims that this is connected to the monetization of data: although a deceased person no longer holds value in

[20] A person's account is automatically memorialized when Facebook learns about a person's death, but if family would like a person's account to be taken down after a person's death they must show documentation such as power of attorney documentation and an obituary (Karppi, 2018; Facebook, 2024)

terms of tracking their online behaviour and selling that data to other companies, keeping their network emotionally tied to the platform holds great financial and informational value. While themes, including the monetization of data, will be explored further in Chapter Five, the emotional complexities of death and its interrelatedness to social media are important to think about here. Death itself was not a dominant theme discussed by my participants, but Rahim offers insight into how death and grieving are connected to socially determined feeling rules as well as the mediation of death rituals through platform structures:

> **Rahim:** There's actually a quote about social media that's like social media is like a highlight reel of your life or something along those lines. And that's not necessarily true for me. I do post. Like I posted for example, when my dog died, I posted a picture of my dog. But I believe in that circumstance it's because all my fans who follow me could also say condolences to my dog. But I think in general speaking, I don't like posting sad or like something negative because it'll make everyone around me feel negative. It's like it's going to have a ripple effect.

Rahim specifically states that he does not typically post negative emotions online but felt comfortable doing so in the event of his dog's death. A choice to post an image of his deceased dog was made by Rahim so that his followers could participate in giving condolences and share memories of Rahim's beloved pet. Interestingly, Rahim reveals that his reluctance to continuously post sad images stems from a fear of negatively affecting others' emotional well-being. While emotional contagion, the idea that one person can arouse an emotion in another person (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021), will be explored below, Rahim's statement shows

that death is an event where typical social rules around feelings are altered. Rahim usually wishes to avoid affecting his followers with negative emotions through images in online spaces, but when a death occurs, this rule is overridden because it has become socially normative to memorialize death through social media applications. On Meta's website, it speaks to the emotional complexities of death and memorialization on social media where it states:

> "In addition to creating supportive tools, we also hope to minimize experiences that might be painful…we use AI to help keep it [images of the deceased] from showing up in places that might cause distress, like recommending that person be invited to events or sending a birthday reminder to their friends" (Sandberg, 2019, para. 8)

Both in Meta's and Rahim's statements, there is a blatant reminder that even when negative emotions are deemed socially acceptable, there is a balance between what should and should not be expressed publicly. To expand, Rahim wants to achieve the opportunity for his friends to talk about the death of his pet, but he generally wants to avoid the "ripple effect" of sadness because, to Rahim, the experience of sadness is seen as generally negative. In Meta's statement, they want people to memorialize the deaths of others on social media platforms because it keeps them emotionally tied to the technology (Karppi, 2018), but Meta wants to avoid elongating negative emotional sensations by reminding people of the losses they have experienced, which is contradictory. Could this be because if a person were to feel negative emotions for a long period of time, then it could affect their ability to be a "good" worker? The capitalistic ties to a desirable balance of emotion seem to shine through here. If the structure of social media platforms controls our intellectual and emotional experiences, it seems to echo a general emotional rule that

negative emotions are acceptable but only up to the point in which they keep a person connected to the technology. Otherwise, there is a reversion back to fearing negative emotions.

Hiding in Plain Sight

Social Steganography

When youth express negative emotions within a digital space but only want it to be communicated to specific audiences, they may use social steganography to achieve this. Social steganography is where a person uses shared knowledge and cues to hide a message in plain sight (boyd, 2014; Gurunath et al., 2021). While this is a practice people have engaged with for centuries, such as messages being tattooed onto the scalps of slaves in ancient Greece to invisible ink pens in the 1900s, social steganography can now be used in digital spaces through a variety of techniques: song lyrics, memes, quotes (boyd, 2014; Chatfield, 2013). The technique of social steganography allowed my participants to communicate their feelings only to a select group of individuals through the means of covert language or symbols that only a specific audience could understand. boyd (2014) found that youth typically want to share information about the drama of their everyday lives, but only with those who are a part of their inner social circle. This means that in order to maintain their privacy when publicly posting about a private matter, any encoded information used in public social spaces must be hidden from those outside of a specific subgroup (boyd, 2014). Juan expresses that while hiding his “main message” is essential to controlling public opinions of himself, the ability to externally communicate his feelings gives him emotional relief:

Juan: At times, you may feel it yourself, but you have to hide the main message.

> Let's say, for example, public opinion on relationships and breakups. You have to hide the message…but you feel relieved, don't you, when you convey that message to yourself.

Emotional turmoil caused by the ending of relationships is a common event spoken about by youth in connection to social steganography, both from my own participants as well as the youth in danah boyd's study (2014). An example provided by boyd (2014) was Carmen, a seventeen-year-old who used song lyrics to express her sadness after a breakup, a practice echoed by Elena, shown below. While the connection between social steganography and breakups is clear, why is this an event that warrants hiding? Juan states that public opinion is what drives his need to conceal certain messages from his public online audience because it may affect their opinion of him. As discussed above, displaying negative emotions, especially within certain contexts, is a stigmatized symbol whereby a person's social capital could be affected by displaying these feelings (Goffman, 1963; Hochschild, 2003). Within the specific context of a breakup, the fact that an intimate relationship was dismantled may signal to an audience that a person is "undesirable," which could negatively impact their overall stance within their social group (Goffman, 1959). However, given that social steganography allows messages to be understood by specific social groups and not others, I believe it's more likely that the need to hide emotional messages is connected with the stigmatization of negative emotions, particularly by adults who may overreact and hystericize over the expression of certain emotional experiences (boyd, 2014; Hochschild, 2003).

Juan also notes that having the opportunity to express his feelings in a covert manner provided him with a sense of relief. There is a scientific neurological reason for this occurrence.

When a person expresses their feelings, the amygdala, which triggers a flight-or-fight reaction, reduces its activity (Lieberman et al., 2007). Through the act of socially articulating our feelings, we physically become calmer, which explains Juan's sense of reprieve after externalizing his emotions. This means that communicating one's feelings could have potentially positive effects, even if steganographic messaging is used. There are, however, dangers to this form of communication, such as losing control of the information. To expand, I will return to boyd's (2014) participant, Carmen, whose mother often overreacted to the emotional tones of her posts. In Carmen's case, her attempt to hide a message failed because her mother, who was outside of the intended audience, was able to decipher the message but took it out of context, assuming that Carmen was suicidal when this was not the case. Here, a context collapse occurs because a person who is not the intended audience views the posts from a place of misunderstanding, causing the poster to lose control of the impression they wish to leave online (boyd, 2014). However, my participant Elena highlighted another potential issue: What if the intended audience doesn't pick up on the message at all?

> **Elena:** I sort of express myself in social media quotes. When I'm sad, I'm going through something really tough, a breakup or something like that….I hope that you know when someone sees it, that they'll reach out and see what's what is going on… It's sad because I'm pushing for people to reach out, and then they don't reach out, and I feel bad.

Figure 10

A social media quote submitted by Elena

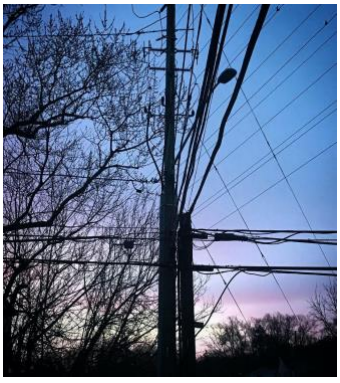
Elena used a quote by Luke Chmilenko to signal to her social media audience that she needed support but did not receive a response, prompting her to feel worse psychologically. When youth are attempting to cope with an issue or event that is causing mental health stress, they appraise the situation in two ways: 1) They assess how the situation may be harmful to them, and 2) They evaluate potential resources (Pimenta et al., 2021). Youth are often encouraged to reach out to their friends when they are experiencing a mental health crisis, yet youth are not necessarily equipped to provide support to peers (Pimenta et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2011). Pimenta et al. (2021) found that when youth were confronted with a peer who was experiencing mental health issues, they generally saw the idea of helping them as positive, but they didn't feel they were an appropriate resource, often needing to seek advice from adults to help them navigate the situation. Stigma was also discussed as a factor that might impact a youth reaching out for help when needed (Pimenta et al., 2021). While it is possible that Elena was simply not effective in portraying her message clearly to her desired social group, it is also conceivable that her social circle did receive her message but did not feel able to respond to her call. In either case, social rules around how we portray feeling potentially impacted both Elena's choice to ask for help in a clandestine manner and her peer's lack of response. Lastly, I would

like to look at Eva, who used an aesthetically pleasing image to portray a difficult time in her life:

> **Eva:** So the reason that I took it was because I had pulled an all-nighter at school right before, and I'm on my way back to my student house basically, like, to brush my teeth and go back to school for more class. It was a just a really rough period of my life dealing with my thesis stuff. It was really, really stressful for me, and I really needed a lot of time on it. So I was kind of tired, and I didn't really know why I was doing this, just like it was still dark. And now it's like the day is starting, and I'm exhausted. So in that mindset, coming like riding, hopping off the bus, I look up to the sky and I see the view most beautiful view of the sky… and that just made me feel like I came alive in that moment, and I'm like, I really needed to take the photo.

Figure 11

Image of a morning sky submitted by Eva



Eva made the photographic decision to capture the morning sky to commemorate a difficult time in her life. The warm hues in the background of the photograph show a dawning new day, contrasting the dark shadowed lines in the forefront of the image. There are a few

noteworthy elements to Eva's image. Firstly, the negative emotions associated with this image would only be understood by specific subgroups of Eva's friends, particularly those who knew Eva was in school and could empathize with the fact that a lack of sleep and high-stress situations were dominant during various seasons of higher education. To onlookers not in tune with the realities of Eva's life, they would simply see an image of a morning sky and would lack the contextual cues to understand the negative experiences associated with the image, making Eva's photograph an example of social steganography (boyd, 2014). Eva's photograph is also reminiscent of Chole's (pg. 116) above, who used pleasant aesthetic elements to embellish a generally negative message. The visual beauty of the sky pulls attention away from the socially "unpleasant" messages that are connected to this image. While using social steganography techniques allows for youth to express a broader range of emotions in a public setting while still maintaining privacy, the fact that negative emotions need to be "hidden" speaks to the deeper social rules embedded into the way youth perform emotions. Using these techniques suggests that youth only feel comfortable speaking about certain emotions with specific, trusted audiences and that there is a lack of a more general acceptance of negative emotional experiences.

Emojis

While this dissertation focuses on digital photographs, emojis, a digital pictorial language, were also discussed by my participants as being a part of their visual communicative toolbox and, therefore, important to consider in connection to emotional expression. Emojis are a hybridized visual communication system because they utilize both pictographs, which represent an object, and ideographs, representing a concept or emotion (Ong, 2009). Emoticons were a primitive version of emojis beginning in the 1980s, where typed symbols were placed together to

create images of faces (ex. :-(to show sadness) (Pardes, 2018; Riordan, 2017). My participant Zara talked about still using emoticons when she stated, “I, in fact, use more emoticons than emojis.” She double-checked that I understood what she meant by explaining the process, “Emoticons are when you make them yourselves using punctuation and like letters and style of expression.” She explains that her choice is because she feels emoticons are more aesthetically “cool” when Zara is chatting with her friends. Zara is more of an exception than a rule in terms of using emoticons to communicate her emotions, with statistics showing that only 4% of digital messages actually contain emoticons (Riordan, 2017; Riordan & Kreuz, 2010). However, both emoticons and emojis, which became available in 1999 (Pardes, 2018), can be used to express emotional experiences.

Emojis expanded pictorial digital communication from punctuation-based emoticons to pictograms that represent both emotions and expressions (ex., sadness or boredom) as well as objects (ex., a trophy or a champagne bottle) (Riordan, 2017). Emojis can be used to represent the actual object/subject they depict or can be symbolic representations of something dependent on a social or cultural code (Riordan, 2017; Stark and Crawford, 2015). To expand, a cat emoji can represent a physical cat or female genitalia. The symbolic use of emoticons and emojis in connection with a textual message has an effect on how the reader perceives the emotional context of the message, making emoticons and emojis an important instrument in affectual communication (Riordan, 2017; Lour et al., 2010). Lour et al. (2010) found that if a sad face followed a rather neutral message, the reader perceived it as negative, ultimately affecting the emotion being communicated. It is also important to note that because emotions rely on nonverbal cues, there is not always a clear translation from writer to reader, and context collapses can occur (Riordan, 2017). Riordan (2017) also suggests that emotion work, such as a

person managing how they perform their emotions to reflect social rules around feelings (Hochschild, 2003), also comes into play with emojis and emoticons. For example, if someone posts online about having a bad day and their friend responds with a sad face because they socially felt that this was an appropriate response then the friend would be engaging in emotion work.

In this section, I would like to continue the conversation of emotion work by looking at how youth use emojis and emoticons to communicate feelings with friends online. Let's consider the following vignettes:

> **Chloe:** Yes, I do [use emojis]. Usually, it's a crying emoji and a heart. It's like, Oh, I love this picture…Usually, I only leave happy comments [referring to emojis]on the pictures that I like.[21]

> **Matteo:** I like a sad face, and then like no expression. [22]I like it….I feel comfortable using it. It's that, you know, it is a kind of like emotion. It's pretty easy, you know, it is not a happy mode, and it's not a sad mode.

> **Zara:** I have slowly developed my own emoji language as well… So, for example, two quirks I do have is that one reacting with the heart. I always use a blue one or a pretzel.[23] It will never be a red one, which is the default. So I do use them for reactions, OK, or for

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21 😭❤️

22 😐😔

23 💙🥨

like very specific contexts. But in general, if you're reacting to a text, I will use these two. I do have a distinction between when I use the blue heart and when I use the pretzel. Well, those are the two main reactions I use to substitute for the general hard one. Again, it's just personal preference, but also the idea that I want to have like a standard of communication and I find that a red one it has more implications. It can be taken as a bit too serious, depending again, because there's a broad spectrum of people you communicate with. And I don't want to have to be self-conscious about it in a big way. So having a blue one just eliminates that out of the equation…. crying emojis were never to actually express sadness. OK. Is like, oh, no, like that, but never like. I'm very upset emotionally, just they can oh, no kind of situation or in an ironic situation.

In each of the cases above, my participants clearly show that emojis are used as a form of pictorial communication in terms of emotion but that social rules around emotional expression still impact how they are used. In my conversation with Chloe, she talks about using the crying face and red heart most frequently, seemingly suggesting that she often expresses the emotions of sadness and love. However, she quickly contradicts this conclusion by stating that she only leaves happy comments through emojis on images she likes. Clarity as to why Chloe claims to use the sad face yet only leaves happy comments might lie in Zara's answer. Zara states that sad emojis are "never to actually express sadness" and that sadness is only ever expressed in irony. Therefore, it's possible that while Chloe uses the sad face often, she isn't actually expressing deep sadness, which is why she recalls only leaving happy comments. Matteo takes on a similar mindset when using emojis, where, despite using both a sad face and a neutral face and associating the use of emojis with emotions, he continues on to state that using emojis to express

feelings is “easy” because there is a neutrality to them. In all three of the above cases, there is a social understanding that sadness is a negated emotion and that even when it’s expressed through an emoji, the reader comprehends it as a faded version of itself: either it’s neutral or ironic, but not “real” in the sense that deep negative emotions are being felt and communicated by the poster. Hochschild (2003) states that “rules as to the type, intensity, duration, timing, and placing of feelings are societies guidelines, the prompting of an unseen director” (p. 85). Sadness expressed through emojis is often dismissed as trivial and not given the space to be recognized as a legitimate emotion. This reinforces social norms that discourage the expression of negative emotions.

Zara’s comments on how she negotiates expressions of love in a public space are also important to acknowledge here. While there is a social presumption that sadness, expressed through emojis, is a minimized and faded version of itself, love seems to have the opposite effect. Zara states that using a red heart, which indicates love, can have serious implications in terms of how her audience perceives the comment. Zara indicates that where sadness is not taken seriously by a public audience, love is, and the use of a red heart can easily be taken out of context, given the wide range of followers she has for her digital accounts. We can return here to the concept of impression management discussed in Chapter Three through the theories of Goffman (1959) and boyd (2014). People follow social rules to make performative decisions about how they will present themselves to create a desired impression of themselves in the eyes of a specific audience (Goffman, 1959). Digital spaces can be particularly complex in terms of impression management because various audiences might be interacting with a person at the same time, but different performative decisions would be made if these groups were separate (boyd, 2014). In Zara’s case, while some groups from her followers list might understand her

hypothetical use of a red heart, others might not and make assumptions about her identity and experiences that don't match the impression she wants to leave. To avoid this situation, she uses a blue heart or a pretzel to minimize the emotional connotation that sits behind a red emoji heart. She is attempting to indicate that she loves something, but not deeply. In all of the discussed cases, there is a clear intersection between social rules that surround emotional expression and pictorial-based communication.

Emotional Contagion

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that controlling one's behaviour in terms of emotional expression is based on social rules associated with emotional performances and is learned by children (Salvadori et al., 2021; Hochschild, 2003). For example, babies mimic the facial expressions of the adults around them (Salvadori et al., 2021), and parents often teach children to control their emotions based on the needs of the parent's work environment (Hochschild, 2003), suggesting that adults in authoritative positions hold influence over how children understand emotion rules. However, while feeling rules can affect the way someone performs emotions, it is also possible to socially affect the emotions someone feels through a process called emotional contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Nickerson, 2023; Hatfield, 1993). When a person witnesses another person expressing an emotion, their body reacts with a physiological and neurological response where the autonomic nervous system creates neural pathways that mimic the emotional state being observed (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Prochazkova & Kret, 2017).[24] Therefore, people have an unconscious instinct to align their emotional expressions with those around them, causing their own emotional arousal within their bodies; emotions are contagious (Hatfield, 1993; Herrando & Constantinides, 2021). Hatfield (1993) suggests that

[24] It is important to note, however, that each person's reactions may not be precisely the same. For instance, if I witness someone crying, my body will mimic the emotion neurologically so that I understand what I am seeing, but this may create a range of responses, such as laughing or crying. In either case, my body is affected by the emotions I witness.

mimicking the emotions of others is an essential social process because it creates empathy and synchronicity within a social group. However, while face-to-face interactions have been widely studied in connection with emotional contagion (Prochazkova & Kret, 2017; Hatfield, 1993; Manera et al., 2013), research also suggests that emotional contagion can occur through non-face-to-face mediums such as films, images, and digital communications (Weber & Quiring, 2019; Trautmann et al., 2018; Choi & Kim, 2021).

The communicative nature of social media applications has made them a prime technological artifact where emotional contagion among people in non-face-to-face interactions can be studied (Choi & Kim, 2021; Kramer et al. 2014; Ferrara and Yang, 2015). The most famous and highly controversial study was done by Kramer et al. (2014), where the Facebook News Feeds of 689,003 people were purposefully altered for one week to test how seeing certain emotional expressions (positive or negative) affected the emotional tone of subsequent posts. The researchers ran two simultaneous experiments where half of the participants had the positive content in their News Feeds reduced, and the other half had negative content reduced. Kramer et al. (2014) found that when people were exposed to positive content, they were more likely to also post emotionally positive messages, and a similar pattern occurred with negative posts. This suggests that emotional contagion is possible within social media frameworks on a large scale, even without direct interaction with another person (ex., a direct comment or instant message). However, this experiment has been criticized heavily due to the lack of informed consent obtained by the participants and the possibility that psychological harm was caused to those whose news feeds were adjusted to portray more negatively toned posts (Shaw et al., 2016; Bradshaw, 2014).

While Kramer et al.'s (2014) experiment shows the possibility for emotional contagion to occur on social media platforms, it focused heavily on text-based posts. With social media applications having a highly visual framework, it is also important to consider image-based interactions and the emotional exchanges that can occur through pictorial communication. When an individual interacts with an image online, they feel what they see and, therefore, emotionally participate in their online community through photographs (Hirsch, 2012; Rose, 2001). According to Jill Bennett (qtd. in Hirsch, 2012), "images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion" (p.39). Bennett (qt. in Hirsch, 2012) suggests that while taking an image entails emotions and embodiment, a person viewing an image draws from their own experiences to mimic the witnessed moment within their bodies. The emotions emitted from a photograph are contagious through a psychological process where neurological shifts and connections stem from the interaction (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Prochazkova & Kret, 2017). This section will address youths' views on image-based emotional contagion on social media platforms and how emotional contagion intersects with feeling rules. Three main findings will be discussed: 1) That youth will use images to purposefully cause an emotional response in their desired audience. 2) That youth are aware of emotional contagion and specifically avoid certain emotional tones in posts to avoid harming others. and 3) This awareness also applies to themselves, where youth avoid specific categories of images to avoid negative emotional arousal.

Causing Emotions in Others

Most youth who participated in this research showed an awareness that emotional contagion could occur when viewing posts in both visual and textual formats. As Rahim stated, "It's a big positive feedback loop. I became positive, positive because I posted something, and then they became positive." While Rahim's explanation deals specifically with positive emotions, his description of online emotional exchanges as being a "feedback loop" is useful for an array of emotional experiences. Rahim is correct in that when one person views an image, they might have an embodied emotional reaction (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Prochazkova & Kret, 2017), and then if the original person chooses to share the image, then they can "infect" their entire network with emotion. Emotions spreading through networks of social groups have been studied outside of social media, whereby face-to-face interactions between friends can affect not only the people in direct contact with the initial emotions but up to three degrees of separation (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).[25] While in-person interactions can cause a domino effect of emotions in a community, the widely networked nature of online communities can make this occur on an even larger scale (Kramer et al., 2014). In the following conversations, the youth wanted to cause an emotional reaction in either an individual or a community of people through their images:

> **Ahmed:** I posted this because I had a girlfriend that loved pink. So, I just posted it to make her happy… She ended up liking it really good.

[25] This would look like a friend of a friend of a friend. This was a longitudinal study following 4739 people from 1983 to 2003 to understand how happiness spreads in a community.

Figure 12

Image of a pink flame (originally from The Purge) submitted by Ahmed

Miguel: I posted this after the pandemic. I posted this on a Friday. Friday is always a happy day for everyone because they know they are going to be free on Saturday and Sunday. I wanted people to feel happy and not stressed because were coming into the weekend.

Figure 13

Image of a Happy Friday Adobe stock image submitted by Miguel

Nina: I just wanted to be creepy. I mean, some people look at it, and maybe get PTSD from university or something. It's called the humanities wing; a lot of people say that it gives off Maze Runner vibes. I don't know if you watch that, but it's like it's a whole movie when the society is or is surrounded by three walls. So that's the real thing. It's really like the main building, so it's like really quite old. And I am not sure I want to give off a liminal space vibe. Hence, the black and white I have the picture and color, but it looks worse somehow.

Figure 14

Image of a University classroom submitted by Nina

Where Ahmed had a specific intended audience for his image, Nina and Miguel posted an image to infect their network as a whole with an envisioned emotion. However, given the networked nature of social media, there is no way for the youth to identify exactly who saw their images and the impact the image may have had on the viewer (Kramer et al., 2014; Fowler & Christakis, 2008). There are technical options on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to share images privately through direct messaging capabilities where the interaction

would be directed at one person versus a network, but each of these images were shared in a public setting with Ahmed's friend being tagged in the image to bring her attention to the posting of the image. Ahmed chose to share the above image with his friend based on information he knew about her to achieve his desired emotional effect; she enjoys pink, therefore, the image will make her happy. What is particularly interesting about Ahmed's image selection is that it comes from the horror movie The Purge (2013), where American citizens have twelve hours to commit any crime they would like with no consequences, including murder. With its connection to a horror film, it can be assumed that the original emotional intention of the image would be to arouse fear in its viewers. However, Ahmed's intention contradicts this, and he imbues new meaning into the image, making the focus of the image on the pink hues and the happiness it might bring his friend. Given the multiple emotional goals placed upon this photo and the networked nature of the image, it is possible that while Ahmed's friend had a positive emotional reaction to viewing the image, others in his network may not have.

Both Nina and Miguel wanted to infect their network in a broader sense with their images. However, while Miguel's image deals with a general cultural understanding of the weekend being associated with happiness, Nina's image is more specific to people who went to university and could empathize with the image. In all of the images, aesthetic tones are used that reflect the emotional intensity of the image. Miguel's image shows bright colours with a warm undertone, where as Nina's is black and white with high contrasts, making the image seem dark and dreary, and Ahmed selected his photo based on the bright pink hues. While Miguel and Ahmed's images were found on the internet, Nina speaks about how the editing of her image was done on purpose to give it "liminal space vibes" and make it "creepy." Aesthetics acts as a type of visual language that the above participants clearly apply to direct their viewers to specific

emotional experiences (Manovich, 2017). We can connect this to “feeling rules” (Hochschild, 2003) because each of the images, with a desired emotional reaction, acts as a rule reminder to the viewer on how they should feel. For example, Miguel’s image reminds people that social rules indicate that they “should” feel happy on a Friday. Each of the participants had a prior expectation of how their viewers should feel by looking at the image and using aesthetics to communicate their intention.

Protecting People From Emotions

Adolescence is a prime developmental period where youth are highly likely to mimic their friend’s emotions and behaviour (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). This may be because they are in a developmental stage where they are forming their own identity and deepening their peer and familial relationships (Erikson, 1968). The contagious nature of emotions and behaviours amongst peer groups is important to think about in the context of social media because youth predominantly use online spaces to connect with their peers (boyd, 2014, Turkle, 2011). Emotional contagion stems from the ability to feel empathy and sympathy, where one is able to share the emotional experience of another through bodily reactions (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Hatfield et al., 1994). Emotional contagion has the possibility of causing negative reactions in youth, such as increasing delinquent behaviour and suicidal ideation (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Gould et al., 2003). However, youth in this study used their prior knowledge of emotional contagion to “protect” their networks of peers from negative experiences. The following quotes highlight this:

Hannah: Well, social media is depressing enough. I don't want to put people down and stuff like that. Yeah. So, my main reason why is it's very depressing. And I don't think people want to be sad, angry, or frustrated online, so yes.

Nina: I wanted to share images so people can have a glimpse into my life, but not that I wanted to make them feel a negative way. So overall, I think I mainly tried to post funny things and happy things, but I also wanted to share with them when I had my downsides. But also, I don't want them to feel sorry for me. I don't want them to feel that they're responsible for, like, trying to comfort me. So I think trying to tell them that I'm OK, but this is what I've been through. Kind of that point, I think, is kind of about distancing myself in that way. Yeah, distancing the negative emotion…so they're safe from it in a way.

Juan: If you use them [images]correctly, you know, during the COVID pandemic. You know, some of us became depressed. So, the online images and what you post would act if you know the right materials and act as a source of motivation, a source of relieving yourself from such depression, a kind of mental health solution.

Above, I spoke about the fact that displaying negative emotions is stigmatized and often seen as a performative action that devalues a youth within their peer group (Hochschild, 2003; Goffman, 1986). Miguel even suggested that his friends and family would question what was "wrong" with him if he posted negative images (see pg. 111). However, the conversations in this section suggest that for some, the decision to avoid negative posts goes deeper than just their

own desire to preserve how others view them. The youth above display empathy towards their audience and an understanding that what they post might cause negative emotions in their viewers. Hannah clearly articulates that she is concerned about her network of friends and doesn't want to "put them down" through negative imagery on her social media. Nina felt that she was keeping her friends and family "safe" by avoiding emotionally negative posts. Nina also mentions that she doesn't want her friends to feel sorry for her when she posts about experiencing something negative. On one hand, this could indicate an attempt to control how her friends view her, corresponding with the previously mentioned finding that youth avoid negativity as a form of impression management (Goffman, 1986). However, I also discussed how youth often don't feel that they are an appropriate resource for their peers when they express mental health concerns (Pimenta et al., 2021), and therefore, it is possible that Nina recognized that her peers would not be comfortable being a source of emotional reprieve displaying further empathetic decisions.

Juan also uses the idea of emotional contagion to offer an interesting solution for those experiencing mental health concerns. The youth community has been facing an increase in mental health concerns with more than 4 million youth calling Kids Help Phone in 2020 to get professional assistance with their mental health, compared to 1.9 million in 2019 (Yousif, 2020). Hospitalizations and prescription medications associated with mental health disorders have also increased since 2016 (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022). Juan suggests that by viewing positive images online, a psychological reaction will occur that will act as relief from uncomfortable negative emotions. Kramer et al. (2014) and Fowler & Christakis (2008) both suggest that it is possible to infect others with happiness, meaning that this solution might have validity. More research, particularly the views of youth, is needed on how digital spaces can be

used as a conduit in aiding youth through mental health crises. However, given the context of this dissertation, I must question: While blasting social media with positive images could make for a happier society, could it also further perpetuate social ideologies that suggest other emotions are not valid?

Accentuating the Positive/Conclusion

I have spent most of this chapter exploring how youth avoid posting images on social media that portray negative emotions because it can undesirably impact the way others see them (Goffman, 1986). This is because social rules around feelings inform a social group on not only what feelings they should show to others but also when certain feelings are appropriate (Hochschild, 2003). My participant, Nina, spoke about the fact that she saw negative posts about her feelings as not valuable enough for her online audience, and Hannah and Eva also felt that performances of negative emotions are symbolically stigmatized, whereby people witnessing their image would judge them in a negative way (Goffman, 1986). This shows that youth make decisions about their emotional displays online based on preconceived notions of the social capital certain emotions hold. Parents and close friends often act as catalysts for feeling rules because they might ask youth to account for their feelings (Hochschild, 2003). For example, if a youth experiences a difficult moment, a person in their close social circle might suggest they "look at the bright side" or question the negative feelings they may express. My participants indicated that their family and friends were a driving force behind curating the display of their images, not only because they feared how their social circle would view them after performing negative emotions but because indications of unhappiness might go against social displays of a "happy family" which is tied to cultural expectations of familial harmony (Ahmed, 2010).

When youth do choose to post images that accentuate negative feelings, certain boundaries and stipulations exist in connection to these choices. For example, if the "negative" image is in connection to a collective experience, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or loss, then it is considered acceptable (Garfin, 2020; Alexandar et al., 2004). Even in these instances where performances of negative emotions are acceptable, my participants embellished their feelings with bright aesthetics to tone down the emotional quality of their image. Youth also used techniques such as social stenography, where emotional expression lay in hidden messages, in the hope that only certain anticipated people could decode the message while others in the audience would be none the wiser (boyd, 2014; Gurunath et al., 2021). Even when emojis are used by youth to express emotions, which separates the youth from embodying their feelings to a public audience, the emotional weight of the emoji is underplayed. As stated by Zara, "crying emojis were never to actually express sadness". This highlights that even when youth engage in conveying negative emotions, feeling rules control when negative emotions are appropriate; otherwise, emotions must be veiled or understated.

The youth in this study showed a profound awareness of the fact that emotions can be physiologically transferred from one person to another and that social media can act as a conduit for emotional contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Nickerson, 2023; Hatfield, 1993). Youth use aesthetics to create emotional tones that would be intentionally transferred to their audience, such as feeling happiness on a Friday. However, each of the images discussed in the emotional contagion section had a specific desired emotional reaction, meaning that there was an expectation that their audience would follow certain "feeling rules." Youths also avoided posting negative images online because they felt that they could impact their social circles negatively through emotional transference. Therefore, they believed that they were keeping their family

"safe" by stopping them from "catching" negative emotions. While social rules around emotions clearly impact how youth portray (or avoid) undesirable feelings, I would like to end this chapter by thinking about the opposite of negative emotions: happiness.

In Sarah Ahmed's (2010) text *The promise of happiness*, she speaks about happiness as being "the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose" (p. 1). But what is it that youth should be aiming for? According to a study by UNICEF (2019), forty-five percent of youth were not highly satisfied with their lives, and twenty-seven percent felt sad or hopeless, meaning that a significant portion of Canadian youth have not "found" happiness. Much like rules around displays of negative emotions, happiness is indicated by social signifiers of what we should and should not be feeling, of what is good and bad (Ahmed, 2010; Hochschild, 2003). To Ahmed (2010), social rules not only suggest that happiness is what people should strive for but also indicate what should make us happy. In a previous section, I discussed how family is culturally associated as an object that should make us happy and is a notion that is passed down from parent to child (Ahmed, 2010). One of my participants, Nina, expressed that her family caused her to be depressed and not happy and that she hid this fact from her public audience. When a person lacks happiness, they "experience the world as an alien" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 12) because they are out of sync with the expectations of the social world. Objects can become socially bonded to feelings, and how a group views an object emotionally can affect one's desire to be close to or far away from it (Ahmed, 2010). For example, thoughts like "I will be happy if I buy this object" or "I will be happy if I marry a certain person" draw people to try to obtain the things that are socially associated with happiness. If youths avoid embodying negativity in their images for fear of being associated with "bad"

emotions, this means that they steer themselves toward portraying happiness. The following conversations explore what happiness meant to my participants:

> **Olivia:** I was having some issues with my friend, and I was like, I don't want to talk about it. I just want to be happy and everything else. You know, it's actually relieved me.

> **Sebastian:** I feel that happiness is important…So I feel that being happy is the most important and being happy comes from your health….I received almost all people that comment commented positively. It's true that they're not being happy and it's the most important thing.

Figure 15

Image of Heath Ledger quote submitted by Sebastian (Originally from brightvibes.com)

> **Hiroshi:** Another person had posted this. I was feeling sad, so it was more of how do I become happy? I was trying to decide what I could do to become happy. So I could live a life as comfortable as I can.

Interviewer: So, what does happiness mean to you?

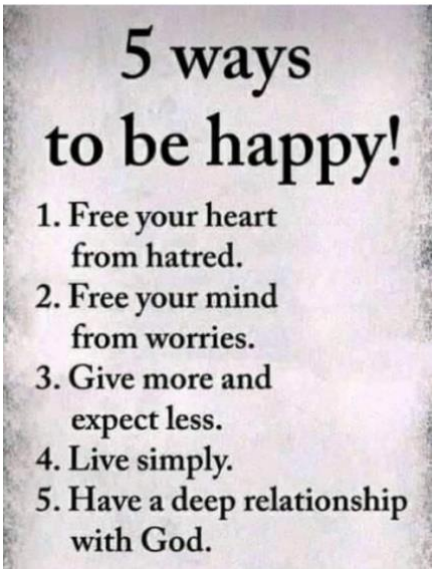
Hiroshi: Posting things makes me happy. Sometimes I watch football. If my team wins, I feel happy, if not, I feel angry.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you are a happy person?

Hiroshi: I must admit at the moment I'm not so much happy. I feel like I'm losing and losing.

Figure 16

Image of ways to be happy submitted by Hiroshi (Originally from Lessons Taught by Life Facebook Page)



For each of the participants, there is a strong desire to be "happy," but the definition of happiness seems to differ between each person, leaving what happiness means to be fairly murky. In Olivia's case, she felt that by remaining silent about her difficulties with a friend, she would become happier. Socially, a fight with a friend is seen as something emotionally attached to negativity; therefore, by not talking about the situation, Olivia was stripping the situation from

her body in an effort to bring out happiness once again. In my conversation with Sebastian, he declared that happiness "is the most important thing," highlighting the social value associated with this specific affect. For Sebastian, happiness is tied to health, although it is unclear whether this is in a physical or psychological sense. Sebastian's image shows a quote by Heath Ledger that questions why people are not asked if they are happy. This is an interesting choice because happiness, from a cultural sense, is often associated with the things listed: a career, marriage, and owning property (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2010). However, Lauren Berlant (2010) thinks about people's attachment to having certain things, such as a house or a job and its relationship to happiness as dangerous. To Berlant (2010), the idea of a "good life" and the potential loss of the objects or subjects that create the facade of what generates an ideal life can become the cause of unhappiness. Interestingly, Sebastian's image and the quote it contains seem to question the attachment of certain elements to happiness. However, the importance he places on happiness still highlights the social feeling rules around the importance of positive affects while minimizing those that are considered negative.

Lastly, Hiroshi's image lists five ways to be happy and originated from a Facebook page called *Lessons Taught by Life*, where quotes are often posted in image form. Hiroshi chose this image because he was trying to figure out how to be happy. It was an emotion he desperately desired to feel but didn't know how to achieve, so he searched for the answers within an image on social media. When I asked about what made him specifically happy, he mentioned social media and football but didn't feel like he was happy overall. Intriguingly, Sebastian mentions that he feels like he is "losing and losing." Is it possible that the emotional attachments he has made to happiness, to his personal idea of a good life, have created his emotional demise? Is it possible that if he released these attachments, happiness would manifest itself? While there is no

answer to this question, the stories in this chapter lead me to believe that feelings rules that control how youth attempt to hide negative emotions and crawl toward a murky idea of happiness is a problem. Although I am not negating that social media has problematic elements, such as cyberbullying, it is perhaps worth wondering if the decreased mental health (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017; Caner et al., 2022) youth are experiencing does not come from a specific technology but from socially perpetuated ideas of how a person should feel and express themselves emotionally.

Chapter Five: Private moments, public spectacles, and more: Exploring the various roles of images in digital spaces.

Will you love me when my phone turns off? I don't want to be some digital Jesus, No more followers we'll both get lost, when it's me and you inside real life – Jon Bellion

Introduction

Susan Sontag (1977) speaks about people as having a compulsion to photograph their experiences, a desperate need that touches upon both public and private spheres of living. For example, a person might photograph a private family moment, or a photojournalist might capture a public event. The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s and the subsequent merger of cameras into cellphones shifted the landscape of image sharing because it created the possibility of instant distribution of photographs to a wide, networked audience, making the differentiation between private and public photographs murky (Sarvas, 2014; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2023).[26] [27] Social media has fundamentally shifted the way private and public spheres operate within a society (Drozdova, 2020; boyd, 2014). For example, the existence of social media has minimized the need for physical meeting spaces, such as parks or malls, to engage with public audiences, which can now be done from the comfort of one's home through digital methods (Drozdova, 2020; boyd, 2014). Therefore, these spaces are no longer separate but have collapsed upon one another. boyd (2014) argues that the conflation of private and public spaces has made social media an integral part of social connectivity for youth. While youth might be in a private space, such as their home, when they access social media, these types of digital spaces have become ingrained in the cultural formation of the public and have become essential to youths' access to others. However, boyd (2014) acknowledges that the networked

[26] The camera phone was created by Phillipe Kahn in 1997 when he jerry-rigged his mobile phone with his digital camera to send out images of his newborn daughter to thousands of his contacts instantaneously (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2023).

[27] This Chapter does not engage in thorough discussions of private and public theory but explores the complexities of photographs in digital spaces.

nature of social media has made digital publics unique to physical public spaces. boyd (2014) identified four “affordances” (p. 11) that highlight social media's distinctive qualities, which can be perceived as both opportunities and challenges: 1) public online expressions are durable in a way not possible in physical public spaces, 2) the potential audience becomes vast and sometimes unknown, 3) public content can be easily shared with others contributing to the widely visible nature of posts, and 4) content can be searched and found online.

All of these affordances apply to photographs and videos that are posted in digital spaces. To expand, if an image is posted online of a private moment, it becomes a public image and can be shared and searched for by audiences, sometimes unknown to the original poster, which can have dire consequences. An instance of when negative consequences stemmed from image sharing is the case of Ghyslain Raza. Ghyslain, a fifteen-year-old from Quebec, known as the “Star Wars Kid,” took a video of himself wielding a golf club like a lightsabre in 2002, his classmates posted it online. The video has since been watched over one billion times and has been turned into various video spin-offs and image-based memes (Armstrong, 2022; Drost, 2022; boyd, 2014). The shame Ghyslain experienced caused his family to have to move from their home, and he eventually sued his classmates for harassment. Photographic reimaginings of Ghyslain's self were shared without his consent within a public space, causing him psychological and social harm. Because Ghyslain’s private creation was pulled into a public space without his permission, he lost control over the impression the public had of him. Ghyslain’s case is severe and is not an expected result of image sharing in the public digital sphere. The reason I share this scenario is to show that the framework of digital spaces has created a possible “messiness” to a person’s ability to separate the private and public and control what happens in each of these spaces.

Privacy is noted as a dominant concern for youth accessing social media, and they often attempt to negotiate privacy online by making their account private or managing the information they post (boyd, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2022; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2020). However, boyd (2014) also explains that in addition to the digital landscape shifting the formation of private and public spheres, it also formed a social understanding that content is "public by default, private through effort" (p. 61). Prior to the emergence of social media, the opposite connotation existed where most conversations were private, and it was an effort to bring a conversation to a public stage. Now, social media users engage in a space where dialogues are consistently public, and there is effort and decisions that need to take place to make something private, which leads to an assumption that "privacy is necessary only for those that have something to hide" (boyd, 2014, p. 63). Social media creates a social sphere where it is standard to speak publicly, which has an impact on how and what we post.

While youth are aware of privacy tools online, Tilleczek & Campbell (2020) suggest that many youths' decisions to employ these tools have less to do with privacy and more to do with impression management. This connects to Chapter Three, where I explored how youth curate impressions of their "self" in order to manage how they are seen by a public digital audience. In order to be viewed in a desirable way by onlookers, youths' personal images must reflect a publicly acceptable personality. In Chapter Four, I dove deeper into how ideal presentations of the "self" are often intertwined with social rules around emotional expressions, which influence youth to favour positive emotions and reject emotional performances of negativity. This final Chapter does not aim to contribute novel thoughts on conversations around private and public spheres in digital landscapes. Instead, it is an eclectic mix of stories told by the youth I spoke to that all touch on creating and publishing photographs on social media. While the following pages

explore differing topics, such as professionalism, difficult images, female bodies and celebrities, they create a mosaic of experiences brought forward by youth that emerge within the digital world where negotiations between private and public are consistently occurring.

Images, Capital, and Professionalism

Despite the fact that privacy is noted as a concern by young users of social media, and they might attempt to achieve this by making their account private, it's important to acknowledge that the structure of social media applications never allows a user full privacy (Tilleczek & Campbell, 2020; Chun, 2016). When a person signs up for a social media account, they voluntarily withdraw their right to privacy and agree for the application to track and collect data on them, regardless of whether or not their account is set to private (Drozdova, 2020; Meta, 2023b). According to Meta's (2023b) privacy policy, they collect information such as your phone number, your friends, what posts you click on, your photos and your messages. In Chapter Three, I introduced Wendy Chun's concept of "N(YOU) media" (p. 3), which suggests that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram use the notion of a tailored social media experience to validate why they need to collect information on their users. This becomes an economic exchange because the habits of social media users are sold to companies for advertising purposes (Chun, 2016; Pettman, 2016). Meta notes that they exchange information with any "Person, business, organization or body using or integrating our Products to advertise, market or support their products and services" (Meta, 2023b, para. 5). While Meta (2024a) does not list their "partners" the list would likely be vast as the above statement encompasses any person or business that advertises on their platforms which reached three million businesses in 2024 from

around the world.[28] This practice of obtaining and selling user data has been referred to as "the new predatory capitalism." (Dayen, 2017, as cited in Tilleczek and Campbell, 2019, p. 66). The term predatory is used by Dayen (2017) because he viewed users' engagement with social media, such as sharing and liking, as unpaid labour for a multi-billion dollar data industry (Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). It is important to note that most people, regardless of their age, are not fully aware of the extent to which their data is used and manipulated by companies (Pettman, 2016; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019).

In a networked setting, our connections are tracked, and the reach of our information is vast. From a digital sense, friendship is a large part of this connectivity because we engage with our friends through actions such as liking and commenting (Chun, 2016). However, Chun (2016) describes friendships as "leaky" because while the connectivity of online friendships eases our loneliness, the private communities we think we are building are, in fact, "poorly gated" (p. 103). Social media platforms give the illusion of privacy, such as the ability to accept a digital connection to friends only we approve of, but in reality, there are many ways that information is leaked and privacy barriers are dissolved (Chun, 2016). For example, when our friends share an image we post, that information is no longer contained to just our network but also our friend's network and this cycle can continue in a perpetual loop until a single image is situated in an extensive network of nodes and edges (Chun, 2016; Karppi, 2018).[29] The "leaky" confines of what we share with our friends turn something we think is private into very public information where that data is monetized.

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[28] It's also important to note that this study recruited its participants on social media, meaning that information collected by Meta on the youth in the study was used to show the advertisements I created to appropriate users.

[29] Networks are often academically explored by analyzing nodes, which are individual elements or objects, and edges that represent the relationships and connections that unfold between these elements (Chun, 2016; Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

Sharing content, including images, with our friends can also be useful to companies through a concept called "viral marketing," whereby our digital social connectivity with peers allows content to be circulated at a rapid pace (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 20). However, Jenkins et al. (2013), in connection to viral marketing, do not view users as slaves to large companies but instead see them as active users with autonomy over what is shared. Jenkins et al. (2013) are correct in that there are a number of choices that users have when they partake in digital connectivity: whether they should sign up, what apps they should use, and what content to share. However, we can't forget that the design of applications controls the way that we interact and that there are social pressures that influence our online behaviour. For example, as mentioned above, boyd (2015) speaks about a "public by default, private through effort" (p. 61) framework whereby it's socially assumed that online privacy is only needed if one has something to hide. People may behave in a more public manner because they don't want to be viewed as someone who "needs" to be private. In either case, users' desire to be connected to their friendships creates the groundwork for a network that continues to expand and produce valuable data.

While financial capital is gained by social media conglomerates through the obtaining and selling of data (Chun, 2016; Pettman, 2016), youth also use digital spaces to gain various forms of capital themselves. Although my participants did not discuss how they understood or interpreted how their digital data is commodified, we did have conversations about how they obtained various forms of capital through images in digital spaces. In Chapter Three, I addressed how images posted by youth can act as a form of social capital within a friend group. [30] To expand, when a youth posts a photo on social media, only specific viewers might understand the context, indicating who is inside and outside their social circle. In their book *Youth in the Digital*

[30] This section relied on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1989), who identified various forms of capital that exist within a society, such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic.

Age, Tilleczek & Campbell (2020) speak about the concept of digital capital, which was originally introduced by Andy Furlong in 2011. Digital capital refers to the way in which young social media users harness their digital literacy skills to gain other forms of capital, such as social or monetary (Tilleczek & Campbell, 2020; Furlong, 2011). In this section, I would like to discuss how two youths, hoping to build a photography business, used their knowledge of digital networks to gain social recognition and increase their financial capital. The following quotes explore how social media acted as a tool to gain capital through image creation:

Figure 17

Series of Professional Images submitted by Nina

> **Nina:** I do photography because I'm trying to get into it. I'm trying to get gigs and build my business. So, I can do this in general. I go out every Saturday just about and take pictures. It’s pretty fun for me.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you like to take pictures of?

Nina: Just anything, I think; I tried to get the street photography, so that's like the images of people and everything. So I just tend to take pictures of random, inanimate objects, and I'm trying to get into portraits. So I did like a few pictures of my friends with my phone.

Nina uses the networked nature of social media applications to advertise her photography skills and grow her recognition as a professional photographer. She created a schedule for herself to capture and post photographs to her social network in order to showcase her capabilities. Two of the photographs she brought to our interview highlighted her photography skills, both showing inanimate objects, which she mentioned was a style of photography she was comfortable with. According to Manovich (2017), professional photographs on social media sites, which account for about 11% of images online, typically obey photographic rules such as balanced colours and composition that follow the rules of thirds[31]. Nina used light editing techniques such as colour and contrast correction via professional software prior to posting her images, suggesting that she fits in the category of professional photography based on the techniques she displays. Following these rules almost acts as a code to the audience, suggesting that the creator is a part of a professional circle. We can think about this through the lens of Bourdieu's (1989) theory of fields, assuming that professional photography is the field that Nina wishes to be welcomed into. Nina uses specific aesthetic cues to indicate her professional identification to others within the field of professional photography and to the public. This identification is then used to gain both social capital in the sense that Nina increases the public's acknowledgement of her as a

[31] The rule of thirds suggests that subjects being photographed should be placed along the intersecting points of an imaginary 3x3 grid (Mansurov, 2024).

professional photographer and financial capital as she gains monetary compensation for her work.

Nina's social network also contributed to the growth of her professional photography business. While the "leakiness" (Chun, 2016) of friendships on social media and the extended networks this digital framework creates allows social media applications to monetize data, it also allows Nina to grow her following and build her photography business. For example, if one of Nina's friends shares one of the above photographs to their followers on social media their network can then view the image and potentially hire Nina for a photography job. Li and Xie (2019) suggest that aesthetics may also play a role in how networks engage with images through actions such as liking or sharing. For example, social media users are more likely to engage with an image that is colourful (Li & Xie, 2019), meaning that Nina's choice to post voluptuously colourful photographs might have increased the impact her posts had on her network, influencing them to engage with her images. As Nina's images are shared amongst various networks, the reach of her photographs will grow, increasing the social media public's perception of Nina as a professional photographer. Below, Chloe also discusses her use of digital networks to develop as a professional photographer:

Figure 18

Professional Image submitted by Chloe[32]

Chloe: I started my photography journey, and it was really hard for me because I couldn't fully express myself in my photography, and I was getting a lot of comments from professional people who have been in that industry for a way longer time than me around like ten years plus that I should stop and or just try to think what I'm doing exactly because I didn't portray emotions of people in my works. So this is kind of the first photoshoot that I did with my friend, and I tried to experiment with collage and inserted some phrases. I in the picture about that you should try and learn how to express yourself. And try different things, so this is the story behind this photo.

[32] I blurred the face of the model present in this photo to keep the model anonymous as I was unable to obtain consent to show their face.

In Chloe's case, the social community involved in professional photography initially rejected her entrance into the field. This caused Chloe to experience difficult emotions, especially when she was told she should stop photographing by other photographers. While Nina did not express difficulty in gaining recognition as a professional photographer, Chloe lacked the visual social codes that would unlock being publicly identified as a skilled photographer. Interestingly, the professionals commenting on Chloe's work indicated that her work lacked emotional nuance and, therefore, did not contain the elements required for the recognition she desired. This is a fascinating finding because it contradicts how emotions are displayed in the casual photographs of youth. In Chapter Four, I discussed how youth generally avoid expressing negative emotions in the photographs they post online, which aligns with social rules around the display of emotions (Hochschild, 2003). When youth attempt to express negative emotions in their photographs, they do so in a cryptic and codified way so that only people in their inner circle understand the context of the image. According to Chole, when an image is categorized as professional versus casual, there becomes a social expectation that emotions are displayed in the image, which suggests that emotion rules in photographs might be unique to various subgroups. While this finding is only based on one conversation and therefore requires further research, studies on user engagement do indicate that photographs that invoke high emotional arousal, either positive or negative, are more likely to receive likes or shares and, in turn, increase their networked reach (Li & Xie, 2019; Berger & Milkman, 2012), suggesting that there is validity to this finding.

In Chloe's image above she took into account the feedback she received to produce an emotionally evocative photograph. Chloe used the creative technique of collage to piece together multiple photographs of a model, her friend, posing in various positions. The images of the

model are surrounded by a sea of vibrant colours and positive quotes such as “energy flows where intention grows”. Chloe’s image displays positive emotions, and her choice of phrases, such as “heal yourself,” suggests an internal belief that negative emotions and experiences are something we need to mend, which does play into cultural feeling rules that suggest that bodies should reject negative emotions (Hochschild, 2003; Ahmed, 2010). However, in this instance, Chloe also used the emotional expression as a code to gain social capital and, therefore, recognition by others as a professional photographer. These photographic choices were made in the hopes of entering an industry where she would be financially compensated for her artwork. In both of the examples shared, Chloe and Nina used their digital network and knowledge of technology to photograph and post images in order to gain social and financial capital, showing that the framework of social media applications creates possibilities for capital gains for both technology-based companies through data mining as well as their users. This section also shows that young users of social media are not passive “victims” of technology, as often noted in media articles (Benchetrit, 2023; Jalonick, 2023; Rana, 2024) but can actively engage in social media technologies for their own gain, whether that be economic, social, or otherwise.

Affectual Responses to Difficult Images

In the above section, I introduce the possibility that emotionally arousing photographs are more likely to engage viewers in public social media domains (Li & Xie, 2019; Berger & Milkman, 2012). However, emotionally challenging images that have been available in a public manner have historically brought about debate in terms of whether or not they should be shown to a public audience. For example, an image called “Falling Man,” captured by Richard Drew from *The New York Times*, showed a man falling to his death from the World Trade Center

during 9/11. While various news outlets initially used this photograph along with stories of 9/11, public outrage followed the publication of this image, calling the photograph "disrespectful and invasive" (Quay & Damico, 2012, para. 2). There are many ethical debates that coincide with this image such as the privacy and consent of the man in the image, who has yet to be identified, as well as what it means to view this image.[33] To expand, Joanne Faulkner (2008, cited by Quay & Damico, 2012) suggests that viewers might be offended by images such as the "Falling Man" not because their death is objectified but because it reflects their own immortality and brings into focus cultural concerns about life and death.

The "Falling Man" is far from the first or last image to be debated in terms of its appropriateness for public audiences. Any image that portrays violence and death, particularly in the case of war, always straddles a delicate dance between informing the public about their existence versus providing privacy to the victims (Berger, 2013; Quay & Damico, 2012). Would removing a difficult image from public circulation provide privacy to those captured in a photograph or cause the erasure of someone's experience? This is a difficult question to answer. Many photography theorists, such as Sontag (1977), Berger (2013), and Hirsch (1997), address emotionally challenging images, particularly those connected with war. Hirsch (1997) speaks about a statement made by John E. Frohmayer, a former chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts, who suggested that images depicting the events of the Holocaust should not be displayed in the front halls of museums where everyone could view them, but instead be placed in labelled areas where "only those who chose to confront the photographs would be required to do so" (pg. 24). This brings forward the question: Should people be forced to view difficult

[33] Initially, the man in the photograph was identified as Norberto Hernandez, but this was a misidentification and has since been revoked (Quay & Damico, 2012; Singer, 2006).

images? [34] On one hand, research has suggested that viewing traumatic images online can have a direct psychological effect on the viewer, such as heightened anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Holman et al., 2020; Kaplan, 2018). This is because when a person views a traumatic media-based image, such as of a dead body, their brain can potentially experience a threat response, which can have both acute and long-term effects (Holman et al., 2020; Holmes & Mathews, 2010). Berger (2013) also suggests that there is a social element to viewing upsetting imagery whereby the viewer has a difficult time returning to the reality of their own lives because the juxtaposition of their own lives contrasts heavily against the image they viewed. He states, "We try to emerge from the moment of the photograph back into our lives. As we do so, the contrast is such that the resumption of our lives appears to be a hopelessly inadequate response to what we have seen" (p. 32).

On the other hand, viewing challenging images online can encourage onlookers to become involved in an issue politically and, therefore, contribute to society's engagement in issues in a positive way (Lempinen, 2024; Pedwell, 2014). For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement, photographs that were distributed in digital spaces contributed to the visibility of white supremacy and its effects on Black communities (Mirzoeff, 2017). This movement was first initiated by a textual Facebook post that contained the phrase 'black lives matter' by Alicia Garza after the acquittal of George Zimmerman and later continued its momentum with the sharing of photos, videos and hashtags after the death of Michael Brown (Edrington & Gallagher, 2019). Images became a crucial component of the publics involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement because through difficult photographs, such as of police using aggressive force on Black citizens, visibility of these issues was shown to a broad audience and

[34] Given this question, I have included examples of photographs I discuss in this section in Appendix H instead of in the dissertation itself, should the readers of this dissertation not wish to view the images.

insighted actions of activism (Edrington & Gallagher, 2019; Mirzoeff, 2017). Beyond difficult images, digital photographs that have circulated online, such as images of citizens participating in protests, have increased social knowledge and encouraged further civic engagement (Edrington & Gallagher, 2019). Sontag (1977) argues that over time, photographs that portray horrific moments lose their "emotional charge" (p. 21) and that repeated exposure to difficult images can cause an aesthetic distancing whereby the viewer is no longer affected. It is possible that images that had a profound effect on the Black Lives Matter movement may not create as large of an affectual response from viewers in the future, but it cannot be denied that the act of sharing and looking at images impacted the visibility of the issue and the civic response that followed. The following quotes reference youths' personal interactions with images that caused a personal and emotional reaction:

> **Chloe:** I'm a really emotional person when it comes to violence and pictures that portray a lot of things that you don't want to see. Bodies or maybe blood or something like that. I actually have an example about this if I can share it with you. I moved to Vancouver not a long time ago. It's been a year, basically, and I have been travelling here sometimes. And like most of the pictures that I shared with you today they were taken here. I moved here because I am pursuing photography and film as a major in one of the universities here. And I come from Russia, and I think everybody heard what is going on in the world right now with the war between Russia and Ukraine. And half of my family is in Ukraine right now. And when the war started, I have been coming across a lot of not blurred pictures of dead bodies and people. And I just remember that I took a two-month break

from social media because I just couldn't keep seeing them. So, I think this is the only images I don't want to see.

Juan: I see images of people, you know, happy, you know, coming together as a family, especially an extended family. To me, I see a certain level of hypocrisy from how I have having been raised. You know, what I have gone through. I never like seeing this. I feel like it's a popular image and it's not what my dad's brother has done to my family. So, I hate seeing it.

For Chloe, seeing images of death and war was emotionally difficult for her, especially given her personal relationship to the conflict. This connects with some of the points highlighted above, such as the psychological impact viewing these images had on Chloe causing her to need a break from participating in social media practices. With platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, the algorithms select the content that matches your individualized habits and networks and places it on your feed (Chun, 2016). Although viewers can report a photograph as inappropriate in the hopes of having it removed from the platform, Meta (2024b) approves certain forms of difficult images to circulate through their users' feeds. Meta's (2024b) policy on disturbing imagery states that they remove some graphic content, such as dismemberment or throat-slitting, and put a warning sign on images of violent deaths where the user has to click through to experience the image. This is reminiscent of the above discussion as to whether or not a person should have the choice to confront a difficult image. However, Meta (2024b) also states in "discussions about important issues such as human rights abuses, armed conflicts or acts of terrorism, we allow graphic content (with some limitations) to help people to condemn

and raise awareness about these situations" (para. 3). While Meta aimed to increase world knowledge of the Russia-Ukraine conflict by allowing free-flowing imagery of the happenings around this event, Chloe was not given a choice about viewing these images which caused her psychological harm.

My conversation with Juan was particularly interesting because the images he discussed as "difficult" did not fall under typical categories of emotionally challenging images, such as those of war and death. For Juan, looking at images of happy families triggered a negative emotional reaction. Juan, an international student at a Toronto University, expanded on the above comment earlier in our conversation, where he explained that there was a conflict between his uncle and his father. While Chloe's depiction of a difficult image fell into a more typical category, both Chloe and Juan highlight how our personal attachment to the events happening in an image can affect our emotional reaction to it. We can think about Barthes's (1980) concept of the "studium" and "punctum" (p.27) here, first introduced in Chapter Three. When the viewer of an image experiences a punctum, it is because they have a profound and personal emotional attachment to the image in a way that "pierces" (Barthes, 1980, p. 26) them, indicating that emotional reactions to images are individualistic. Susan Sontag (1977) also specifies that for a person to have an emotional reaction to an image, including experiences of moral outrage towards war images, one must have a "degree of familiarity with these images" (p.19). This is highlighted in how Juan and Chloe uniquely define what sorts of images are upsetting. Despite the differences between their categorizations, in both cases, their personal experiences are interconnected with how they shaped their definitions of "difficult" images. While this section does not answer questions pertaining to whether or not youth should be subject to difficult images in

public digital spaces, it does suggest that our relationship with what difficult means is individually defined.

The Female Body

As of 2023, 17.6% of Instagram users were females between the ages of 13-24 (Dixon, 2023). While this dissertation thinks about photographs across multiple platforms, this Instagram-specific statistic is particularly interesting because it shows that a large number of female children/youth are engaging with a highly visual photograph-based platform. Research suggests that the idealization of the female body in the photographs that circulate on public social media platforms has been detrimental to women's private relationships with their bodies and their self-image (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Parnell & Coutler, 2022; Salomon & Spears 2022). Social media and the visual artifacts that circulate on these platforms contribute to unhealthy narratives about female bodies by constructing an idea of the type of body that is valued. Walseth and Tidslevold (2019) found that young women believe that the most valuable body is one that is fit (but not too muscular) and thin and that this concept of what makes a body have value is largely constructed by viewing images either on social media or other media related sources.[35] Notions of value are exacerbated within social media spaces because of the presence of positive reinforcement and social approval structures, such as the heart button on Instagram (Walseth & Tidslevold, 2019; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Social media also contributes to this unhealthy value system because algorithms favour images of attractive, thin women, given the image's aesthetic attractiveness and a higher likelihood of achieving user engagement and those with body types that don't match this ideal are not given as much visual

[35] While media-related messages are a prominent conduit for body dissatisfaction, family and friends can also play a role in establishing thin ideals, such as through teasing about body appearance and can occur in both digital and physical spaces (Saunders & Frazier, 2017; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010)

space within the platform (Srivastava, 2023). The patriarchal ideology of value being placed on a woman based on aesthetic attractiveness creates a culture where women are objectified.

While social media has exacerbated social issues around the objectification of women (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Parnell & Coutler, 2022; Salomon & Spears 2022), digital photography is far from the first form of art to show the female body as an object to be observed. For example, in his book *Ways of Seeing,* John Berger (1972) addresses the prominence of the naked female figure in art from the 14th-19th centuries. Berger (1972) speaks about the female body as being an object to be looked at by men. Berger states, "A woman must continually watch herself...persuaded to survey herself continually...her own sense of being appreciated as herself by another...men act and women appear" (p.46-47). Here, Berger (1972) suggests that the entirety of a woman's being is to be visually appreciated by men. While Berger (1972) is making reference to early artwork, the idea that women are presented as objects in visual culture can be applied to digital photography today. I want to turn to objectification theory, first discussed in the late 90s by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, to think about women's bodies in visual constructions. When a person is viewed as an object and is reduced to their physical attributes, this can lead to self-objectification and self-monitoring (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). While this is harmful for all women, it is particularly concerning for young females who are forming their identity during their adolescent years (Erickson, 1968).

In the context of modern-day social media technologies, females are more likely than males to post images of their faces and bodies and are also more at risk of experiencing self-objectification, monitoring and dissatisfaction with their bodies (Parnell & Coutler, 2022; Salomon & Spears 2022). From the one hundred and two images submitted to my study, nine contained faces or bodies despite my consent form asking participants to avoid images of faces

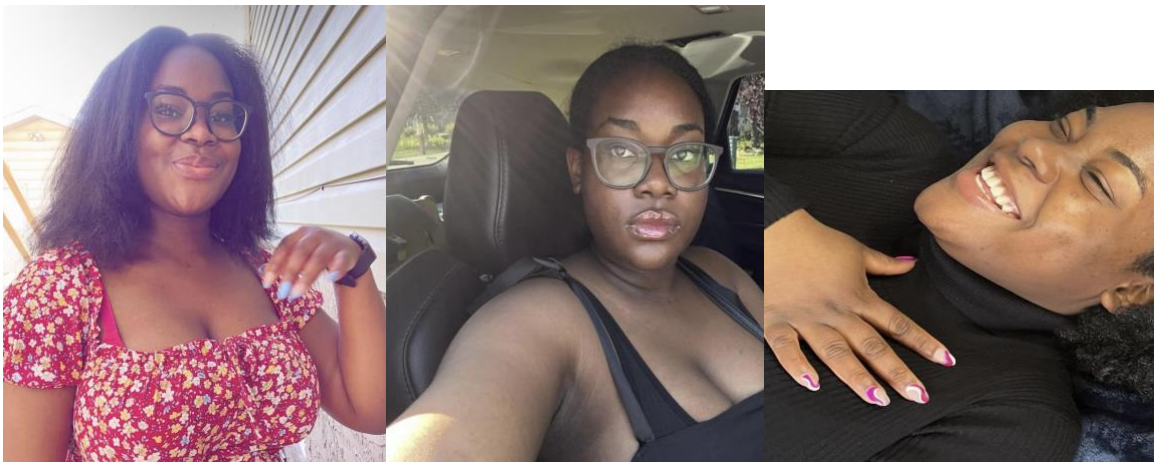
for confidentiality purposes. Female participants submitted all of the images containing faces. The conversations that I had with the female participants who submitted images of their faces, discussed in more detail below, suggested that they worked hard to present themselves in a socially acceptable way by performing actions such as selecting "nice" clothing, wearing make-up, and posing themselves in a flattering angle. They also feared ridicule about their bodies from onlookers in social media spaces.

To reflect social standards of beauty, many young users turn to editing tools available on social media platforms to alter their images (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). Technical choices such as posing, lighting, and filters can be employed to dramatically alter the physical appearance of a subject in a photograph (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). In Chapter Three, I discussed the concept of authenticity in association with representing one's "self" on social media and concluded that parameters of authenticity are complex and often personal. While the use of editing tools by female users may warrant questions of authenticity, I would argue that the females are not so much participating in a lie but in a social practice where they are taught that they are an object to be viewed by an audience. Edkins (2015), who speaks about the politics of the human face, states, "There is no separation between face and mask...the person has become the mask—the social role—and is indistinguishable from it. The being is missing, objectifies, instrumentalized, and disappeared" (p. 7). Females have become so attuned to being objectified that their careful curation of how they present themselves in images is not fabricated. This is because the "mask" that females put on, which would otherwise be viewed as a deceptive act, is actually so engrained in their identity that there is an immense amount of truth in the image. When a female poses or edits themselves, I would argue that they are expressing the experience of being objectified in their everyday life. However, there have been instances where females

have pushed back against objectification through images. For instance, the #nomakeup movement was popular on social media platforms from 2009 to 2016 where women would post photographs of themselves without makeup (Beeson, 2021). Research suggests that viewing the #nomakeup image had a positive impact on young viewers and reduced their body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Rapee, 2019). The following conversations highlight how the social practice of objectifying female bodies affects the photograph choices of youth:

Figure 19 (a,b,c)

Series of selfies submitted by Hannah[36]



Hannah: Well, I was just in my house one day, and I was like, I just bought this dress. I was like, oh, it looks really good on me. So I was like, Why not do a photoshoot in my backyard with it on, so that's what I literally did. I got my tripod. I went outside did the whole entire photoshoot, and those are the pictures that came out.

Interviewer: So when you did this photo shoot, were you doing it with the intention of capturing images for social media or just sort of images in general, and you happened to

[36] I received permission from Hannah to publish these photographs as is, with her face being shown.

Hannah: I think both honestly, some were like someone for me, someone were for social media. So I guess both and I see what turned out good and what didn't. So yeah.

Interviewer: OK, so what response, if any, did you receive from your online community

Hannah: This was also a good response, a positive response as well. Beautiful. I like the dress. Looking gorgeous. Stuff like that to my friends, you know?

Interviewer: And what's it like getting like, really positive feedback about your posts?

Hannah: It feels good. It feels nice. Like I did something right. You know, I really showed off my dress. I showed off those photos and stuff like that. So yeah…I don't want to look unpresentable sometimes, you know, on social media. So I'm like, if I want to dress up, I'll take good pictures and stuff like that to...Because of all the comments of like, oh, you know she doesn't look so pretty or, you know, it's just like trolls and putting people down when they try to put a picture on Instagram or put a nice video out on TikTok. And they're so mean about it, you know, and I'm like, you're human as well. You know, you need to live life and not put people down for just posting about what they want to post about..

Hannah, who is eighteen-years-old indicates that it's important to her that she looks "presentable" within the public space of social media. She achieves a desired aesthetic look by selecting outfits, applying make-up, and posing her body so that the photograph reflects her desired social impression. The first quote in the above conversation connects to the image of the flowered dress. Hannah felt that she looked attractive in the dress, making it appropriate to photograph and display to her public audience. Throughout our conversation, she spoke about

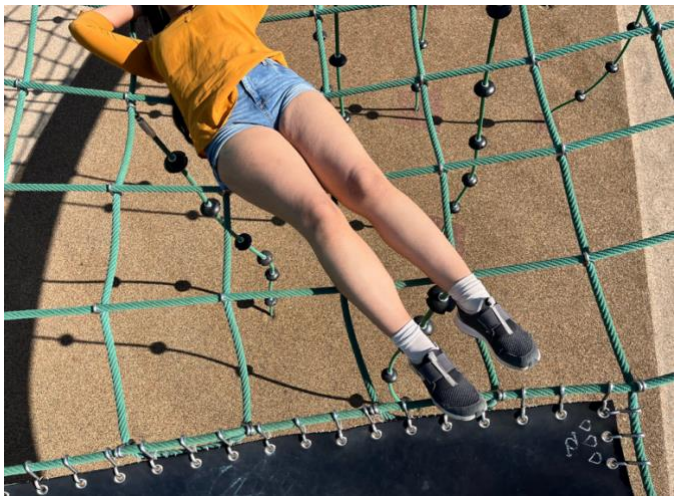
the other photographs shown above. In the selfie taken in a car, she explained, “I was hanging out with my dad, and I was looking nice that day because we were going to a party. So, I was like, I’m looking good, I’m looking nice, I’m looking pretty. So, I was able to take a picture.” Hannah reveals here that her appearance and the assumption that viewers will see her as aesthetically appealing were prerequisites for the photograph being captured and shared. The concept of dramaturgy, as discussed in Chapter Three, suggests that people act in certain ways to control how they are perceived by their public social audience (Goffman, 1959). For Hannah, her body needed to be presented in a specific way to her social media audience because aesthetically pleasing photographs hold more social value, especially for female bodies. This ideology was further solidified for Hannah when she received positive reinforcement from her audience through affirming comments such as “looking gorgeous,” which suggests that the viewer perceived her body as beautiful. To Hannah, these comments indicated that she “did something right.”

In connection to the photograph depicting Hannah smiling with her hand on her chest, she explains, “In that moment, it was a happy time in my life. I was, you know, things are looking good in my life, so I really wanted to focus on that…I’m happy right now. I’m doing well in life.” Her social media followers responded by saying, “It’s so pretty. You look so happy”. In Chapter Four, I addressed how youth depict emotions in online photographs, typically following social rules favouring positive emotions over negative ones making Hannah’s capturing of happiness unsurprising (Hochschild, 2003). However, this picture is particularly interesting because it suggests an interconnection between female beauty standards and happiness. Sara Ahmed (2010; 2012) talks about female bodies as having a social expectation placed upon them that they will continually portray happiness. If females don’t portray

happiness, they are perceived as a threat to social order. Ahmed's work (2010; 2012) focuses on the concept of the feminist "killjoy," where those who identify as a feminist, and would be against the objectification of women, are seen as difficult and unhappy. While the association between social expectations of female beauty and happiness needs to be examined from a larger pool of photographs, I do think Hannah's comments suggest that photographic decisions are influenced by multiple social rules simultaneously. The next vignette shows a conversation with nineteen-year-old Zara:

Figure 20

Image of Zara on play structure submitted by Zara



Zara: So that's an example of an image I use when I need to use an image to identify myself, but I wouldn't show my face, but it still shows my personality. This is like a climbing structure, like a jungle structure and so I went to the very top and all the people would be grabbing onto it, right? Because you were really high up. I was like, no, I'm just going to utilize the surface area to lie down.

Interviewer: So that's cool. So it's kind of a fun thing that you did.

Zara: It's a fun thing. I did that. I just like had shared, Yeah. But it's also something I didn't post simply because I did not want to risk people commenting on my body. But I did post it, just not as a post.

Interviewer: As a story?

Zara: As a story, but ironically, I do use it for profile pictures in certain situations. So on one angle I don't want to post it to be commented on and yet I make it the front and center figure in certain spaces.

Interviewer: Are people commenting on other people's bodies common in your online community?

Zara: Usually, when people comment on my posts, it's usually because they're complimenting me, right? And. While again, I've never had interactions with people who comment on my body or anything simply because I know the people that follow me would never do that. But also, I never really allow for those things to even happen right. And again, I've never interacted with them personally, but I know that that happens. I never had it happen to me, but I know it happens. Usually, it's one of those situations where it's like people start commenting on the comments, and that's what I see. OK, so I'm just not going to scroll down because I don't want to interact with that negativity. Like, stop commenting on their bodies and stop shaming them, right?

In Zara and Hannah's interviews, both participants feared that their bodies would be negatively received by their digital audience and that they would be subject to harmful comments, yet neither had actually been bullied about the way their bodies looked in their

images. Hannah speaks about needing to be presentable because "trolls"[37] will put people down, and earlier in our conversation, she stated, "People are going to judge you." Zara mirrors Hannah's response by talking about how people judge and shame the bodies of others within the comment section available when pictures are posted online, yet she says, "I never had it happen to me, but I know it happens.". Each participant deals with the fear of being judged in their own way: Zara keeps her online public small by ensuring that only friends[38] interact with her images, and Hannah makes sure she presents herself in a way that reflects social standards. However, if neither Zara nor Hannah has experienced online ridicule, why is this concern so prominent for them in their photographic decision-making?

Foucault's concept of the panopticon offers a lens to think about this occurrence. In his text *Discipline and Punishment,* Foucault (1977) is inspired by Jeremy Bentham's prison model, where a central tower for the guards was surrounded by prison cells. The idea was that being constantly confronted with the tower caused the prisoners to police themselves because they always assumed they were being watched (Malpas & Wake, 2013). Foucault (1977) brings this concept into a society where he argues that modern institutions, such as schools, function similarly to prisons because the notion of being surveilled causes people to internalize rules set by those in power and conduct themselves based on these rules (Malpas & Wake, 2013). In more recent work, social media has been referenced as a virtual panopticon where people are always being watched within digital spaces, driving users to perform their identities in socially acceptable ways (Waycott et al., 2017; Stoycheff et al., 2019; Møller, 2023). We can see this play out in the experiences of Zara and Hannah because their awareness of a constant possible

[37] Trolls are social media users who purposefully write comments on people's posts with the intention of causing a negative emotional reaction. They often do so anonymously (Merriam-Webster, 2024)

[38] While Zara used keeping her public small as a protectionary technique while using social media, it is important to keep in mind that friends are "leaky" (Chun, 2016) and that her images may have been seen by audiences she is not aware of.

audience, particularly one that could potentially ridicule them, causes them to make photographic choices that they assume will protect them. Zara and Hannah police the way their bodies are shown to align with social rules determined by an invisible power source.

Additionally, Zara's choice to photograph her body without her face is fascinating. Zara wanted the photograph to show her personality but hide her face. Edkins (2015) speaks about faces as highly political and that hiding one's face is often viewed as an indication of shame. Was Zara experiencing shame? In our conversation, Zara initially indicated that she tried to keep this image private by only sharing it in her stories, where the image disappears after a period of time. However, she quickly corrects herself and says that sometimes she uses it as a profile picture. Zara notes that the reason she hesitates to post the image of her body publicly is because she doesn't want to "risk people commenting" on her body. Perhaps Zara doesn't feel shame about her body but fears that shame will be inflicted upon her by her public audience. Elspeth Probyn (2010) highlights the connection between mind and body when experiencing the affect of shame and quotes Deleuze's words, "The mind is ashamed of the body in a very special manner; in fact, it is ashamed for the body" (Deleuze, 1997, qt in Probyn, 2010).[39] Probyn (2010) also suggests that shame is neither fully an external object nor purely personal but a "clashing of mind and body" (p. 81).

Zara's conversation allows us to unpack this concept. In Zara's situation, the external factor of society placing shame on her body exists outside of herself. Zara's mind perceives this and then decides whether or not to feel shame towards her body. Both private and public spheres of experience influence shame in this case. However, while Zara's fear of the public negatively commenting on her body was clear and influenced her decision to hide her face, she also

[39] Probyn (2010) is especially inspired by Deleuze in the referenced chapter, who was an early thinker in affect theory and viewed affect as pre-personal and pre-linguistic.

seemingly fights against this by placing this picture as her profile photo on her social media accounts. In Zara's words, she puts the image "front and center." Some female artists use photography to create a "countervisuality" that rejects the identity placed upon them by society (Lutrell, 2020; Hirsch, 2012). Hirsch (2012) speaks about Jo Spence, a feminist British photographer who used self-portraiture as a form of therapy to explore her relationship with her body and produced work that examined female bodies in the social world. It might be that Zara placing the photograph as her profile picture was an act of resistance against the fear of her body being judged by the public. We can also see "countervisualities" happening in digital spaces through movements such as #nomakeup and through the quiet rejection of norms performed by individual images creator such as Zara. This shows that images have the power to both mould a body, particularly female bodies, into emulating socially constructed expectations and for that body to question those expectations through imagery.

Celebrities

Introduction

Most of the conversations highlighted in this dissertation came from the portions of my interview process where I discussed the photographs submitted by my participants and their perspectives on social media and images. In part two of my interview, as outlined in my introduction, I brought a series of six images widely shared on Instagram in 2020 to discuss with my participants (see Appendix F for all images). These images were selected based on the number of likes, which ranged from 22,000,000 to 66,000,000, meaning that they were widely shared by viewers on Instagram. During the process of selecting the images for the purposes of the interviews, I was initially shocked at the fact that five out of six most widely shared images

on Instagram during 2020 were of celebrities, especially given that many notable historical events were occurring during this time, such as COVID-19. While I was personally aware that celebrities dominate digital platforms like Instagram, I believed that with the weight of the cultural events occurring during this time that their popularity would be shared with images of the pandemic and #BlackLive Matter imagery. However, while 38.8% of Instagram users are under 24 (Dixon, 2023), the engagement associated with the images used in this study does not reflect just youth online activity because the entire digital public could interact with these images. This was reflected in the comments my participants made when I first showed them the images, which were mixed in nature:

> **Nina**: I don't know what; it kind of says something about people. I mean, we all already know that people obsess about celebrities, but my God.

> **Eva**: I'm disappointed. I think there are so many different important things going on in real life…I think there are more specific things they should be focusing on…I understand how social media will work and how part of it is the algorithm and also their popularity overall. So I understand that it's not that the world only cares about these things, but to know that the most interactive posts are these trivial things, I'm kind of disappointed, but actually, the more I think about it, the more I'm also kind of, I don't know, it's actually complicated because it seems that people care about the same thing they had cared about this for the past two years. I thought the pandemic would change a lot of people, but the core things that people enjoy looking at, the things people interact with is the same thing as ever. Just celebrities.

Rahim: Does this tell you what's in the mainstream, because I don't recognize half of these?

Hannah: Not Really [Hannah is talking about not being surprised]. The celebrities probably have means, so it makes sense.

The above showcases various mixed responses to viewing the six popular images during the interviews. Nina and Eva show profound dismay at the fact that common images were celebrity-based. Eva also communicates that she is disappointed that the events of COVID-19 did not shift the digital public away from interacting with images of celebrities. However, given that one of the primary reasons why young people interact with social media is to escape their own lives emotionally, it would be reasonable to assume that the pandemic could actually cause an increase in engagement with celebrity accounts, given the emotional climate at that time (Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2023; Huang & Su, 2018; Schmuck, 2021). Eva's answer is particularly insightful because while she was upset at the images I showed her, she mentioned that she understood that algorithms and their number of followers could shape what people interact with in digital spaces. Algorithms on Instagram collect information on their users to determine what they are most likely to engage with through likes, comments, or shares (Chun, 2016; Mosseri, 2021b).[40] Celebrity accounts typically have millions of followers and, therefore, are algorithmically more likely to show up in people's feeds due to the likelihood of the users engaging with the image (Cotter, 2018). Hannah also reflects a knowledge of the inner workings

[40] Instagram uses multiple algorithms at the same time to classify and process the content that a user sees on their feed and stories (Mosseri, 2021b).

of social media as she remarks that she wasn't surprised that celebrities were dominant in the image set because celebrities "probably have means," meaning that they have a large following, creating the algorithmic potential to be seen by a wide audience. While social media users are likely to interact with celebrity posts, Rahim's honest comment that he didn't recognize half of the images I showed him demonstrates that exactly what posts someone sees is specific to the data collected on the individual and that not everyone sees the same compilation of images. While part two was less robust in findings than part one, it led to interesting conversations about celebrities and their photographic presence on social media, which will be explored in this section.

Celebrities, Their Images, and Youth Perspectives

Famous people, from prophets to athletes to artists, have been a part of the social fabric of society for thousands of years (Rublack, 2011; Stewart & Giles, 2020). However, it has been argued that celebrities, as we currently understand them, began in the modern world when mass communication, such as television and print, became available for celebrities to promote themselves and connect with their audience (Marcus, 2019; Stewart & Giles, 2019). Photography has been a significant component of the modern public's interactions with celebrities, from print photos of celebrities being sold to the public in the 1860s to the posting of images on social media platforms today (Marcus, 2019). Social media platforms have added a layer to celebrities' communication with "publics" because they can now connect with their followers almost instantly at any time (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).[41] Digital platforms have also widened the range of what it means to be a celebrity by creating new terms such as "micro-star," where an

[41] Sharon Marcus (2019) argues for the plural use of the public because the public is diverse in nature and not a singular entity, and therefore, its plurality is appropriate.

account has between 10,000-100,000 followers, as well as housing traditional celebrities, such as actresses and musicians that may have a digital following in the millions (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017; Marcus, 2019).

Celebrities, regardless of the number of followers one has, are associated with status and value placed upon them by their public audience (Marcus, 2019; Stewart & Giles, 2020) Sharon Marcus (2019) argues that celebrity culture comes to life when media producers, members of the public, and celebrities themselves cooperate in assigning meaning and value to a celebrity and that celebrity status cannot be achieved by each of these entities on their own. For example, Billie Eilish, who appeared in two of the photos I showed during my interviews, cooperates with media producers such as magazines and radio as well as the public to negotiate her standing as a celebrity. Rojek (2001) identifies various categories of celebrities that affect their overall value: achieved, ascribed, and attributed. Achieved celebrities have a talent or achievement that has been recognized as valuable by society, such as an actress, and typically obtain the most value compared to the other mentioned categories. Celebrities who receive their status due to familial association, such as Prince William and Kate Middleton, would be considered ascribed. Lastly, attributed celebrities are "ordinary" people who are propelled into the media, such as Monica Lewinsky after being involved in a sex scandal with Bill Clinton, and often hold the least amount of status. While I don't argue that there are various social categories of celebrity, I do think it is important to note that social media may be expanding these divisions through reimaging what it means to be famous, such as the microcelebrity (Marcus, 2019; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017).

While different categories of celebrities may hold various amounts of value bestowed upon them by the public, their existence interconnects with consumerism, capitalism, and

entertainment. On the one hand, celebrities themselves are products who compete to get recognition from the public, but they are often entangled with other forms of capitalism, such as selling products on their social media accounts or promoting the new movie they are involved with (Schouten, Janssen, Verspaget, 2019; Hedhli, 2021). When celebrities "sell" themselves by increasing their visibility and value in a public setting, they also gain capital in various ways that increase their influential power (Driessens, 2013). Throughout this dissertation, I have used Bourdieu's (1989) categorization of forms of capital multiple times, such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. In connection to celebrities, arguments have been made that celebrities should be considered a form of capital on their own (Driessens, 2013; Couldry, 2015; Hunter et al., 2009). With celebrity capital, celebrities can use their recognition and power to increase the value of brands, such as through product endorsements on social media (Driessens, 2013; Hunter et al., 2009). Celebrity capital is also unique to other forms of capital listed by Bourdieu (1989) because their power is upheld across multiple fields versus just specific fields. To expand, while my future doctorate degree holds value within academia, it doesn't necessarily hold power in other fields. However, with celebrities, their statuses allow them to hold influence over multiple fields and groups within society (Driessen, 2013; Hunter et al., 2009). In contrast, while publics are surrounded by celebrity culture, individuals can choose to ignore it and opt out of the process (Marcus, 2019). As we saw above, each of the youth had varying reactions to viewing the celebrity photos, showing that each individual had their own relationship with celebrity culture. Based on my conversations with the participants in this study, when youth do interact with celebrities on social media, they view them in two frameworks: 1) They see celebrities as idols and desire to mimic them in various ways, and 2) They see celebrities as products and exert

power as a consumer when they choose to engage, or not engage with the images celebrities publish in public spaces.

Celebrities as Idols

When talking about the celebrities in the provided images, many of the youth used the term "idol" to describe the person depicted. Juan (quotes below) felt happiness when he saw certain celebrities because he experienced motivation and encouragement by witnessing their success. Elena referred to Billie Eilish as her idol because of how she emotionally expresses herself in her music, and Chloe used the image shown below (Figure 19) to alter her hairstyle similarly. Research suggests that young people's idolization of celebrities is often connected to identity development (Eyal et al., 2020; Zhang & Kennedy, 2020; Xie, 2021). In Chapter Three, I discussed Erik Erickson (1968), who established a staged approach to identity development. The participants in this study fit into both stage five, Identity versus role Confusion, which occurs between the ages of twelve and eighteen, and stage six, Intimacy versus isolation, which occurs between nineteen and forty years old (Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2020; Furlong, 2013; Mcleod, 2023). While staged theories have been critiqued for reasons such as disregarding social or cultural variables (Babakr et al., 2019; Enright, 2021), this theory has been used to understand youths' relationships with celebrities in terms of identity building.

Although identities are consistently changing throughout our lifetime, during adolescence, young people develop a core sense of their identity, such as their values and beliefs, and they often experiment with various identity components to see what works for them (Furlong, 2013; Côté, 2006). Celebrities can become figures of social comparison for young people where the social value of celebrities, such as a large public following, is considered

attractive (Jiménez & Mesoudi, 2019; Eyal et al., 2020). We can see this in Juan's response where he looked up to the career success of the celebrities he followed and wanted to be "one of them". Elena's comment contrasts Juan's as she was more interested in Billie Eilish's emotional vulnerability than her status. However, she had clearly identified a personality trait that was, to Elena, admirable. While young people who idolize celebrities often imitate elements of those they look up to by their behaviour, they may also attempt to mirror their appearance (Zhang & Kennedy, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020), much like Chloe, who used Billie Eilish as inspiration for her own hairstyle. Celebrities are clearly admired by Juan, Chloe, and Elena, but it is important to remember that not all youth are enthralled with celebrities. For example, in conversations with Nina and Eva above, they were against celebrities and did not view them as idols. The idolization of celebrities is also not restricted to young people alone, as those who are famous can act as a guideline for "how to be in the world" (Marcus, 2019, pp. 150) and can contribute to the behaviour of their followers throughout their lifetime (Schouten et al., 2020; Zhang & Kennedy, 2020).

> **Juan:** Wow. I was happy and, you know, I see they are my idols, you know, they are my people who meant something to me because they are always hard working, you know, to perfection. To me, there's more motivation, this is more encouraging. If I do well, if I continue well I might be one of them….When I see a successful person. I also dream that I should know her story or his story so that I might be next, and I am encouraging myself.

> **Chole:** So, Billie Eilish showing her new hairstyle. I actually showed this picture to my hairstylist at that time, and I got the same haircut.

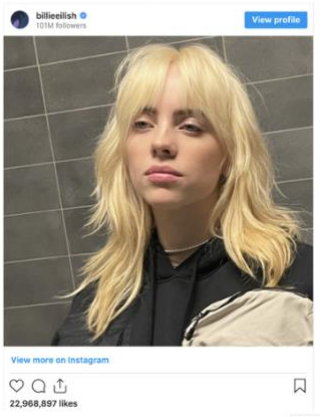
Elena: Billie Eilish does relate to my life. You know, I like her. She's my idol.

Interviewer: What makes her your idol?

Elena: I love the way she expresses her feelings through music like she sings what she feels, and her music really hits deep.

Figure 21

Image of Billie Eilish after dyeing her hair blonde. (@billieeilish,2020a)



Celebrities as Products

Social media has changed how celebrities interact with their followers by allowing fans to view intimate and instant moments of their lives (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Through social media platforms, celebrities often endorse various products through paid partnerships and use their social value to influence the consumer behaviours of their followers (Zhang & Kennedy, 2020; Driessen, 2013; Hunter et al., 2009). If we think of the above section that suggests some young people idolize celebrities and mimic their behaviour (Eyal et al., 2020; Zhang & Kennedy, 2020; Xie, 2021), we can see how viewers would be influenced to purchase products their idols endorse. However, it must also be acknowledged that celebrities themselves

are products and that viewing celebrity accounts on social media is a form of consumption (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Marcus, 2019). Marcus (2019) suggests that publics hold an immense amount of power in determining who is famous by supporting the person's social status as someone valuable. While celebrities need the public in order to maintain their inflated value, the public technically does not need celebrities to function (Marcus, 2019, p. 9). In the following quotes, we can see how youth exhibited power in selecting the celebrities they wanted to endorse:

> **Sebastian:** I must admit that I might enjoy watching [soccer]. I saw that there are some of my friends are fans of Manchester United and Chelsea. So I just comment on it just to show my support.

> **Eva:** If I see something that I like, crafts or arts that I feel like, oh, I wanted to support them when I tell them that someone likes it, just kind of at that point almost that the fact that these people already have so many likes actually makes me not want to interact with them. Plus, it's not going to make a difference. I suppose in a way, if there's no purpose to adding that plus one, I don't want to do it…if I like actually like the content you're creating, and I wanted to show my support to you. And the fact that you already have thousands, millions of likes. No. These photos met none of the criteria, and therefore I wouldn't engage with them.

Sebastian is a fan of soccer and he engages with this sport on various platforms, such as television and social media. To support the product he enjoys, he left a comment on the

Instagram post of Lionel Messi (Figure 20), which would contribute to Messi's growth as a celebrity in two intermingled ways: technical and social. Commenting on Messi's posts assists him in a technical way because the more engagements a post gets on platforms like Instagram, the more the platform algorithm will place the image on people's newsfeeds, giving Messi more social exposure, which amplifies his celebrity status (Chun, 2016; Mosseri, 2021b). Eva purposefully makes a point of not engaging with celebrities on social media and instead uses her power as a consumer and member of the public to back lesser-known artists. Eva highlights that accounts with millions of followers are disenchanting to her as a consumer, and has to enjoy the content the creator posts in order to warrant a like or comment. While celebrities hold power in terms of what their followers consume, consumers of all ages are not passive in this process and can be a part of deciding what and who is considered valuable.

As noted above, social media platforms have shifted the way celebrities interact with their followers because celebrities can now control how and when they share information, which is typically much more intimate than through past media sources, such as newspapers (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016; Marcus, 2019). Kowalczyk & Pounders (2016) found that consumers genuinely want to know more about celebrities' personal lives and that having access to intimate information about the celebrity makes them want to continue to consume their posts. Consumers typically seek intimacy with celebrities they idolize by interacting with their posts and collecting memorabilia (Marcus, 2019). Chung & Cho (2017) suggest that social media has minimized the barrier between celebrities and their followers because by allowing intimate relationships to exist through the sharing of personal images, spectators have shifted to more of a "friend" role. However, this relationship is often parasocial because while the follower may feel a connection with the celebrity, the celebrity may not have a relationship with the follower

(Chung & Cho, 2017). While intimacy might be an important component of the relationship between celebrities and their followers, my participants noted that their desire to view intimate images lay more so in the realm of curiosity:

> **Chloe**: I think I just like to see how people decided to live their life and see their decisions and like a sneak peeks to their lives. I think it's just curiosity.
>
> **Juan**: To me, these are successful people, and so I'm curious now about their life.

Both Chloe and Juan use the term "curiosity" to describe why they engage with images of celebrities Chloe notes that she likes to see what decisions they make and their life choices. Juan explains that he is curious about the lives of successful people. The curiosity that Juan and Chloe feel might be connected to the above section, where young viewers use the intimate details of the lives of celebrities to build their own personalities (Jimenez & Mesoudi, 2019; Eyal et al., 2020). Considering that Juan is interested in the celebrities' success and Chloe is interested in their life decisions, they may be applying the information they learn when interacting with celebrity accounts to their own lives. While intimate details of celebrities' lives may pique the viewer's curiosity and build intimacy between the viewer and the celebrity, some images may not be well received. For example, when I showed an image of Cristiano Ronaldo and Georgina Rodriquez announcing that Georgina was pregnant with twins, my participants were less than enthused.

> **Eva:** I'm actually a bit like, I feel a bit negative about it because I see a lot of Instagram couples over the years who like them take photos, for instance or videos of themselves. I understand that this is a great moment. That's definitely like, how did you share? But just looking at how they're posing for how like the composition is imagining almost the film

angle of them trying to film it makes me feel disappointed that they're not enjoying the moment but choose to focus on how this photo is going. This too scripted for my liking.

Elena: I'm big on celebrities. Yeah, but there's this confusion that people care that much about couples having babies.

Figure 22

Image of Cristiano Ronaldo and Georgina Rodriquez announcing Georgina's pregnancy (@cristino, 2020*).*

Elena and Eva both comment on the fact that, to them, the sharing of an intimate moment between Cristiano Ronaldo and Georgina Rodriquez in a public space was inappropriate. Eva emphasizes that the image feels staged and is disappointed that they are focused on sharing the moment versus enjoying it together. Elena remarks that the public doesn't really care about couples having babies. While women who are pregnant often use social media for support and

information (Oviatt & Reich, 2019), this shows that people in varying social "fields" [42] (Bourdieu, 1989) may desire to view photographs that are specific to their lives, behaviours, and interests.[43] As of 2020, only 0.0055% of pregnancies in Canada were mothers between the ages of fifteen and nineteen (Baltzer & O'Donohue, 2022), showing that pregnancy is not a common experience during youthhood. Because pregnancy is not typical among youth, it is unsurprising that they would not desire to view pregnancy-related images. As platform-based algorithms collect information on images their users engage with and tailor their feed to show posts that reflect their likes, likely most youth would never engage with the above image. Celebrities are ultimately a part of the mosaic of images on social media, but youth can decide what role these images play in their lives.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore the varying ways the theme of private and public spaces emerged in young users' image-based social media activity. While each section took a unique approach to the chapter's theme, collectively, they display that the complicatedness of privacy versus publicity in digital spaces emerges in many facets of youths' digital experiences. For example, the design of social media platforms gives the illusion of control over privacy, such as the option only to accept certain friends or alter privacy settings, yet data is constantly being collected on users, even on those who don't have an active account (Meta, 2023b; Chun 2016). [44] However, youth can also use the platform to gain various forms of capital. As discussed above,

[42] Fields are groups within society that a person can identify with, such as Canadian, youth, or student (Bourdieu, 1989).
[43] To Bourdieu, a person's behaviours and interests would be considered their habitus (Bourdieu, 1989).
[44] Meta collects data on anyone who clicks on any platforms they own. For example, while a person may not have a Facebook account, if they click on a link tied to Facebook, such as an article, information is collected on that interaction (Meta, 2023b)

Chloe and Nina harnessed the networked nature of Instagram to gain financial capital by solidifying their social recognition as professional photographers. While most users lack an understanding of how their data is used (Pettman, 2016; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019), which is admittedly problematic and calls for greater support for digital literacy, social media users can also use the framework of the platform for their own gain.

Challenging images ignite ethical debates both from the angle of the subject in the image and the viewer (Quay & Damico, 2012). For example, should the subject in an upsetting photo be given privacy, or is it more important to inform the public of current events (Berger, 2013; Quay & Damico, 2012)? With viewers, witnessing a challenging image can cause psychological harm (Holman et al., 2020; Kaplan, 2018), as we saw with Chloe, who had to remove herself from social media platforms after feeling bombarded with images of the Ukraine/Russia conflict. Yet, viewing difficult images can also positively affect people by encouraging them to become engaged citizens and participate in political issues (Lempinen, 2024; Pedwell, 2014). While the section did not come to a conclusion about whether or not people should be forced to view challenging images, my conversations with youth showed that definitions of "difficult" are highly personal. While Chloe had difficulty viewing war-related pictures, Juan was triggered by seeing images of happy families. Because our own experiences affect how we view and interpret an image, we each have unique reactions to "seeing."

Images that people produce and share online can influence and challenge social expectations. In this Chapter, I explored how the social objectification of female bodies and aesthetic ideals perpetuated in images can contribute to self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Parnell & Coutler, 2022; Salomon & Spears, 2022). We looked at the discussion of two teen girls, Hannah and Zara, who were aware of the existence of the ideals surrounding

female bodies and photographed themselves in a certain way to protect themselves from being socially ridiculed. Despite never being bullied for their appearance, the possibility of social ridicule caused them to perform in specific ways when photographing their bodies. Hannah used outfits, makeup, and posing techniques to reflect social expectations of beauty, while Zara removed her face from posted photographs. Zara's decision to post the photograph of her body as her profile photo in a public space could be seen as an act of defiance against the social rules that hold her back. This shows that through photographs, people can challenge the social norms that no longer serve them.

The last section explored youth relationships with celebrity images in online spaces. I identified that the youth I spoke to frame celebrities in two ways: 1) as idols and 2) as products. Those who saw celebrities as "idols" used elements of celebrities' personality traits, successes, and lifestyle choices as inspiration for their own lives. Youth also expressed exerting their power as consumers by liking the posts of celebrities they wanted to support and ignoring the posts of those they didn't. While celebrities hold significant social power and value and can use this to influence their viewers (Eyal et al., 2020; Zhang & Kennedy, 2020; Xie, 2021), the public has some control over who they support (Marcus, 2019). Each of the sections of this Chapter was diverse and explored the intricacies of images in digital spaces through various lenses; one overarching theme emerged: youth are actively engaged digital citizens who challenge norms through their images and use their understanding of the framework of social media to their advantage.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Beginning of the End

As we come to the end of this dissertation, I would like to return to my initial introduction. My first few words were about the question, "Is social media good or bad?" This is an inquiry I often get from child-rearing adults when I reveal that I study youth and social media. Often, parents, those who work with children and youth, and political entities approach the topic of young social media users with fear. This can be seen in action in various ways, such as cellphone bans in schools despite youth having the right to have access to technological devices (Benchetrit, 2023; Tobin, 2022; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021) and the way the media portrays social media use as innately "harmful" and "toxic" (New York Times, 2023; CBC Radio 2019). While I don't deny that certain aspects of social media are concerning, such as cyberbullying, taking a solely dystopian approach to digital technologies creates a narrow understanding of digital youth culture (boyd, 2014; Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2021; Papapanou et al., 2023). Therefore, it was not the goal of this dissertation to answer the above question but instead to approach the landscape of young social media use as a complex tapestry of stories and experiences that cannot be categorized as good or bad.

Social media applications have become ingrained in the everyday social activities of both adults and young people (boyd, 2014; Karppi, 2018). Users can chat with their friends and families, buy new or used products, and become informed on various topics of interest, which makes digital social spaces complex in that they have become part of the fabric of how most people live their lives (Chun, 2016; Karppi, 2018).[45] Visual communication through photographs

[45] Here, I say "most" because in Canada, 90% of youth use social media applications as of 2021 (Schimmele et al., 2021), and 91.3% of the Canadian population as a whole access social media (Bush, 2024), making Canada one of the most digitally connected countries in the world. While not all Canadians, young or otherwise, use social media, it is a prominent social tool.

and videos is a prominent component of social media applications. Billions of photographs are shared by social media users every day across various platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram (Broz, 2023). Given that social media is embedded in the social experiences of youth (boyd, 2014; Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019) and that photographs can be used as a visual conduit to both understand and respond to culture (Rose, 2022; Pink, 2012), I entered into this dissertation hoping that by specifically examining the photographs of youth I would gain a better understanding of youth digital culture and the greater social rules that drive how youth participate in these spaces. More specifically, I began with the following questions: 1) How do youth use photographic creation to express themselves emotionally?; 2) What sociological rules influence what a youth chooses to post in online spaces publicly?; 3) How does interacting with the photographs of other social media users affect youth emotionally and contribute to their understanding of their own identity?

I was not wrong in that my participants images inspired fruitful conversations about their online experiences. Initially, I was most interested in the way "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 2003), which are socially constructed rules around how a person should conduct the embodiment of their emotions, would play out in the images of youth. Through conversation it was evident that youth followed social guidelines in terms of what emotions should be displayed on social media and how digital emotional expression should be managed. However, the open-ended nature of my interviews revealed that emotions branch into many aspects of image sharing, even when a specific emotion is not the main focus of the image. For example, in Chapter Three, I explore how identity is connected to what images youth post online. Yet, entangled in stories about identity are emotional experiences. For instance, my participants often used social media and the practice of viewing and posting images to stay connected to their friends and family during the

pandemic. Beneath the practicality of the conversation around connectedness, we can also see emotions such as loneliness and love. This was also reflected in Chapter Five, which looked at how the conflation of private and public spheres in digital spaces intersected with images. To illustrate, looking at "difficult" images online could potentially cause emotional arousal in the viewer. In all three of the Chapters in this dissertation, my initial questions came to life by exploring how emotions, identity, social rules, and private/public spheres all intersect through photographs. This conclusion will provide final thoughts on my findings in three ways: 1) I will consider the limitations of my work, 2) I will speak to how this project identifies various avenues for future work, and 3) I will reflect upon each chapter both textually and through my own photographic creations.

Limitations

While this dissertation successfully considers the role of photographs in the social media practices of youth, no project is without limitations that need to be addressed. I have identified three major limitations that could have impacted the overall quality of this project: 1) The number of participants, while sufficient for the type of project, as well as diversity in participant demographics, could have been improved; 2) The protection-based parameters I gave to the participants in terms of the types of photographs they submit to the project could have influenced my findings; and 3) The time-constraints associated with this project did not allow me to use methodologies that focus on youth engagement as much as I would have liked. It is important to communicate the limitations of my research with the readers of my dissertation because it can help advance future work in the area of youth digital culture by identifying areas for improved research practices (Ross & Zaidi, 2019; Greener, 2018).

As discussed in my introduction, thirty-four youths participated in this study by submitting photographs and engaging in an interview. There is a general academic consensus that between twenty-five to thirty participants is enough to achieve saturation where clear themes will emerge, meaning that this project met these guidelines (Tilleczeck & Campbell, 2020; Saunders et al., 2018; Dworkin, 2012). However, given that a vast number of youth are engaging in social media practices (Schimmele et al., 2021), I feel that a higher number of participants may be necessary to gain a firmer understanding of the role photographs play in youth digital culture. While having thirty-four participants is respectable for this type of project, given the time and funding constraints associated with Ph.D. research, I recognize that there is a risk of generalization and that a higher number of participants would minimize this concern. This dissertation features themes brought forward by my participants and acknowledges that user experiences can vary. For example, in Chapter Three, I highlight how parameters of authenticity may differ from youth to youth, and in Chapter Five, I discuss how youth define "difficult" images uniquely. However, with only thirty-four participants, some of my findings may be interpreted as generalizations, where I am assuming that specific experiences apply to everyone (Payne & William, 2005; Larsson, 2009), such as the fact that social feelings rules impact how youth express images online.

It is important to note that I acknowledge that each user of social media will have a distinctive experience, especially because algorithms shape the feeds of each user on an individualistic level (Chun, 2016; Mosseri, 2021b). Technology is also constantly evolving, meaning that certain findings presented in this study may no longer apply if a digital shift occurs, such as a new application. While there is fragility in my conclusions, given the ever-changing nature of digital landscapes, youth culture, and political frameworks that govern youths

interaction with digital spaces, my findings contribute meaningfully to the advancement of understanding the intersectionality between images, youth culture, and digital life. Should this project be expanded in the future with an increased number of participants, I would also expect to see an expansion in the range of the demographics of my participants. This project did have a fairly diverse group of participants (see Table 2), but there were voices that were absent from the stories told in this dissertation. For instance, all participants were between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, yet many social media applications allow users that are thirteen years of age or older. I made a specific choice not to include participants under the age of sixteen due to the potential technical difficulty of obtaining parental consent, but younger social media users should be included in larger future studies. Another obvious gap is that all of my participants identified as either male or female, meaning that my findings did not include any non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals. Having conversations with a broader range of participants will contribute to understanding the intricacies of individuality in digital spaces.

The second limitation I would like to address is that the boundaries I placed on my participants regarding image submission may have skewed my results. As part of the interview process, I asked my participants to bring three images that they had taken and shared on social media applications between 2020 and 2022. While I feel that the time period parameters were warranted as it was important that the images were connected to the participant's current lives, I also stated in my consent form that "It is encouraged that these images do not contain your face or any identifying features and may not contain the faces of others due to confidentiality issues." This choice was strategically made as a protective measure to make sure that all of my participants remained anonymous. However, this aim may have hindered my participants from choosing the photos they wanted to share and, therefore, obstructed their voices (Alderson &

Morrow, 2011). Many participants also rejected my boundaries and submitted photos outside of what I requested. Out of the one-hundred and two images discussed during the interview process, sixty-six (65%) were found images, and nine (8.8%) contained faces or bodies. While some participants pushed through my restrictions to discuss their experiences the way that they wished, I do wonder what images would have been submitted had I not suggested excluding faces.

Lastly, while I recognize my young participants as capable of sharing their own views, and participatory techniques such as photovoice were used, I do think more methods should be employed in future projects to engage youth in the research process. For example, forming a youth advisory board would have allowed me to collaborate with youth on the design of the study, and it, therefore, would have been shaped by the involved demographic (Young et al., 2023.; Collins et al., 2020). This method could have also been used to discuss knowledge mobilization, where information, post-study, could have been better disseminated to youth. While time constraints made this approach inappropriate, I do think that using engaged methods is important when working with children and youth participants because their thoughts are valuable, and they could assist in producing research that better serves the young population. In future imaginings of my work with young digital users, I also think it would be valuable to operate a youth-led project where I act as a support to youth researchers (Ozer et al., 2020; Ozer et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2020). This type of project empowers youth to research a topic and engage in social and political change, which could be particularly useful in projects about digital spaces, given the number of youth involved in social media platforms. While my dissertation does have limitations, it will inform my future work and the way that I design forthcoming studies.

Future Work

Throughout this dissertation, I identified various areas where future research may be warranted due to present gaps. The first area is understanding how dramaturgy functions across multiple platforms. Dramaturgy was heavily discussed in Chapter Three and comes from Goffman's (1959) view that people are actors who conduct themselves differently across social settings in order to manage others' impressions of themselves. To expand, a youth may act one way with their friend, another with their teachers, and another with their parents. Goffman (1959) separated themes of "frontstage" and "backstage", which represent "public" and "private" lives. According to Goffman (1959), people are more authentically themselves in private settings, yet given that the differentiation between private and public spheres becomes murky within digital spaces, when this theory is applied to social media, it needs to be reimagined. While dramaturgy has previously been used in digital culture research (Hogan, 2010; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Lewis et al., 2008), most literature focuses on only one application at a time. This is problematic because social media users are often on more than one platform. For instance, in Chapter Three, Eva discussed how she used separate platforms to communicate with her Chinese relatives versus Western friends. Her posts were uniquely curated for the audience viewing her posts, and she separated them in order to manage the differing group's impression of her "self." This shows the importance of understanding the role cross-platform interactions play in digital impression management.

In Chapter Four, I examined how youth use images to infect their audience with an intended emotion. For example, Miguel posted a brightly coloured image that read "Happy Friday" in order to evoke feelings of happiness in those who viewed the image. The youth I spoke to were also aware of the fact that emotions can have a contagious effect and potentially

negatively impact others should the image be upsetting (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021; Hatfield et al., 1994). In order to protect their audience from negative emotional experiences, they often avoided posting photographs that could be interpreted as undesirable. One of my participants, Juan, offered an interesting idea in terms of facilitating the concept of emotional contagion to positively impact those who were experiencing diminished mental wellness. Juan stated, “The online images and what you post would act if you know the right materials and act as a source of motivation, a source of relieving yourself from such depression, a kind of mental health solution.”. Social media has often been viewed as a technology that causes mental health concerns in youth (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; Boumosleh & Jaalouk, 2017; Caner et al., 2022). While I don’t agree that social media is the sole cause of a rise in mental health issues in Canadian youth (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2022; Government of Canada, 2022; Boak et al., 2018), and feel that the reality of this increase is likely complex and multifactored, Juan interestingly “flips the switch” in terms of how social media is viewed in connection to mental health. Could it be a solution? A future study could be conducted to understand how youth could use images and social media to improve mental health.

I would like to continue research in the field of digital rights. During my work for this project, I found that very minimal research exists that aims to understand young people's interaction with social media from a rights-based perspective. Canada is a country that has ratified the UNCRC, a document that outlines specific rights that children are entitled to, meaning that Canada is obligated to uphold these defined rights (UNCRC, 1989; Government of Canada, 2021). While the initial document predates society's emersion into communicative digital technologies, the United Nations released a statement called General Comment No. 25 *on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment,* which proclaimed that all the rights in the

initial UNCRC also applied to digital spaces. Currently, no research exists that analyses how *General Comment No. 25* has been implemented in Canada or how children and youth understand their digital rights. My future research will address the following questions: 1) How do current digital platforms, such as social media applications, align with child rights as outlined by the UNCRC? 2) How are digital rights understood by both children and youth, as well as child-rearing adults? 3) How can children/youth, adults, policymakers, and digital space designers be better informed about digital rights? and 4) According to youth, what should digital spaces look like? I imagine this project as a collaborative effort amongst multiple researchers in partnership with organizations such as Media Smarts. I envision knowledge mobilization strategies that include 1) A report that outlines our findings in non-academic terms, 2) A toolkit for youth that provides resources on how to ensure that their digital rights are met, 3) A series of picture books that explain digital rights to younger audiences, and 4) A website providing free resources for teachers and parents on how to talk about digital rights and support the rights of children/youth.

Lastly, my work in this dissertation uses the theories of many great thinkers such as Erving Goffman, Arlie Hochschild, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Sara Ahmed. The theories provided by these academics were used as a jumping off point in my writing to think about the stories of my participants. For instance, Hochschild's (2003) concept of "feeling rules" was useful in understanding the social pressure that might influence the embodiment of emotions in young people's images. I also use an assorted mix of theoretical concepts such as affect theory and identity theory to serve the conversations I wanted to engage in during this dissertation. While this approach was useful in this piece of writing, my work does not reflect upon singular theories at length, and this could be viewed as a limitation. In future work, I will have more time

to participate in an even richer engagement with specific philosophies and thinkers within the fields of cultural and media studies in connect to how emotions and images intersect.

Chapter Reflections

I would like to end this dissertation by reflecting on each chapter and the stories that unfolded within them. As I asked my participants to share their own photographs, I felt that it was fitting to create some of my own. I produced three photos, one for each chapter, to emphasize the main point. I only used tools that would be available to my participants, such as the camera on my iPhone and free editing tools, such as Canva and Snapseed. Initially, I had imagined creating a large online gallery with images I photographed that reflected all of the prominent points found in this study with interactive capabilities where onlookers could comment on how the image makes them feel. The intention of this was to continue the conversation in a public manner about how emotions and images intersect. While this idea faded due to funding, it may have been for the best because, standing on the other side of this project, I think it is more important to highlight the stories and images submitted by my participants than my own. However, it is my pleasure to end this dissertation on a creative note.

Identity

The image below, called *Multiple Selves,* reflects the intricacies of impression management in online spaces. I placed a prism in front of my phone's camera so that the image of myself was split into multiple fragments. This is to represent that a person might present various versions of themselves online. For example, as discussed above, Eva posted different photographs based on her intended audience. The images she produced and published reflected

specific cultural and social expectations she felt were placed on her by the various groups. Impression management, where someone performs their identity so that their audience views them in a specific way (Goffman, 1959), can become cumbersome on social media platforms because multiple groups of people may be witnessing an image at the same time, such as parents or friends. This complicates identity presentations because while a person may post an image intended for their friends, their family may view the same image and make an assumption about their identity that conflicts with how they want to be seen (boyd, 2014).

Another important aspect of *Multiple Selves* is that, as the viewer, it is hard to differentiate between the real me and reflections of my image. This represents the complexities of authenticity in online communicative spaces. In the introduction of Chapter Three, I showed that Meta's (2023) transparency policy requires people to be "authentic," but what does this even mean? When I spoke with my participants about authenticity in digital spaces, each had a unique interpretation of what this meant to them. To expand, while Zara felt stories were more authentic than posts, Rahim saw authenticity in not posting at all. Where we land on the topic of authenticity is that there is no clear definition, and each individual comes to their own conclusion about what makes an image authentic. While impression management and interpreting authenticity are challenging components of participating in social media, most of my conversations with the participants in Chapter Three related to one thing: Youth want to be connected to their social circles, their friends and family, and they do this by witnessing and publishing images.

Figure 23

Multiple Selves

Emotions

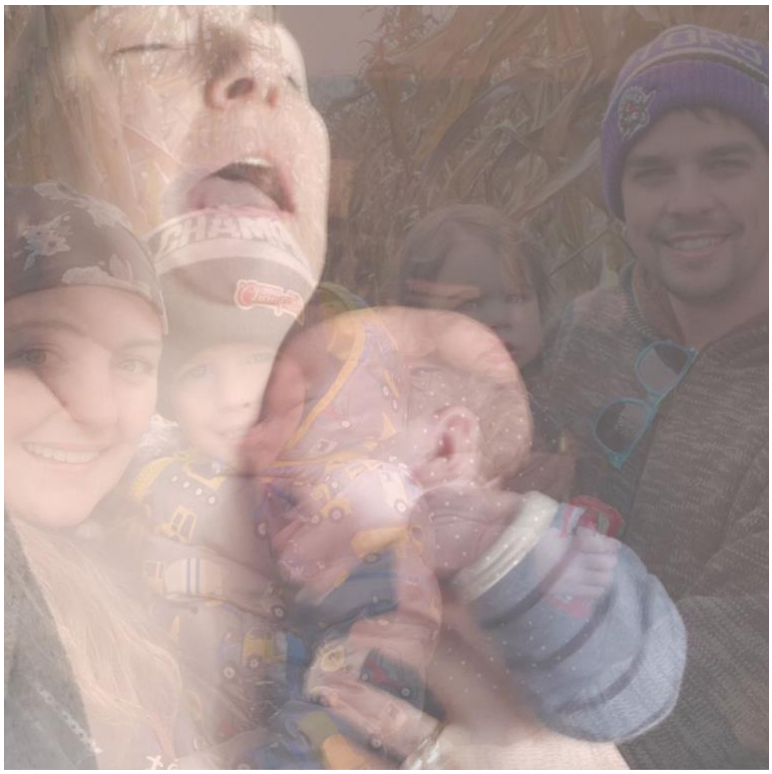
In Chapter Four, I explored how feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003) intersect with the images youth produce for audiences on social media. Much like our identity, Hochschild (2003) believed that people managed their emotions based on social rules around appropriate emotions. In general, within Western society, people are taught that negative emotions are not valuable and should be controlled (Hochschild, 2003). This is evident in both the images and words of the participants, who commented that they often avoided posting images that portrayed negative emotions because they are not "valuable" (Nina) and because negative emotions are stigmatized, meaning that your audience is "going to judge you" (Hannah). When youth do post about negative occurrences, the themes of the posts often fall under categories that are deemed socially acceptable in terms of portraying emotions like sadness. For example, Rahim posted about the passing of his dog, and Chloe artistically depicted her loneliness during the COVID-19

pandemic. In each of these scenarios, there is a level of shared experience where, because the trauma is collective in nature (Garfin, 2020; Alexandar et al., 2004), talking about it in a public space is more customary. The youth in this project also attempted to express more negatively viewed emotions by hiding them in plain sight, such as through memes or emojis, so that their experiences were not presented in an embodied and obvious way to their audience. While feeling rules shaped the way youth avoided negative emotions, it also pressured them into constantly striving to be happy (Hochschild, 2003; Ahmed, 2010). For instance, Sebastian saw happiness as the "most important thing" and displayed this belief by posting images that reflected happiness. What this chapter shows is that social rules shape how youth feel and how they perform their emotions in photographs.

The image I created to reflect this chapter is called *Hidden Emotions.* I made a composition of two personal photographs to show the emotions that might exist underneath how they are initially portrayed through images in public spaces. The first photograph shows a standard family photograph, where my husband, myself, and my two children are smiling towards the camera. There is a social belief that happiness stems from family structures, and people may put affective effort into showing their family as happy through the images they post, even if the happiness is a facade (Hochschild, 2003; Ahmed, 2010). In Chapter Four, Nina avoided negative posts because the portrayal of sadness would conflict with her mother's desire to be a "happy family." Entangled with my happy family photograph is a moment of vulnerability as a mother. The second image in the composition is the first night I was alone with my son when he was a newborn. As mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, Elliot was very ill when he was born and needed to be held all night. Caring for my son at night was a job typically shared with my husband, but on this night, it was just the two of us. I sent this photo as

a joke to my husband at three am to tell him to come home. While my family is, in fact, something that makes me happy, there are also moments of frustration, exhaustion, and fear. Although my identity as a mother in my 30s does not directly mirror those of the youth I interviewed because I am an outsider to current youth culture, it does play with the idea that images can hold space for the array of emotions a person experiences. Life is not about singular emotions but an ever-changing tapestry of feelings that reflect and constitute the life we live.

Figure 24
Hidden Emotions



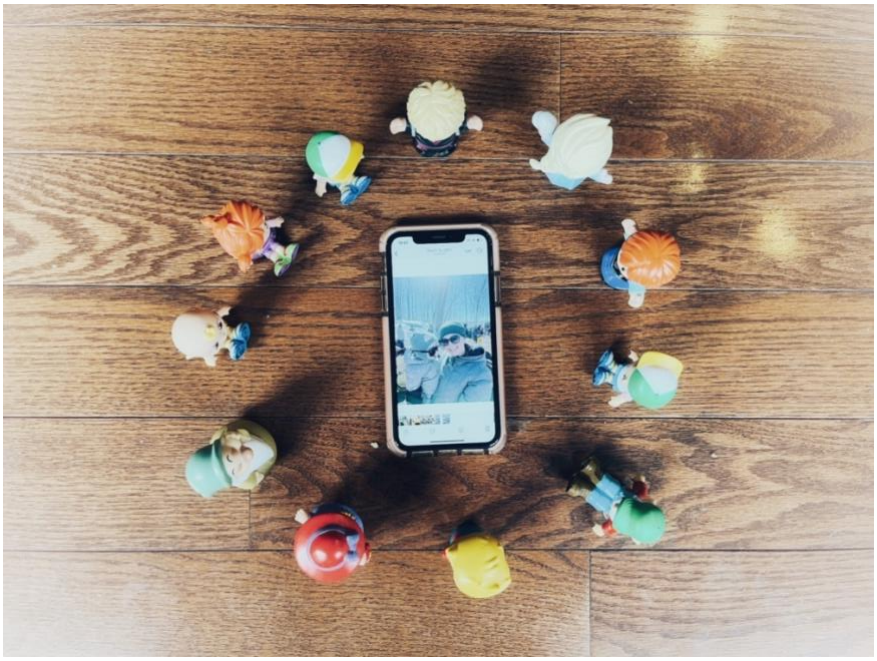
Private vs Public

Social media exists as a space that straddles the spheres of public and private life (Drozdova, 2020; boyd, 2014). A person might post a photograph to their social media accounts with the intention of sharing a moment with close friends and family. Yet, the "leaky" (Chun, 2016) structure of social media applications means that the reach of a photograph might not be realized by the original poster. This stems from the capitalization of user data, where the online habits of users are recorded and used for financial gain (Chun, 2016; Pettman, 2016). While the youth I spoke to may not have developed literacy on the topic of data mining, our discussions revealed many unique ways that their photographs intersected with themes of publicity versus privacy. Although each of the findings was vastly unique, there was one main thought that connected the chapter: youth actively engage in image-based decision-making online. Youth spoke about using the networked capabilities of social media sites to build personal businesses, support artists, and push back against social ideologies that shape what we post. Youth are also affected as the audience of images circulating on social media. For instance, youth were triggered in unique ways by "difficult" images, and some youth used the images of celebrities as inspiration for their own life decisions. Being both a witness and producer of images impacts life experiences.

The photograph below shows a digital image surrounded by an audience. Some characters in the audience are staring directly at the image, while others either have their heads turned away or are facing the outside of the circle. This represents that when a person posts an image online, the audience isn't always realized, yet they are ever present within the social media landscape. A single image can have an immense ripple effect where viewers are affected in ways never known by the poster. I would like to conclude this dissertation by leaving you with

some final thoughts. Images are an important part of the communicative practices of online interactions. Through images, posters not only express their experiences to their audience, but through images, we see social rules and ideologies that shape how we frame our lives. Youth can also create "countervisualities" (Hirsch, 1997) of these social structures by pushing against them through visual creations. While there are challenging aspects to social media from emotional, social, and political perspectives there is also opportunity for youth within its structures to be actively engaged in thinking about and responding to the world around them.

Figure 25
The Audience



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Appendix A

Samples of Social Media Pages

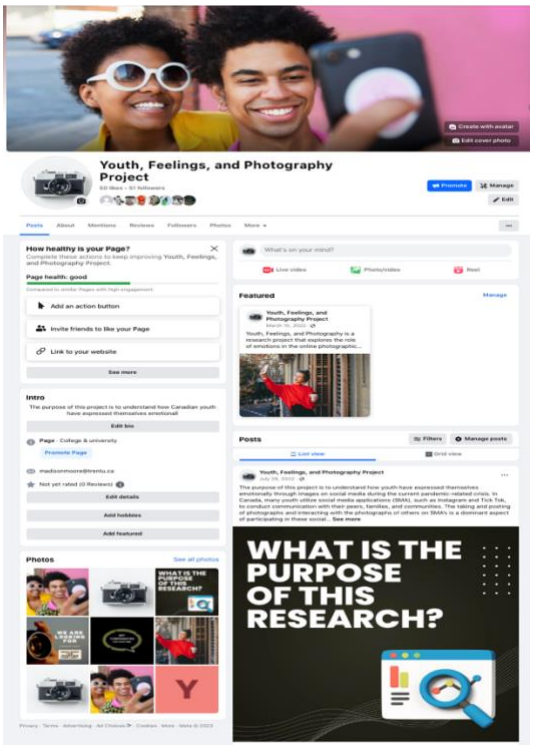


Figure A1. *A sample of the project's Facebook Page*

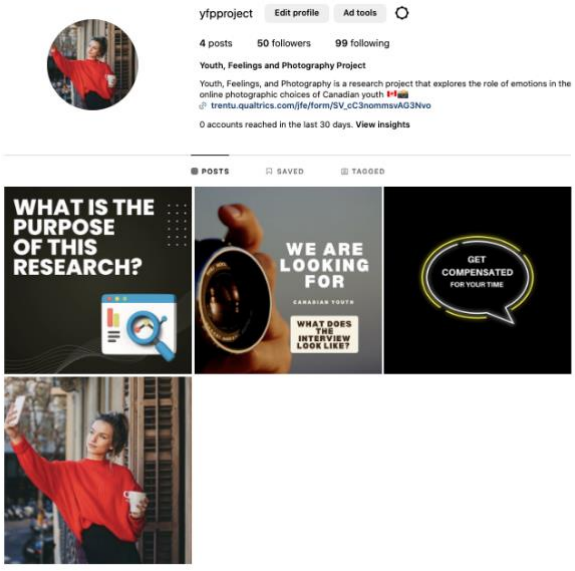


Figure A2. *A sample of the project's Instagram Page*

Appendix B

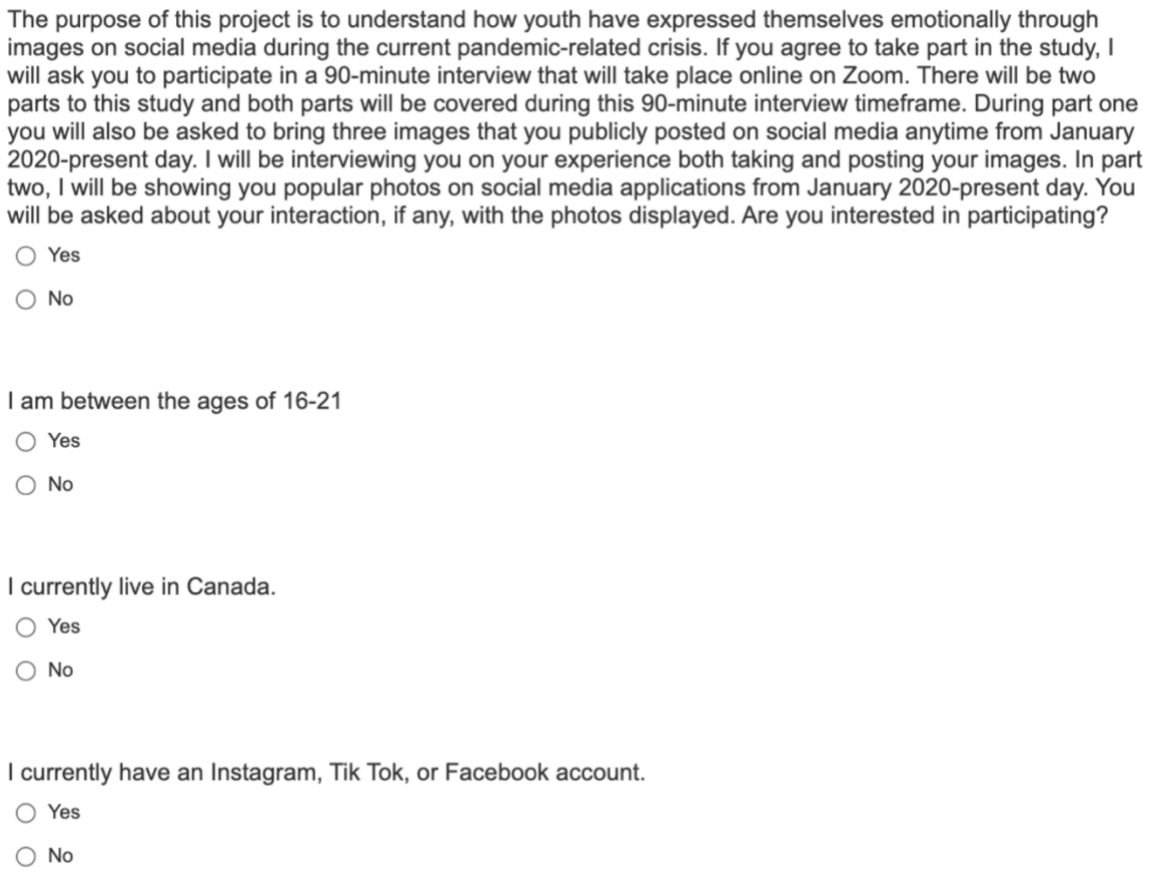


Figure B1: *Qualtrics Survey*

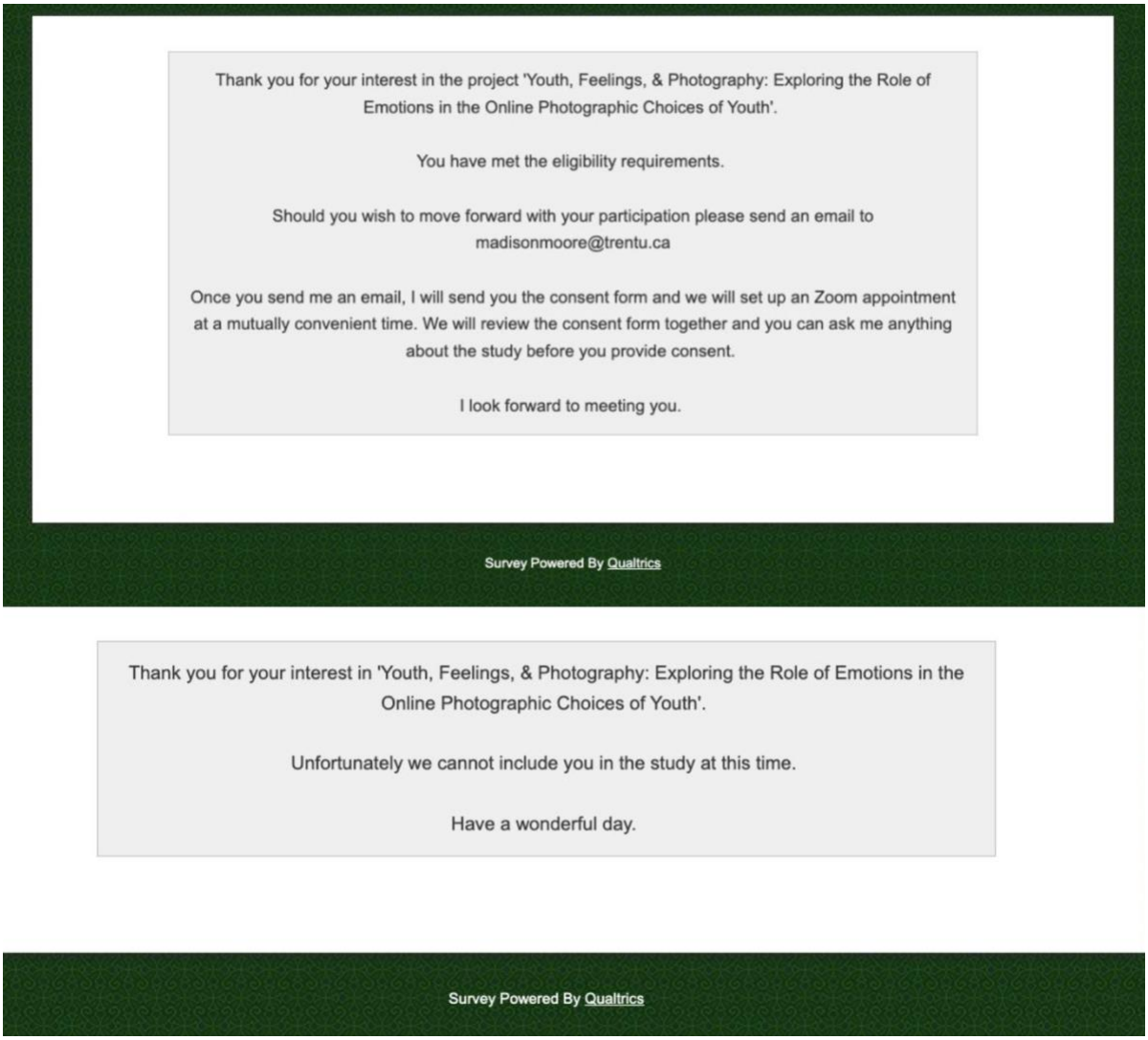


Figure B2: *Qualtrics Survey-Results email.*

Appendix C

Emails sent to Participants

1) Welcome Email

Thank you for your interest in the Youth, Feelings and Photography Project.

To participate you MUST:
- Be between the ages of 16-21
- Live in Canada
- Use social media

I have attached a consent form for you to read. Please let me know if you have any questions. If you would like to move forward with being a participant, please sign the form and return it to me at your earliest convenience.

Please let me know three dates/times that work best for you for your interview.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to take part in the study, I will ask you to participate in a 90-minute interview that will take place online on Zoom. There will be two parts to this study and both parts will be covered during this 90-minute interview timeframe. During part one you will also be asked to **bring three images** that you photographed and publicly posted on social media anytime from January 2020-present day. I will be interviewing you on your experience both taking and posting your images. With your consent, the images may be used in publications. If you do not consent, your images will be described verbally. In part two, I will be showing you popular photos on social media applications from January 2020-present day. You will be asked about your interaction, if any, with the photos displayed. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed, the audio-recording will be destroyed. If you do not consent to audio-recording, with your consent, I will take notes throughout the interview.

Have a wonderful day.

Madison Moore

2) Booking Email

I have you booked in for x date (Eastern Time). Please let me know if there are any issues with this time. The Zoom link is below.

As part of the interview, we ask that you bring three images that you photographed and publicly posted on social media anytime from January 2020 to the present day. If you are comfortable, you can email them to madisonmoore@trentu.ca prior to the interview. I will be interviewing

you on your experience, both taking and posting your images. With your consent, the images may be used in publications.

I look forward to your interview and hearing your thoughts on photography and social media.

3) Closing Email

Thank you so much for your participation in the YFP project. A gift card has been sent to your email address.

Here is a list of mental health resources that we like to send to all of our participants:

- Kids Help Phone for Children and Teens www.kidshelpphone.ca/
- Anxiety Canada – A great resource for Anxiety and other related mental health challenges.
- Mind Your Mind www.mindyourmind.ca.
- Teen Mental Health www.teenmentalhealth.org.
- Mind Check www.mindcheck.ca.
- Good to talk www.good2talk.ca.

Appendix D

Consent Form

Research Consent Form

Title: Picturing a Pandemic: Exploring the Role of Emotions in the Online Photographic Choices of Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Principal Investigator: Madison Moore, PhD Student, Trent University, Cultural Studies Program Contact: madisonmoore@trentu.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Michael Epp, Associate Professor, Trent University, Cultural Studies Program Contact: michaelepp@trentu.ca 705-748-1011 ext 6252

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you agree to participate, please ask any questions that you may have.

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research project because you are a youth between the ages of 16-21, use social media, and have resided in Canada between 2020-present. The information in this form is intended to help you understand what we are asking of you so that you can decide whether you agree to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time (see withdrawal information below). A decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this project is to understand how youth have expressed themselves emotionally through images on social media during the current pandemic-related crisis. In Canada, many youth utilize social media applications (SMA), such as Instagram and Tick Tok, to conduct communication with their peers, families, and communities. The taking and posting of photographs and interacting with the photographs of others on SMA's is a dominant aspect of participating in these social applications. I would like to better understand the choices behind what a youth posts on social media and the connection their decisions have with their emotional experiences and cultural identity. This investigation is qualitative and aims to collect and analyze interview data from Canadian youth (age 16-21). I plan to write a PhD dissertation on the findings of this research. The information collected from this study may also be presented in the format of journal articles, conference presentations, or book publications. A research creation

component will be a part of this project. I intend to create a series of photographs based on the findings of the study which will be displayed on a website where the public can interact with the findings.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to take part in the study, I will ask you to participate in a 90-minute interview that will take place online on Zoom. There will be two parts to this study and both parts will be covered during this 90-minute interview timeframe. During part one you will also be asked to bring three images that you publicly posted on social media anytime from January 2020-present day. I will be interviewing you on your experience both taking and posting your images. It is encouraged that these images do not contain your face or any identifying features and may not contain the faces of others due to confidentiality issues. With your consent, the images may be used in publications. If you do not consent, your images will be described verbally. In part two, I will be showing you popular photos on social media applications from January 2020-present day. You will be asked about your interaction, if any, with the photos displayed. With your consent, interviews will be audio-recorded. Once the recording has been transcribed, the audio-recording will be destroyed. If you do not consent to audio-recording, with your consent, I will take notes throughout the interview.

Risks and Inconveniences
I anticipate that any risk will be minimal to those participating in this study. If there is a question that makes you uncomfortable in any way you may refuse to answer. Resources, such as the number to Kids Help Phone, will be provided to you.

Possible Benefits
Your participation may result in the follow benefits:
1) Provide an opportunity for youth to voice their opinion on how they use social media (photography) as a form of expression.
2) Provide parents/adult caregivers information on how social media can be used as a tool to encourage youth expression and suggest ways in which to support youth while participating in social media.
3) Provide policymakers information on how youth use social media to express themselves emotionally, therefore this may be a good space for support-based programming.

Compensation
You will be compensated with a $25 gift card to Starbucks or Amazon.

Withdrawing from the study
If you withdraw your consent during the course of the study, all information collected from you before your withdrawal will be discarded. You may withdraw from this study at any point, up to three months past your interview. To withdraw please email me, the principal investigator (contact information above) to notify me of your intent to withdraw from the study. You may or may not choose to provide a reason. If you choose to withdraw from the study, I will cease all contact with you in regard to the study. If any information had been collected, such as a transcript, your information will be destroyed. No follow-up will be necessary after I am made aware of your intent to withdraw.

Confidentiality

I will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. To protect your identity, you will be assigned a pseudonym so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be encrypted by being kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer. I, Madison Moore, will have ownership of the data collected in this study. Please note that my ownership only pertains to the information you provide about your photographs and not your photograph itself. Ownership of the photographs you bring to the interview remain the property of the participants. While Zoom interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes (with the permission of the participant), they will be immediately destroyed following transcription by myself. The data (transcripts) will be retained for two years after the completion of the study and then destroyed by myself.

Ethics review

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board. Please direct questions pertaining to this review to Jamie Muckle, Certifications and Regulatory Compliance Officer Trent University, Phone: 705-748-1011 ext. 7896, Email: jmuckle@trentu.ca

Statement of consent – please type your name below

I _____ am fully informed and freely give my consent to participate in this research. I have received a copy of the consent form for my records.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

I agree to be audio recorded ___ Yes ___No

I agree that my photos presented to the researcher may be used in any future publications. However, I maintain ownership over my photograph.

___ Yes ___No

Appendix E

Demographic Questions

Where in Canada do you live?

What year were you born?

With what gender do you identify? (select all that apply)

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

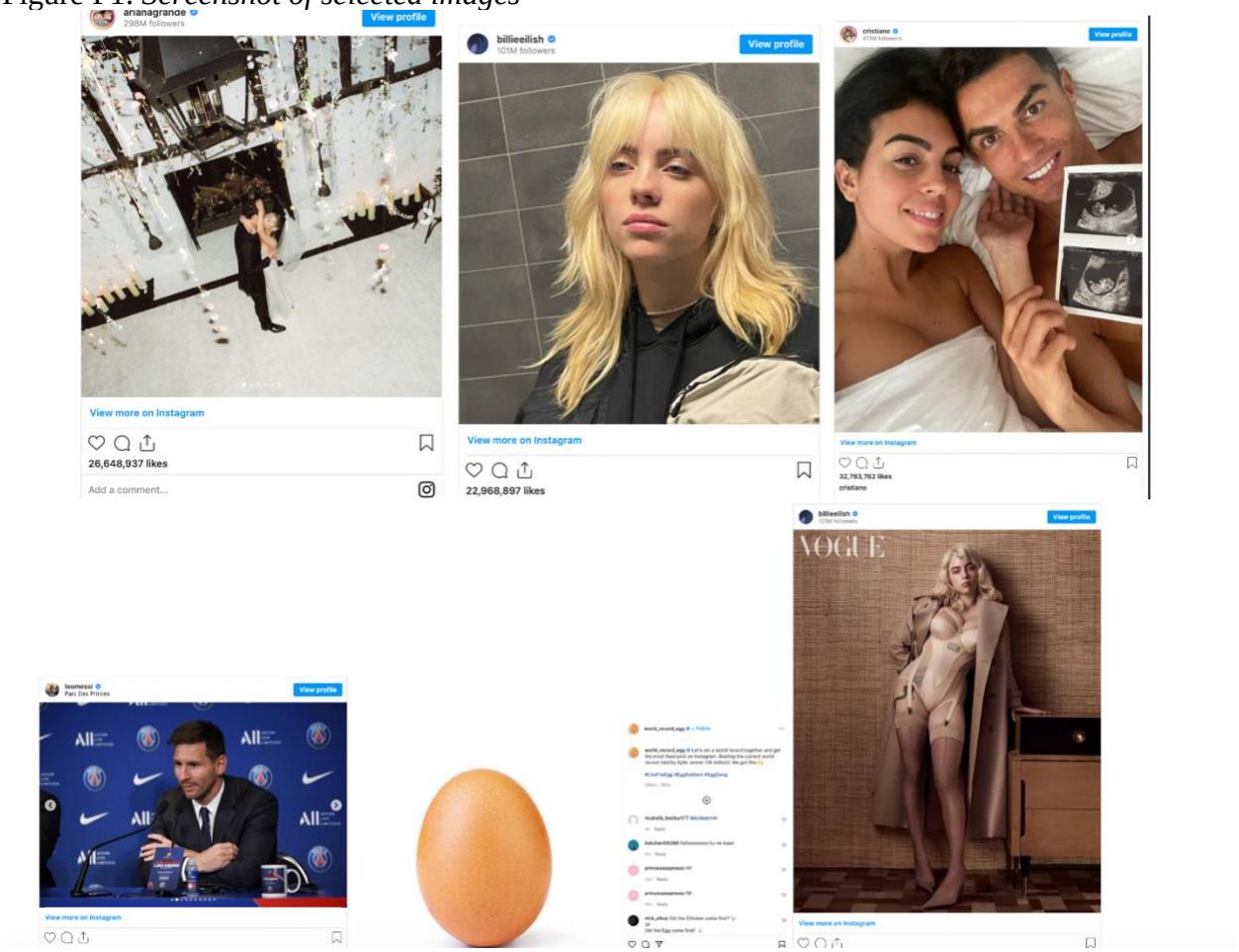
Which of the following best describes your racial identification? (select all that apply)

- Black
- East/Southeast Asian
- Indigenous/Aboriginal, please specify (optional)
- Latino
- Middle Eastern
- South Asian
- White
- Prefer not to say
- Other, please specify

Appendix F

Selected Images shown to the Participants

Figure F1: *Screenshot of selected images*



(@billieelish, 2020a; @billieelish, 2020b; @leomessi, 2020; @world_record_egg, 2020; @cristino, 2020; @ariannagrande, 2020)

Appendix G

Interview Questions

General Social Media Questions:

1) What social media applications do you use?
2) How do you access social media?
3) How much time do you spend looking at social media?
4) How often do you create/take photos for social media?
5) Do you use editing tools for your photos, and if so, which ones?
6) Which social media applications do you use most often (Facebook/Instagram/Tik Tok).
7) What emotions do you portray the most often in the posts you create?
8) Do you feel comfortable sharing emotions such as happiness excitement/joy in socially posted images? How would you portray happiness/excitement/joy in an image?
9) Do you feel comfortable sharing emotions such as sadness/anger/frustration in socially posted images? How would you portray sadness anger/frustration in an image?
10) Has your use of social media changed, such as increased or decreased, during COVID-19?
11) Has the content you choose to share changed over the course of COVID-19 vs. prior to COVID-19.

Part One Questions:

1) Tell me about your image.
2) Why did you choose to share this image online?
3) Why did you choose to share this image with me?
4) Can you walk me through how you captured the image and why?
5) Did you edit this image at all and why?
6) What response, if any, did you receive from your online community regarding the image?
7) How does this image relate to your life?
8) What are you communicating through this image?

These questions will be asked for each of the images chosen by the participants.

Part Two Questions:

1) Have you seen this image in an online platform?
2) If seen, did you choose to share, like, or comment on any of these images? Why or why not?
3) How did viewing these images make you feel?
4) If you have not seen these images prior to today, how does the image make you feel now?
5) How does this image relate to your life, if at all?

Participants will be shown images as a whole and asked these questions once.

1) What types of images do you like to see on your feed?
2) What types of images do you not like to see on your feed?
3) Have you ever engaged with activism through images?

Appendix H

Examples of Discussed “Difficult” Images

Figure Ha

Image of “The Falling Man” by Richard Drew (2001)

Figure Hb

Image of prisoners in barracks during the Holocaust (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

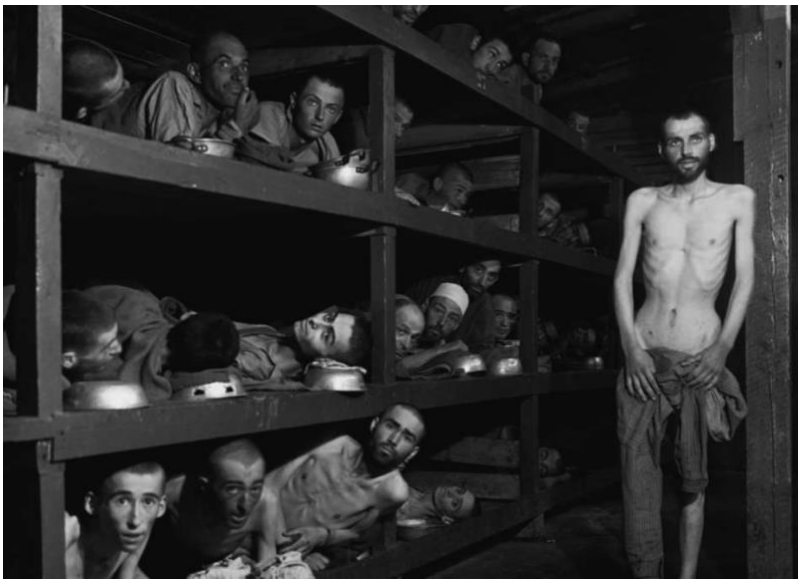


Figure Hc

Image of a woman smearing blood on a police riot shield (Rayford, 2016)