The Role of Social Media as a Gender Socialization Agent for Cisgender College Students

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ABSTRACT

This research project looks at components of gender socialization for cisgender college students. Expanding on pre-existing research, I consider traditional agents of socialization and argue that social media should be newly considered as a primary agent of socialization. To do this, I interviewed 12 cisgender college students (aged 19-23). The traditional routes of socialization and social media were both found to be important gender socialization factors. Interestingly, social media was found to have two contradicting functions. It served to counter traditional ideas of gender through its role providing education and exposure to diverse identities. At the same time, though, participants also reported normative ideas on the types of posts that different genders were expected to publish, feeling pressure to meet these standards. As social media only continues to become more pervasive, this provides an important avenue for research on the role that it has played in a population that has been on these websites for nearly a decade.

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 2020, Harry Styles was featured on the cover of *Vogue* magazine wearing various dresses and skirts, which have become a part of his and other male celebrities' wardrobes. He received praise for breaking down gender norms and fashion stereotypes, although transgender and non-gender conforming individuals, specifically those of color, have been doing this for decades. Still, to be shown on such a popular publication as *Vogue* is a sign of an evolution in the understanding of gender identity and a deconstruction of the narrow constraints of masculinity and femininity. Not everyone was supportive of or pleased to see the cover, though. Candace Owens, a conservative commentator, tweeted, "There is no society that can survive without strong men...Bring back manly men" (Owens, 2021). Clearly, gender is still a contested realm.

Gender identity is something that affects the day-to-day life of everyone, whether or not it is consciously or subconsciously. Although gender is sometimes popularly considered to be a primary concern for transgender individuals, or those whose gender does not correspond to their sex-assigned-at-birth, it is also a key aspect of selfhood for cisgender individuals, or those whose gender identity does correspond with their sex-assigned-at-birth, and non-binary individuals, whose identities fit outside of the gender binary. It shapes how people understand themselves and their sense of self, from the clothing they may feel that they can wear to the ways that they carry their bodies. Given that we live in a patriarchal society, one's place in the gender hierarchy also has a substantial impact on feelings of self-worth and self-esteem due to things like stereotypes (Lurye et al., 2008). It changes how individuals relate to one another and form friendships and relationships (Bradshaw et al., 2022). Therefore, it is evident that gender is something that is not

just a personal identity, but something that contributes to one's everyday experiences in a variety of ways.

Gender is not just innate but also learned through socialization processes. Much of the gender socialization research focuses on the influence of parents/guardians on the development of gender identity (MacPhee & Prendergast, 2019). However, the rise of social media and the ever-increasing universality of the Internet have also played a key role in education on issues such as gender, and there is not much research on this realm, especially in relation to cisgender indivduals. This is especially true for older members of Generation Z (defined as being born between 1997 and 2012), who came of age with the Internet at their fingertips and have had it be a part of their lives from as young as adolescence, a quite pivotal development stage (Pew Research Center). Tracking this generation and the influence of the Internet and especially social media will be important for understanding trends in behaviors of adults and youth alike.

Therefore, this study explores the development of the understanding of gender identity of cisgender college students and analyzes how growing up in the twenty-first century has played a role in this development. I examine how cisgender college students understand both their own personal gender identity and their understanding of gender as a broader concept. I note what individuals indicate as the most salient parts of their gender identity development/socialization and ask them to consider their social media use in their adolescence and young adult life to find any associations. This serves as an important contribution to the field as it will allow researchers to better understand the unique role that media and the Internet have played in the development of this subset of Generation Z's understandings of social issues and identity, a realm that is constantly changing and evolving and is quite different from the forms of media of the past.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

DOING GENDER:

Sociological research and common understandings have typically pushed away from the historic conflation of sex and gender, instead understanding sex as a biological distinction and gender as a cultural distinction, a presentation of self created through behaviors, actions, and decisions like clothing and hairstyles. This, however, has recently begun to also be complicated further, as there has been more of a conversation on the problematic nature of considering sex as a biological binary. Fausto-Sterling (2019) explains that there are many bodies that do not fit neatly into the categories defined through things like chromosomes and external genitalia, such as intersex individuals, and that these categories themselves are often difficult to define. This contributes to issues like Olympic sex testing, in which the International Olympic Committee subjects athletes, typically successful female athletes, to invasive and problematic testing to determine if individuals are really eligible to compete as female (Wackwitz, 2003). Further, Fausto-Sterling (2019) goes on to explain that sex and gender can serve to inform one another, rather than be unrelated, and that sex itself is a social construction, citing Butler (1993), who argued that human societies began with ideas of gender and created sex categories to impose them onto the human body and provide justification for these categorizations. This is still an area of contestation, but provides a better understanding of the ways in which these ideologies and structures are, even today, being renegotiated and understood on both an academic and a colloquial/individual level.

Therefore, it is evident gender is not just a matter of individual decision-making, but is also a structure upon which society is built. In order to justify the inequality and power relations that exist in our patriarchal society, gender differences are created (Risman, 2004). As Lorber

(1994) explains, society needs considerations like divisions of labor, the transmission of values, and care for children to function. Gender provides this, reinforced by things like law, religion, and societal values. Further, these individual decisions do not exist in a vacuum; social structures are reflexive—structures influence individuals while individuals simultaneously shape social structures (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Risman, 2004). Some of these structures are quite obvious; public bathrooms are often divided by sex, university residence halls may be divided by sex, and sport at all levels, from amateur to professional, is also divided into a binary structure that does not distinguish between sex and gender. These reinforce traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, excluding those who may not fit into this binary.

Even for those who are cisgender, this normalizes these divisions and reinforces the hierarchy of the sexes, shaping expectations and decision-making. For instance, sport has historically been seen as a male realm and therefore female sports are seen as lesser and given less acclaim, respect and even media coverage. Further, female athletes are often even paid less, regardless of popularity, as seen in the recent equal pay lawsuit brought against the U.S. Soccer Federation on behalf of the US Women's Soccer Team that took years to be settled (Carlisle). When men and women are conducting the same activities, their behaviors are *understood* as different and society tries to construct boundaries and barriers in order to maintain this difference. For example, female athletes face pressure to maintain their "femininity" while also meeting the demands, influenced by male standards, of playing a sport. Female bodybuilders also feel pressure to wear makeup, dress sexually, and even augment their bodies to compensate for the "masculine" nature of their muscled bodies in order to still be seen as feminine (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Thus, it is clear that gender serves as a dominant institutional structure, determining even things like access to certain facilities.

These structures then contribute to individual decisions. West and Zimmerman (1987) posit gender as something that one "does," a routine and recurring process that serves to either affirm or challenge the sex category that one is perceived to hold. Popular culture has created idealized boundaries of masculinity and femininity and in doing gender, one enacts these boundaries, as we are always being assessed and categorized by those around us depending on our actions and decisions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Further, if one does not meet gendered expectations, namely doing gender "wrong," they are questioned and held accountable, ostracized, and seen as different. This suggests that gender is a structure that is fluid, categorizations that are molded by broader society and the ideals that are valued at a given time, as behaviors deemed "wrong" change over time and in certain situations. This can be changes as big as entering the workforce, as women were traditionally expected to be homemakers until economic changes necessitated a dual-earner home, or, as mentioned earlier, as personal as clothing choice, as evidenced by the rising popularity of male celebrities wearing traditionally feminine clothing. Even these changes are deemed "wrong" by some and acceptable by others, showing the fluidity of gender construction and the evolving ways that people learn to "do" their gender.

Lorber (1994) draws the connection between the institution of gender and the way that it is reinforced amongst individuals. As she writes, "Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water," as it is something that is taken for granted as an inherent part of our existence (Lorber, 1994). Lorber furthers this through her conception of gender being a social construction as a process, stratification, and structure. As a process, gender is created daily through the interactions people have with each other. This occurs in every single interaction, particularly because it is so ingrained. Even people who do not want to portray

themselves as one gender will see society do gender for them, placing them into whichever category they deem best, created by these interactions and preconceived notions, whether or not it is accurate (Lucal, 1999). This is done through meeting learned expectations for their gender or through rebelling against them. However, due to the power dynamics at hand, even rebellions serve as ritual performance and can reinforce the hierarchy through an inherent performance of gender. Lucal (1999) suggests that gender rebellions can both serve to reinforce the gender hierarchy it is trying to subvert while simultaneously showing that if gender is produced, it can therefore be changed. Thus, resistive performances must be quite explicit and intentional in order to truly challenge the binary. As stratification, gender acts as a hierarchy, with maleness acting as the hegemonic ideal and ranking men above women equal in every other sense. It creates Man and Other, the category that all others fall into if they do not meet the standards or boundaries of maleness. This relates to and is further complicated by the A and not-A creations of race, class, sexuality, and other identities that all intersect with gender, creating different hierarchies and expectations. Performances of gender serve as the building blocks for this hegemonic gender binary, which in turn contribute to the behaviors deemed an acceptable performance. As structure, gender also divides work and economic production, granting women less money and power. Even in societies like ours where gender discrimination is not legal, women still tend to dominate certain realms, like domestic labor, because of the ingrained expectations and structures that are produced and then reproduced.

These are social factors, ones that are not natural or necessary, but are enforced and reinforced through language and behavior until they become ingrained and feel normal and natural. This pseudo-naturalness allows for gender to be constructed from a young age, as even

babies and young children are exposed to and taught to understand themselves and others as their gender, creating these boundaries for themselves.

SOCIALIZATION:

Thus, gender is one of many things that is formed and upheld through the socialization process. Primary socialization theory posits that behaviors are learned primarily through primary socialization sources, namely peer groups, the family, and school in adolescence (Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998). I propose adding social media to these sources. The authors point to adolescence as they were specifically using the theory to explore the rise of deviant behaviors, particularly substance use and misuse; however, for the purposes of my study, these socialization sources and adolescence in general are an important starting point to consider as gender is something that is learned from quite a young age, even if individuals are not conscious of it until later. Further, these sources are all interconnected.

Kelly & Donohew (1999) examine the relationship between media and primary socialization theory, which positions media as a secondary source that is mediated by the primary factors. They posit that media can serve as a primary source in certain circumstances, such as children who spend many hours a day watching television. In the 23 years since the article has been published, media has expanded beyond the television, CDs, books, and newspapers that the authors mention. These are still important aspects, but the media has become pervasive and all-encompassing as technology has developed and become a more prominent and ever-present part of our lives. Further, social media has expanded in popularity and usage, finding itself at our fingertips from quite a young age. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) provide us with a definition of social media, positing that it is a platform where content is continuously created and modified by *all* users, not just those who created the webpage. They also give one the ability to present

themself publicly in whatever way they choose and include blogs, social networking sites, and virtual game worlds. These social media websites and applications can function similarly to the ways that media can become a primary socializer according to Kelly & Donohew (1999), as Generation Z has come of age with these worlds growing ever more pervasive as technology has become more present and important. Therefore, it is interesting to examine whether primary socialization theory, specifically related to gender, maintains these same primary and secondary divisions or if theorists should move digital media into the primary realm. Further, I hypothesize that social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, will have the most influence on an individual, as in 2021, 84% of young people aged 18-29 reported using at least one social media site (Pew Research Center). Many of them have been using it since their adolescence, meaning that they have been using these sites both for a large portion of their life and during a pivotal and largely influential part of their life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MORE IDEAS ON GENDER:

Variations in gender identities and the problems with the hegemonic structure are beginning to be challenged and talked about more broadly. As such, new ideas on gender are constantly emerging. Paechter (2018) points out that the common way that gender is discussed right now posits femininity in comparison to masculinity, rather than as its own entity; she further suggests a new way to think about hegemony, positing that hegemonic gender performances, masculine and feminine alike, are those that "uphold a gender binary and maintain traditional social relations between genders" (124). This reflects the fact that the issue of the gender binary is not just one of masculinity, but rather one of constructing and reflecting problematic norms and is gender neutral.

Further, although these issues are beginning to be addressed and people tend to be more aware of topics like sexism and misogyny, these ingrained stereotypes still have a profound influence. For instance, Cassese & Holman (2018) found that attacks on political candidates tended to focus on their violations of the stereotypical expectations of their group, especially for female candidates. There is still discrimination in hiring practices, negatively affecting women and especially women with children (Gonzalez et al., 2019). Household labor is also gender stratified, particularly in terms of emotional and cognitive labor, the latter consisting of household management and decision-making (Daminger, 2019). Therefore, it is clear that even as gender oppression continues to be discussed, the effects of the binary structure persist, even as laws and policies change to emphasize equality. In addition, it is important to consider that these changes have come about in large part in the last few years, so the participants in my study will have been exposed to this rhetoric; however, their parents may not have been, particularly when my participants were being raised, which could have an influence on their upbringing and their view of their upbringing in retrospect.

GENDER SOCIALIZATION:

According to the dominant sociological literature, gender isn't something static. As a separate (but sometimes related) identity to biological sex, gender identity is constantly renegotiated and created through various social processes. This is further fed by gender socialization, the way that an individual is socialized into societal norms and values, primarily important during childhood and adolescence but that also continues into adulthood.

There are common traditional ideas of what a "boy" and "girl" should look and behave like. For elementary-aged children, the expectations are for boys to be dominant, active, and unemotional, while girls should be sharing and avoid domination or noisiness (Koenig, 2018).

These are similar to the stereotypes found for adults, with Koenig (2018) also adding that women should have a feminine appearance and avoid being sexually active, while men should have a masculine appearance, be sexually active, and be interested in mechanical and STEM related objects. Men are thought to be aggressive, strong, and intellectual, while women are considered passive, emotional, and weak; importantly, Collins (1993) argues that these characteristics and the dominant narrative of gender stratification is drawn from white people, and so the gender expectations for men and women of color are different. As she explains, an aggressive man of color is often seen as a threat, not as a "manly man."

Further, men are seen as the breadwinners, while women are thought to belong in the domestic realm. According to the Pew Research Center, people feel that men experience more pressure to support their family monetarily and achieve career success while women feel pressure to be good parents and to be physically attractive (2017). Women are also expected to be thin, have long hair, wear makeup, and dress in a certain way, namely in skirts and revealing clothing (although at the same time, women are also expected to not be sexual beings or risk being ostracized and looked down upon) (Planned Parenthood). Men are expected to have muscles, be tall, and to only dress in pants (Planned Parenthood). In recent years, these stereotypes have begun to be challenged, as noted in the aforementioned Harry Style *Vogue* cover. However, these classifications are still pervasive and influential. Further, they informed the experiences of my participants, who grew up with these changes but were not born into them.

The family is one major location for gender socialization. Parents affect the gender identity of their children in multiple ways, including the division of privileges and responsibilities, material objects, values, and responses to emotions. Children generally spend a lot of time with their parents and therefore this method of socialization is quite important and

typically considered one of the most pervasive. Parental socialization can come in the form of unequal gendered division in opportunities granted like curfew allowance, access to the family car, and the division of chores, with female chores tending to be inside the home and male chores outside (Peters, 1994). The physical environment they create can also do this, as young girls are typically given dolls, pink clothing, and jewelry, while young boys are given blue clothing and different toys (Pomerleau et al., 1990). Parents also influence their children through their conversations and values. For instance, modeling gendered stereotypes within the family and directing and correcting children to "gender-appropriate" toys can shape a child's understanding of gender labels (Fagot & Leinbach, 1995).

These decisions may or may not be intentional. Even as parents become more aware of, for instance, the ways that toys can be normative and influential for gender identity, they may still not recognize the way that this gender structure can be implicit. Parental reactions to emotions are one key example of this; parents tend to respond more to girls' emotions like sadness and anxiety and boys' emotions like anger, which was found to relate to the frequency at which children in the future expressed these emotions (Chaplin et al., 2005). The gender stereotypes that parents hold can affect and be passed on to their children, even influencing the way that parents see their children's abilities in certain stereotypically gendered fields, like sport (Jacobs & Eccles,1992). As a primary socialization agent, parents contribute to the normalization of hegemonic gender norms even into adolescence, as tween mothers reported dressing their children in gender-conforming clothes, for instance, even as the tweens began to express their own autonomy and choose their own clothing (Velding, 2015). By this stage, the children had become accustomed to the typical expectations of dress. Parental messages can contribute to a child's development of ideas of gender, as traditional messages are associated with the child

holding traditional ideas of gender themselves, and more equality-driven messages are associated with the children having lower levels of traditional ideas on gender (Epstein & Ward,2011). Clearly, parents play a big part in constructing the gender of their children, especially from a young age.

Importantly, these messages are also influenced by identity markers such as class, religion, and ethnicity. Whitehead & Perry (2019) found that Christian individuals, specifically those who held nationalist tendencies, were associated with traditional gender ideology beliefs. However, these beliefs also do not exist in isolation. Krull (2021), for instance, found that religion alone did not predict levels of knowledge around sex and contraception; instead, the effects were mediated by parental education, race, and class and thus affected women in different ways. While not a direct comparison, this suggests that knowledge around gender ideology, especially in non-nationalist individuals, may also vary based on these other factors. Further, Kollmayer et al. (2018) found that fathers, older parents, and parents with lower educational levels had more traditional gender views than mothers, younger parents, and parents with higher educational levels and that the latter group was associated with greater permission in toys provided to their children.

Gender roles also vary amongst different racial and ethnic groups. For instance, Jardine & Dallalfar (2012) argue that for African American families, the history of slavery and white supremacy influence the family structure, especially in considering the role of women, who were expected to be leaders in their families in ways that white women were not due to things like the mass incarceration of Black men. These differences can lead to issues of competing demands and pressures, as Qin (2019) found that Chinese immigrant adolescents experienced conflicting

gendered expectations at home and at school. Thus, it is clear that individual parental expectations themselves, while influential, are also mediated by broader cultural ideologies.

Peers also play a big role. Friends and informal conversations are an important and formative part of childhood, adolescence, and beyond. They can reinforce or challenge ideas that one may be developing from other sources, like their family. For instance, Rodkin et al. (2000) found that young male boys often admired aggression in their peers, pointing to this as an indication of coolness and athleticism. This reinforced, even implicitly, the idea that to be a man was to be tough and strong. Friend groups serve a powerful function of relaying whether or not behavior is okay, and so an individual transgressing gender norms, for instance, will either be supported or ridiculed, contributing to how they understand themselves and their identity (Witt, 2006). Peer groups, particularly those that are same-sex, also teach specific skills, like listening for girls and conflict management for boys (Witt, 2006). Even if parents try to teach their children gender-neutral values, peer groups can suggest, for instance, that certain toys are only for girls, leading a young boy to stop playing with dolls (Hanish & Fabes, 2014). In addition, Hanish & Fabes (2014) also found that children tend to play in same-sex groups from as young as 3, and so their gender socialization processes reinforce gender segregation and teach them to play and identify with members of the same sex. Further, as individuals get older, friend groups may discuss various topics that each individual is learning about, from gender and beyond, which can influence their understanding of themselves and their identities.

As a location where individuals spend much of their early life, schools are also an important factor for gender socialization. Martin (1998) found that there was a pervasive hidden curriculum in pre-schools, where traditional gender structures are reinforced. For instance, girls' voices tended to be controlled to be softer, while boys were able to get away with yelling and

being rowdy. Girls are therefore taught to be quiet and small and see themselves physically constrained more often. Teachers reflect and reproduce their own biases, wittingly or not, contributing to the ways that children view themselves and their peers (Stromquist, 2007). Female students taught by a teacher with traditional gender views experience lower performance in math tests (Alan et al., 2018). In addition, teachers themselves also perform gender, albeit potentially subconsciously, based on their own political perspectives, socialization, and identities. Teachers can take on a role model role and so this is important to note, as students may be looking up to and learning from their teachers, even in the non-academic sense.

Further, this type of gender socialization is also heavily related to racial identities. Morris (2005) found that in the public school in which he conducted research, young Black girls were continually reprimanded to "act like a young lady," controlling the ways they moved and held their bodies, a reprimand that was not directed at other students. Taking place in a realm of education and knowledge, these behaviors and divisions become normalized, as students and teachers alike may not realize the messages that they are sending and internalizing.

The type of school and geographic location can also have a role. There have been many recent political debates about the role of schools in educating students on issues like gender identity and sexual orientation, with many conservative regions of the country pushing back on this as other areas attempt to be more progressive and support their trans and non-binary students. For instance, Florida recently passed the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, more commonly known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill. This law forbids school instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity for young children or in a way that is "not age-appropriate" (Diaz). This may lead to direct harm for young LGBTQ+ students in the state, who may not feel comfortable expressing themselves or feel as though they have support systems to turn to. It also

turns LGBTQ+ identities into something seen as deviant in broader culture, as if it is not able to be discussed in school, this implicitly suggests that it is something to be ashamed of or is something that is wrong or bad. It reflects a broader move among conservative states to restrict the conversations being had in their schools, rejecting the "woke liberal ideology" in favor of traditional family values, excluding any individuals or identities that do not fit into this antiquated ideal. This shows the variations in explicit curriculums in schools, as different students are receiving different types of education both in general and specifically on gender, which further relates to the socialization received and the internalization of specific ideologies.

Finally, the media is typically pointed to as a secondary driver of socialization. The primary focus tends to be on television, video games, and books. As technology advances, individuals spend more and more time exposed to various media sources, particularly those attached to a phone or television screen. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry estimated in 2020 that children aged 8-12 spend 4-6 hours a day looking at a screen, while teens spend upwards of 9 hours (AACAP). Adults are estimated to spend at least 11 hours a day looking at a screen (Scripps). Therefore, it is evident that media, in its various forms, can be quite influential, as individuals are spending a large percentage of their day consuming and digesting media, particularly online media.

Media sources can help inform what it means to be a man or a woman and therefore can be important factors in either dismantling or reinforcing the traditional gender hierarchy (Arnett, 1995). For instance, the media can pathologize the human body, convincing women and men alike that natural parts of their body, from PMS to their physical appearance, are unnatural and in need of changing, specifically through expensive products targeted to "fix" these problems (Wood, 1994). An important note, though, is that to some extent, there is some agency granted to

the individual in terms of what media they choose to consume and therefore, it can be quite an important disruptor to the socialization practices of parents and school (Arnett 1995). If, for example, a child lives in a home with traditional gender values, their exposure to media sources challenging these dynamics could be quite influential and lead to their seeking more media of this nature.

Video games are a key example of the maintenance of the gender hierarchy in media; female video game characters are sexualized at a higher rate than male characters and the characters tend to be represented quite stereotypically as hypermasculine or hyperfeminine (Dill & Thill, 2007). These sexist representations, in combination with the aggression inherent in many video games, can contribute to feelings of anger and violence against women, as well as a reinforcement of stereotypical understandings of gender. Similarly, hypermasculine and violent television shows have been associated with a rise in hypermasculine traits in male viewers (Scharrer, 2005). Children's literature can also spread certain ideologies, such as reinforcing the idea of a "damsel in distress" or a feminine obsession with appearance (Gadzekpo, 2016). Beyond just influencing one's understanding of their role in society and gendered divisions, media socialization can also influence academic performance and job decisions. Grabe & Hyde (2009) found that access to music videos, a genre full of videos of hypersexualized women, led young girls to view their worth in relation to their appearance, subsequently reducing their confidence in themselves and their abilities. Lyrics themselves can also be influential, with Avery et al. (2016) finding that some Black artists tended to reinforce ideas of hypermasculinity and hypersexualization, a problematic association for the gender development of youth, especially Black youth. With many facets to media socialization, it is evident that this can have a quite substantial influence on one's conception of themselves and of what it means to be of a certain

gender. Further, as technology has advanced and come to shape our modern world, media has become ever present and impossible to escape. Children are given iPads and laptops from a young age, households may have multiple televisions, computers, and phones, and music is played everywhere from the radio in the car to on the speakers in supermarkets and shopping centers to on the aforementioned iPads and laptops given to children of all ages. Therefore, although not a living person, the media can have just as much, if not more, time with young people and adults alike, influencing their thoughts implicitly and explicitly.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Social media has become quite pervasive, particularly from the 2010s on with the advent of sites like MySpace and Facebook. These sites are usually restricted to users aged 13 and above, but it is quite easy to lie about your birthday and gain access to these websites at a younger age. This is a particularly vulnerable time period as adolescents are beginning to go through puberty, develop some independence, and begin to try to figure out who they are and what that means. Unlike media forms of the past, social media has taken over many parts of all of our lives. From a young age, adolescents are exposed to vast amounts of information and content through social media and other apps on things like iPads or smartphones. Further, social media is, as it says in the name, social—individuals from across the country or even the world are able to be connected and share their thoughts in real time. And unlike broadcast media of the past, where single stations or companies delivered one message to many people and any responses to messages took a lot of time, social media allows for messages and responses to be shared immediately and without much effective moderation from the social media companies themselves (Manning, 2014; Gerrard, 2018). There is no wait time for someone to pick up a phone call, open your letter, or to get your thoughts published in a newspaper or magazine;

instead, these thoughts can be shared instantly, no matter how profound or mundane a message. Information is abundant—you can learn from your friends, your family, and even from strangers through the Internet, all sharing ideas and stories that are important to them (although deciding whether or not they are true is part of the battle). In this way, social media can be quite a powerful socialization force. On the one hand, many of the same issues of traditional media sources persist. There is still a risk of stereotypical ideas of gender being reinforced, such as the idea of what it means to be a "perfect" woman. This can lead to some adverse psychological side effects, like eating disorders and lower self-esteem, which can also be gendered themselves (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018). This socialization can come both in formal linguistic terms or in more conceptual, implicit, and internalized ways.

On the other hand, social media can also serve as a powerful force to counteract these ideas. Pham (2015) found that although some call posting selfies narcissistic, it can be a powerful tool for women, and especially women of color, to reclaim their appearances and position themselves into the mainstream, providing representation and the ability to be seen on their own terms, not through the hegemonic lens. It has provided a new realm for self-expression and the exploration of one's identity, especially on sites where individuals are able to be anonymous, taking on the parts that feel most authentic and free without the limitations of the real world (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). boyd (2014) found that social networking sites provided young people with the opportunity to explore their gender identities and sexualities in ways that they may not be able to offline due to their parents or other social factors.

While some may use social media anonymously, digital selves can also still be based in truth, with real names and pictures, which can raise issues for the individual as they navigate authenticity and identity, especially at a young age. For instance, Davis & Weinstein (2017)

explore, through case studies of teenagers, how social media posts can necessitate a “glamming” of one’s appearance and life, allowing one to curate who they seem like to people on the Internet and exaggerating certain aspects in order to appear “cool” or fit in with a specific crowd. This can lead to identity confusion and enforce harmful ideas of thinness, beauty, and other “desirable” traits.

Social media can also function as an educational source, particularly on issues that aren’t commonly given the attention they deserve. For instance, Manduley et al. (2018) found that social media serves as a powerful tool for LGBTQ+ and/or marginalized racial identities to create and spread sex education relevant to their population. Selkie et al. (2020) further found that transgender youth use social media to gain information from other transgender individuals on things like hormones and other gender affirming therapy, as well as for emotional and appraisal support, finding comfort in meeting other people like them. While this information may be targeted towards members of their community, given the public nature of social media, people outside of the community may also be exposed to this information, teaching them more about both their own bodies and the experiences of people different from them.

Social media has further become a site for activism, which can be performative but simultaneously raise awareness and education about various issues. For instance, there is a lot of criticism of “slacktivism” because it does not show any real commitment to a movement; a like or repost does not take much. However, Wood (2018) shows that many also add in their own experiences and ideas, participating in the discussion and contributing to the growth of the #MeToo movement. As well, it can serve to expose a larger population to an issue or idea that they might not have otherwise heard of or understood, and so in that way can be an effective tool. Social media can also be a site for health communication, particularly in ways that connect

to broader social justice issues (Plaisime et al., 2020). In serving all of these functions, just like media forms of the past, individuals are able to perform their gender and gender influences their experiences and posts. However, given how pervasive and easily accessible it has become, even from quite a young age, I argue that social media in particular may have become a major driver of gender socialization, moving into the primary realm.

METHODS

DATA:

I determined that a qualitative method would be the most appropriate in order to hear from the participants in their own words, rather than through the predetermined structure of a survey. This allowed for themes to emerge naturally. Participants were cisgender college students at a private, Jesuit Catholic, northeastern research institution. The only exclusion criteria were being under the age of 18 and not identifying as cisgender, with the aim to interview an equal number of male and female participants. Below is a table with collected demographic information of each participant, with pseudonyms provided to ensure anonymity.

Name	Gender Identity	Age	Race (Self-Identified)	Home State/Country	Major(s)	Educational Background of their Parents
Frank	Male	23	Asian	China	Applied Psychology and Theology	Vocational School (both)
Alice	Female	19	Asian	Massachusetts	Computer Science	Doctoral Degree (both)
Mary	Female	19	White	California	English and Sociology	Master's Degree (both)
Eric	Male	20	White	Pennsylvania	Political Science	Associate's Degree and Master's degree
Samantha	Female	20	Hispanic	Georgia	Applied Psychology and	High School Diploma and Middle School

					Theology	Diploma
Ariana	Female	22	White and Asian	Pennsylvania	Management (Marketing and Information Systems)	Bachelor's Degree, High School Education, Doctoral Degrees
Penelope	Female	19	White	Massachusetts	Undecided	Bachelor's Degree and Master's Degree
Anthony	Male	22	White	Massachusetts	Communication	Bachelor's Degree and Graduate School Degree (unspecified)
Leonardo	Male	23	White, Latino	Florida	Finance and Information Systems	College Degrees (abroad)
Henry	Male	19	White	Pennsylvania	Computer Science	Bachelor's Degree (both)
Oliver	Male	22	White	California	Economics	High School Diploma, Bachelor's Degree
Emily	Female	21	White	New York	Chemistry	Master's Degree, Graduate Degree (abroad)

Recruiting was done through email outreach to various departments and organizations across campus, including the Sociology Department, the Women and Gender Studies department, the Montserrat (low-income student support) Office, and the Learning to Learn (first generation college student support) Office. Fliers were also sent in different club newsletters. Between January 2022 and March 2022, 12 interviews were conducted with an even breakdown of 6 men and 6 women. Interviews were either conducted in-person in a private room or on Zoom, depending on the comfort of the participant. This was done to maintain confidentiality and to ensure ease of speaking their mind without fear of being overheard. The interviews were all audio-recorded with the permission of the participant. Participants were also provided with and signed a consent form listing their rights and the research procedure prior to the start of the

interview. Interviews lasted an average of 33 minutes, with the shortest being 17 minutes and the longest 63 minutes. This time includes the brief demographic questionnaire and the research questions. The audio recordings were then uploaded to a secure server, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified. All names used are pseudonyms.

MEASURES:

The interview guide focuses on questions related to gender identity and the ways in which it was constructed. Participants were asked to discuss their own gender identity and their understanding of it. They were also asked to talk about how they learned about gender and gender identities different from cisgender, as well as how they recognize gender manifesting in their day-to-day life, both in differences in families, friends, or classmates or in their own personal decisions. They were also asked about their memories of the development of this understanding through childhood and adolescence. Of particular interest was the role of the media, specifically social media. Thus, they were asked to answer how often they used social media when they were growing up and the type of content they remember seeing, as well as whether they use social media today and if it shapes their understanding of gender. (See Appendix 1 for complete interview guide). I used a semi-structured interview approach, asking follow-up questions based on their responses and on trends I was seeing as I conducted more interviews. This allowed me to adapt my interviews as needed, honing in on the aspects of gender socialization or identity construction that were most salient to each individual participant. I found this to be useful both in building rapport and showing interest in the participants themselves and in identifying trends that I hadn't expected when I started the study.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY:

Because of the use of qualitative data and the decision to use a semi-structured interview guide, themes emerged after the data was conducted. A codebook was constructed with relevant quotes from each transcript for each theme, aiding in both tracking the prevalence of said theme across the 12 interviews and in finding relevant quotes for analysis. Attention was paid to the language used by participants as well as the message conveyed.

RESULTS

From the interviews, two broad themes emerged: socialization from traditional sources and socialization from social media. This reinforces my hypothesis, suggesting that while it is important to continue to consider these traditional routes of socialization, social media provides, and continues to provide, fruitful areas for analysis, particularly for older members of Generation Z.

TRADITIONAL SOCIALIZATION:

This theme has been broken down into four sub-themes based on the breakdown of pre-existing literature: family, school, friends, and other forms of media (books, television, etc.).

Family:

All twelve participants mentioned their family, from their parents to their siblings to their extended families, in having conversations about the formation of their ideas on gender. This reinforces previous literature pointing to the family as a primary socialization agent.

For some, this manifested in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Participants recounted these stories acknowledging their simple mindedness and problematic nature, but had vivid memories of these events. Although they may be able to push back on them now, some even describing their rejection of these conceptions at the time, this still represents an important

type of socialization, as the transmission of these messages can still have an effect on their ideas of gender. Some pointed to their parents reinforcing strict behavioral differences for them, telling them that their gender can and should not perform that action. This contributed to feelings of shame at their desire to act in that way and confusion at why they should not. For instance, Frank described being dressed in a wig and makeup for a play at school and enjoying the art of it. Upon arriving home, his father

"*got really mad at me for somehow misbehaving like, he just told me like in a very stern voice: Don't do this again. Like, even though it doesn't sound like very like anything, but to me. I know, like he didn't like it, he hated it.*"

Another male participant, Leonardo, told a similar story about being told not to sing a particular song or stand in a certain way because that was what girls did. Others pointed to their families occupying traditional gender roles and not pushing back on that. Emily described,

"*I remember being really annoyed that it was always me, my sister, and my mom cleaning the house every Saturday or like serving guests if we had guests over, and my mom and like, female cousins would come help, but male cousins would never and I remember being like, what's up with that? That seems wrong.*"

Even as she noted pushing back on these roles and being annoyed at this behavior, she later recounted that behaviors have not changed and she and her female family members are still the only ones expected to clean and cook.

Interestingly, many pointed to the fact that their families occupied these traditional roles but made it a point to say that it wasn't *because* of the expectations, but rather was circumstantial. For example, Anthony remarked,

"I guess like I don't think it necessarily comes from a place of 'get in the kitchen' type stuff, but like, my family. I'm the only male in my family that cooks — everyone else, even the extended family, only women do the cooking, only women really do the cleaning, and like that's something that, as I grew up like, that's kind of weird. Like, how are you grown ass man and you don't know [how to] cook yourself some dishes?"

This reflects an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of gender roles, but a rejection of the idea that their family (or they themselves) could potentially fall into them. This may indeed be the case, as there may be many reasons why a mother may be the one cooking, for instance. However, this is an interesting dynamic to consider.

Others pointed to their families providing a more explicitly positive gender socialization, consciously making an effort to do so. Ariana remarked that,

"And like, my most specific memory that I can remember now is like my sister and my adopted mother were like, Oh, girls can do anything that guys can do. And I was like, girls can't pee standing up. And they were like, if you really wanted to you could."

While a humorous example, this shows the ways that her family tried to instill in her the belief that there were no boundaries to what she could accomplish, no matter her gender. Another participant mentioned that her father deliberately performed half of the chores and did half of the cooking in order to model to his children healthier gender divisions. Others pointed to their parents treating them and their siblings of a different gender the same. Still other participants saw the role of their family in their gender socialization as an internalized one, as they compared themselves to family members of another gender. This came in the form of recognizing differing expectations or behaviors between siblings.

About half of the participants also mentioned the role of the church that they attended with their family as influencing their thoughts on gender. These participants were of varying Christian denominations. A few women mentioned dress codes for mass as being part of this, as they felt pressure to dress and look a certain way. Others mentioned the teachings as being part of this education, as they were taught, either by biblical stories or by their church community, of the "correct" behaviors for individuals of certain genders. Alice remembered that,

"*Especially at church, I think there is that pressure for us to be a little bit more, you know, servant—or not servant as in like, lower class, but more like, nurturing and helping people. And I think I definitely met guys at church who are like that, but I feel like there's an expectation that girls will automatically be like that.*"

Culture also came up for a few participants, specifically those who mentioned being from an immigrant family or being immigrants themselves. For some, this was at least partially ingrained with religious culture while for others, that connection was not drawn. Alice talked about how ideas of masculinity and femininity were different across Korean and Western culture, which led to her noticing differences in how people interpreted and understood things like the masculinity of K-pop singers. Frank saw a similar pattern, discussing how in China,

"they don't emphasize you have to be strong as much as you have to be the provider for the family. You really have to work hard, you have to suffer to provide for your family. And yeah, women are supposed to stay home and do these things care for the kids"

There was a distinct emphasis on the man as the breadwinner and being tough, which influenced how he saw himself and his desires, as well as put pressure on him to meet his family's expectations. Samantha mentioned that gender roles are very prevalent in Mexican culture, pointing to machismo as a pervasive example of this. My sample size was small and so

these trends of cultural ideas of gender are not generalizable to a broader population. However, I felt that it was important to report as it points to the ways in which gendered expectations vary across cultures and the way that within an American context, this can contribute to feelings of confusion or compounded pressures or expectations. It also calls on us as researchers to consider these differences when talking about gender.

Thus, it is clear that while family socialization is an important role, it does not exist in a vacuum and participants, by and large, did not report these as determinant factors in their understanding of gender, but rather events that they had processed and either rejected or learned to appreciate.

School:

The majority of participants also pointed to their years at school, even at college, as contributing to their understanding of gender. This came in three major ways.

First, multiple participants saw differences in how comfortable individuals felt participating in a classroom based on gender. Specifically, participants pointed to the ways in which boys feel more confident in a classroom setting, whereas girls feel more of a pressure to not take up too much space. For instance, Samantha mentioned,

"I would definitely say I think in high school like, I feel like men were more willing to be the one to speak in class. I feel like they didn't receive as or weren't seen as like, as annoying as like when girls spoke up in class and stuff. So I would definitely say that was like the main thing I observed, like, men were usually the ones always talking and women were usually like, on the quiet side, and just like paying attention, but I feel like men were more known for like speaking up and saying something."

Some also remarked that they saw this continuing even in college, with girls qualifying their comments or failing to make comments at all.

Participants also pointed to the role of teachers in this socialization. An example that was used by multiple participants was a teacher needing help carrying something heavy and requesting the aid of strong boys, implicitly suggesting that the girls were weak and unable to participate in a task like this. The participants who mentioned this remarked feeling angry, even at the time of the event, at this premise; however, the fact that they remember it years later suggests that it was an important aspect of their socialization. Dress codes were also mentioned by two female participants, who mentioned feeling singled out by school administration and being restricted in their clothing choices in ways that boys were not. Emily told a story of her principal in high school, for example, standing in the hallway in order to catch girls who were wearing skirts or shorts that she felt were too short, making them wear big gym shorts to cover up. Boys did not have their school day interrupted in this way and this points to a broader trend of the sexualization and penalization of women's bodies, even from a young age.

Beyond this, though, the bulk of the mentions of the role of the school structure in gender socialization was in informal comparison and conversation with peers. Sports, particularly during recess, was one realm that this was mentioned by multiple participants. Frank remarked that there was a conception of male superiority, making co-ed sports difficult, while others mentioned that there was an informal gendered division in activities, with Anthony saying,

"I guess probably, again, like when you're growing up in elementary school, you realize like, you go to recess and you start thinking, okay, these are the activities that I as a male can do at like recess time. Like, you know, I can go play football, I can go play wall-ball, I can't go skip rope or something like that. I'm just thinking about it again."

These weren't official rules by the school system, but ones that students themselves conceived of during the school day, creating boundaries that were difficult to cross.

Friends:

Many participants also pointed to their friends or peers, outside of the formal school context, as playing a role in their understanding of gender. One of the main ways this was done was through the creation of the idea of "normal" behaviors for members of a specific gender. This led to feelings of shame and confusion if one did not fit into these categories. For instance, Eric mentioned the ways that friendships were typically delineated by gender, explaining,

"And I think from a young age, it always appeared as if, like, up until a certain age like boys were friends with boys, girls were friends with girls, which is obviously such like a stupid rule to have but that's what I like, as a kid, was like, oh, that's what it's like kind of seems like so I think stuff like that. I remember like thinking like, oh, it's like a big deal that I'm like hanging out with girls or like the assumption that if someone has like a friend of the opposite sex, that they're, like, have feelings for them."

While Eric is able to recognize this thinking as flawed now, he mentions that it was something that he was thinking and worrying about at the time, causing him unnecessary stress and doubt.

Interestingly, when asked about whether they had conversations about gender, some participants mentioned that their friends were on the same page as them in terms of thinking about the spectrum and fluidity of gender and that therefore, these conversations weren't ones that they were having often. In a similar but opposite way, two participants alternatively mentioned the ways that their peer group growing up influenced their ideas of gender in a problematic way, and since they all had the same ideas, they didn't have conversations about it. It

is interesting to note that both of these individuals reported attending all-boys high schools. Each discussed the ways that this environment inculcated ideas of toxic masculinity and misogyny, talking about the influence of "locker-room talk" and hegemonic masculinity. As Leonardo put it,

"And I think a lot of the problem is that the people you're surrounded with, surrounded by, also had [toxic gender socialization] happen to them. So like, there's, it's just perpetuated, like, all the other boys are all thinking exactly like you. So like, there's no way to, like, address that or, like, break that cycle."

This points to the importance of peer groups, as they may reinforce either positive or negative thinking, especially at a time of growth and developmental changes like middle and high school.

Media:

When speaking about media sources, television was the predominant example provided by participants. Many mentioned that growing up, these shows reinforced traditional gender roles and influenced their conceptions of the typical behaviors associated with each gender. Alice described,

"And yeah, I think, oh, also, like, watching the Disney TV shows on Netflix. And also kind of seeing gender roles there. Again, like guys being kinda funny and rude and like, confident and shameless. And girls being a little bit more like, self conscious, shy. I think that also like reinforced those social roles to me."

Further, others remarked that there were also differences in what were "boys shows" and "girls shows," influencing the toys that they had access to, as well. These shows didn't tend to challenge the norm, instead pointing to the same traditional expectations associated with each

gender and not providing representation for individuals who may not feel that they don't fit into these boxes.

Books and magazines were not mentioned by the majority of individuals interviewed. One participant, though, mentioned that her library had an entire section dedicated to gender and identity, allowing her to explore and question her gender identity, reading about the experiences of non-binary people to understand both their experiences and her own. This points to the important role that media sources like these can play. Further, some participants remarked on the ways that media sources have changed since their childhood, mentioning that shows have much more complex and nuanced depictions of gender now than they did previously and how children now would have different answers to a question of representations of gender identity.

SOCIAL MEDIA SOCIALIZATION:

Under this broader categorization, four sub-themes emerged: social media as education, as exposure, as a method of reinforcing roles, and as community. Prior to discussing these themes, though, I think it is important to provide contextualization that also emerged from the interviews. When asked questions about social media, participants were asked to consider their adolescence and their present-day experience, delineating between the two. The vast majority of participants, eight out of the twelve, remarked that they have been using social media since middle school, around the ages of 11-13. This is important to note as although these sites have evolved and, as the participants noted, their engagement with different platforms has changed as well, this means that most participants have been using these sites in some form for almost, if not more than, ten years. Thus, beyond being of use during a pivotal time of growth and development, these platforms have also been part of their lives for the majority of it, further underscoring its importance as a method of socialization.

Social Media as Education:

Almost all participants (ten out of twelve) mentioned that social media served as a method of education for them on issues of gender. Further, many also mentioned that online spaces were the first time they learned about identities other than cisgender, as they served as locations to talk about issues that weren't being talked about in school, in their families, or otherwise in their day-to-day lives. Some pointed to YouTube videos as an important space for this. Alice mentioned,

"[VlogBrothers, a popular YouTube channel] had a video that was explaining it, and they had like, like, these good, like, animations and stuff, explaining the difference between sexuality, gender, and then they like also got more in depth into. I think that might be the first time I knew that non-binary was a gender identity."

She went on to explain that a classmate later came out as trans, a concept she only understood because of videos like this one. Others couldn't remember specific posts or individual accounts, but rather that it was generally on the Internet, and specifically social media platforms, that they were seeing conversations about and learning about gender. Ariana explained,

"But I think Twitter was a way for me to, like naturally discover different arguments about like race, and gender, and sex, like all these different identities, just because of the way the conversation flows. And like, people add arguments in context. So I think that's probably where I got most exposed and then went off to find my own research, I guess."

It is quite important that these conversations weren't ones that they were having outside of the Internet, as this not only contributed to their own understanding of their own gender, but also allowed participants to have a better sense of the modern world. Participants weren't always

clear on the types of posts that led to this understanding, something that given the pervasive and all-consuming nature of the Internet makes sense. However, one type of post that was brought up a fair bit was infographics. These are posts, often shared via Instagram story, that display information in an easy-to-read, abbreviated, and usually colorful and eye-catching format. They have become more popular in recent years to share information on current events, social issues, and causes that individuals feel that their followers should understand and learn more about. Infographics often receive a lot of ire, as they are an easy way for an individual to feel that they are performing activism and often, by necessity, over-simplify complicated issues. However, they also serve an important information sharing function. As Anthony noted,

"I guess probably it was social media [where I gained a better sense of what it means to be trans]. I mean, I know, that's not like the best way to like, get your news, but also at the same time, sometimes you don't want to put in the research and stuff. So you just see like what someone's gonna share on their Instagram story."

The role of, in some cases, it being posts from your peers likely also contributes to the chances of someone paying attention to and internalizing this information.

Social Media as Exposure:

Another effect that participants pointed to was social media serving as a method for exposure to individuals with different identities than them. In ways that they were not gaining access to in their day-to-day lives, participants were seeing posts from people from diverse gender, racial, and other social identities, gaining an understanding of their experiences and of the terminology used. This could be both intentional, in terms of following a diverse set of individuals, or unintentional. Mary noted,

"Yeah, I think it was probably late middle school, I want to say, I had made some friends online who identified as non-binary, or they were considering non-binary, or they at least talked about the, you know, being non-binary. So I learned about it through them."

This is important as proximity can be a determining factor in feeling tolerant and understanding of different identities, which is possible in a more wide-reaching way online.

Similarly, multiple participants pointed to the recent move towards placing your pronouns in your bios on various social media platforms, especially Instagram, as a move that was influential in causing them to think about gender in ways that they hadn't before. Eric explained,

"I think another thing I like, can recall is like people beginning to use pronouns in their Instagram bios. And then I like, that was another instance where I was like, kind of like thinking about like, gender identity and stuff like that."

Further, a few participants also pointed to the role of celebrities and/or influencers on social media. They posited that seeing an individual with esteem and popularity discuss issues or act in a way divergent from the norm online allowed them to think of this as a possibility for them/for others. Leonardo explained,

"So artists, celebrities, um, and a lot of them, you know, depending on like, who you choose to follow, can have a really positive impact, like, you know, like, they might address these issues, they might make let you be comfortable, like doing certain things that you perhaps were not comfortable doing in the past. Um, so, I think that's something that wasn't really done before, like, you know, like that closeness to people that you look up to."

This points to the important role of celebrity and the culture that is created online with these individuals.

Social Media as a Method of Reinforcing Roles:

Conversely, though, social media can also serve as a way to reinforce pre-existing gender roles, as they are inherently social, created by the posts of everyday people in a community. Ten participants mentioned specific informal rules for men and women posting on social media, all of whom pointed to the same "rules," showing a clear pattern in expectations. These participants had all remarked on the ways in which gender expectations had influenced their lives, pushing back on notions of binarization. However, when it came to social media, this binarization seemed apparent and not in question. For men, the expectation was to not post often, and most posts would be with other guys, often flexing or showing off their bodies in some way, reinforcing traditional ideas of masculinity. For women, the expectation was to care more about their posts, posing and curating the images much more in order to seem attractive but carefree. Participants reported feeling pressure to follow these expectations:

"So, whether it was me like having a good time, or presenting this, like, ideal version of myself, and I guess an ideal version of myself is like, not like hyper-masculine, but there's like, I wouldn't, I wouldn't post something that made me look really feminine. So—and I feel like a lot of people wouldn't post things, people would post things to construct an image that they wanted to present to society based on, like what society thought was, like, acceptable." - Oliver

"I also think there could be instances where social media, maybe made me question like, Oh, my God, like, is this something that a male would do? Like stuff like that?" - Eric

This was something that they pointed to both in middle/high school and today, marking the pervasive nature of these ingrained stereotypes. While these are online personas, they are inherently tied to our in-person identities, and these pressures can cause a lot of stress and anxiety, particularly when issues of body image are also taken into account, as Emily noted:

"I'm thinking of like, the Punta [Spring Break] pictures now where like, the guys are clearly just like, in a group. And you're like, alright, that picture took one try max. And the girls are like, posed very intricately. And like they're clearly sucking in with all they have to make themselves look like perfectly for that picture."

She went on to describe how seeing those types of images influenced how she felt she had to look, making her think about her own body and how it would look in comparison to these if she posted a picture.

Social Media as Community:

This was a theme that wasn't mentioned often, but that was particularly important to those who did mention it. They reported that having individuals of a similar background and experience to them made understanding their own identity and experience easier, whether it was one of questioning or exploring. Some mentioned this specifically in the context of their sexuality, which was not asked outright but that came up in a few interviews. Emily explained,

"So learning about gender identity in that space [social media] influenced a lot of my thoughts on it, because I could sort of see myself represented and see where I could go with that and learn from people who had already figured it out sort of which was a little easier."

It can also serve as a form of community in an area of censorship, as Frank remarked,

"But I will say so, because social media, and that's how people get to express their opinions more freely, and spread around. [...] I'm part of this WeChat group for strictly Chinese psychologists who care about like LGBTQ issues, or they just share resources and stuff, their conferences, sometimes I'll attend over zoom. And I was just shocked that this thing, this exists, because the government censors these kind of informations, quite strictly."

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explore the ways in which social media sites can influence one's understanding of gender, even later in life. To do this, I interviewed 12 cisgender college students, interested in exploring the ways that this generation consumed and viewed social media, particularly given the fact that it has been a part of many of my participants' lives for over 10 years. Overwhelmingly, I found that while traditional socialization factors were still important, such as family and peer groups, social media served as a *continual* socialization factor, changing in some ways as individuals got older but with many aspects of it staying the same. Further, it served to not only challenge traditional gender roles, but also to reinforce them. This is seen in the ways that participants would simultaneously point to learning about the diversity of gender expressions and then to the rigid binary nature of posting on social media. This is problematic because social media therefore is another realm in which individuals may receive conflicting ideas on gender and feel pressure to present themselves in a particular manner, albeit in a virtual sense.

These findings reflect and expand upon pre-existing literature. First, it reinforces the pervasiveness of the traditional primary socialization sources. Oetting & Donnermeyer (1998) pointed to the role of the family, the school, and peer groups as key socialization factors in adolescence. Parents are a main source of this socialization, as they tend to be the people that a child spends the most time with during their most young and impressionable years. My participants reported this to generally still be the case, with each of them mentioning the role that their parents/family played in their conception of gender. However, this varied, with some mentioning that their parents challenged traditional gender ideology while others reinforced it. This points to the key role that parents play, as even 20 years later, participants could recall

specific events from their childhood that contributed to their understanding of gender. Further, participants often recalled the events that were of a more problematic nature with a critical eye, even discussing how other socialization tools, predominantly social media, challenged these ideas for them from as young as middle-school aged. This raises the question of how participants dealt with this challenge at a young age and how this complicated their interactions with their parents, family, and peers.

Another main takeaway is that gender performativity expands to the virtual world in many of the same ways as it does in the real world. Butler (1990) explains that gender is a performance, with certain expectations placed upon individuals with certain primary sex characteristics to behave in a certain way, creating and reinforcing the gender binary. My study shows that this pressure does not dissipate in the world of social media and is instead reinforced, albeit in different ways. Krasnova et al. (2017) found that women felt that social networking sites were ways to maintain their network and maintain close ties, while men found these sites to be useful for gaining information. This was reflected in my research but expanded and challenged. I found that both women and men were thinking about their "network" and how they were being perceived, not just women.

Participants also all pointed to the same trends, without prompting, suggesting that these are universal ideas, at least amongst the population of my study. They saw girls feeling pressure to post on social media and to curate a specific image, adhering to traditional beauty standards and being generally expected to post in a way that suggests they care, but don't care too much, as it must also appear effortless. This mirrors expectations in the real world on makeup; women should wear makeup to look pretty, but shouldn't wear *too* much. Similarly but conversely, men were expected to not care about their posts, posting about sports or with their friends, posing in a

casual fashion and not posting often. De Ridder & Van Bauwel (2013) also found that everything from commenting on photos to creating culture reflected hegemonic masculinity and heterosexist structures, with a lot of pressure being put on the image being represented. This was certainly reinforced in my study, as these pressures were implicit and based on patriarchal expectations of acceptable behavior, like, for instance, that women are supposed to display beauty.

It is also interesting to consider potential differences between face-to-face performances and virtual performances. Some of my participants who remarked on the gendered expectations of posting also answered that they acted, in person, in contrast to the "traditional norms" for their gender, whether that be in clothing or in personality/behavior. This reflects an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, they are able to recognize the harmful nature of the binary and feel that they are comfortable to break from it; on the other hand, in the virtual realm, these pressures feel different, and they don't feel that they can post something out of the ordinary. There are many potential reasons for this. One could be that social media is a fixed setting, one in which anyone could look at your account and your posts at any time. This makes them less fleeting. Therefore, the pressure to conform may be stronger than, for instance, walking down the street and having someone see you in passing. Another reason could be that social media is a relatively newer and ever-changing world. Thus, actions taken outside of the norm may feel like they take on a deeper meaning in this realm than in the real world. Yet another reason could be that while there is a precedent in the real world for individuals to deviate from expected roles, there may be less of that on social media depending on the accounts followed, and so it is a harder decision to make.

This can be a harmful use of social media, but my study also revealed that there is a useful and important side to it. Many participants reported that social media was their first

exposure to the idea of identities other than cisgender and that it gave them the chance to hear about the experiences or lived reality of individuals with identities that were different from theirs, which was important for their formation of both their own identity and the very conception of the diversity of identity. This was formative for individuals coming to terms with their own gender identities and sexualities and trying to figure out which fit them best, which boyd (2014) reported, but was also important for individuals who may not have been questioning their identities but wanted to better understand the complexities of identity. This is a gap in research, as there is not much literature exploring the role of social media as a socialization factor or education factor for cisgender individuals.

Therefore, this suggests a route for further research. I propose that social media should be considered a primary source of gender socialization, particularly given the ways that children at younger and younger ages are gaining access to these networking sites and the fact that these sites evolve, meaning that the messaging being shared at the age of 12 and 22 may be different, whether in subtle or clear ways. More research should be done to explore the role of these networking sites on one's ideas of gender, particularly given a broader and more diverse sample size. As social media becomes continually more pervasive, particularly in the midst (or aftermath) of a global pandemic that has seen us turn to our digital devices more than ever, it is important to consider critically the role that these types of media have, as they can be quite influential and should be considered as such. It would be interesting to consider the intersection of socioeconomic status, race, education level, sexual orientation, and gender identity in considering the role of social media on socialization. My sample was too small to draw these conclusions, and I think that this would be a fruitful avenue to explore and dissect further.

LIMITATIONS:

There are a few limitations of my research. Primarily, I had a small sample size of only twelve, all attending the same selective, liberal arts university. Thus, all participants were college students, albeit at different points in their studies. It would be interesting to expand this study to non-college attending participants, as some individuals did talk about the combined role of having discussions on gender in the classroom and social media. These were all also participants who were interested in talking about gender and social media, suggesting that these connections may have been ones they were already thinking of prior to my study. Further, particularly with male participants, my own gender identity as a woman and my status as a fellow student likely influenced the answers provided, whether consciously or subconsciously. This is related to the influence of social desirability bias, or the tendency of participants to provide answers that reflect what they believe is the "correct" answer rather than their true feelings on the subject (Grimm 2010). While steps were taken to mitigate this, this is still an important limitation to consider. Despite these limitations, this study still brings forth crucial and important points to explore further in future research.

CONCLUSION:

Social media has become a powerful force in our world, particularly amongst Generation Z individuals, who grew up with these sites and devices. This research provides insight into the methods of gender socialization amongst this generation, specifically within the college-aged cohort of the generation. While not typically considered as such, I argue that social media should be thought of as a gender socialization tool and critically examined, as the messages, implicit or explicit, can both counteract traditional sources of socialization and reinforce it. Further, underestimating social media as a realm of academic research leaves gaps in our understanding

of the lives of younger generations overall, as this study proves that it can have a key and interesting effect.

APPENDIX 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

- Start with demographics:
    - Gender
    - Race
    - Age
    - Hometown
    - Major
    - Level of education of their parents
- How do you define gender versus sex?
- When is the first time that you remember thinking about your own gender?
    - What about the gender of those around you?
- Can you recall and tell me about a time where you remember gender roles being apparent to you?
- How, if at all, do you remember learning about or discussing gender for the first time? How old were you?
- What are the best and hardest parts of being *insert gender of participant*?
- Did you recognize gender differences in your family or friends growing up? If so, in what ways? [If confused, clarify in terms of behaviors and roles occupied]
    - Do you recognize them now?
- Did you recognize gender differences in your classmates growing up? If so, in what ways?
    - Do you recognize them now?
- Where do you first remember learning about gender identities other than cisgender?
- Have you ever felt at odds with your gender? If so, tell me about it.
- How important is your gender identity to you?
- Do you think about your gender on the day-to-day? In what ways?
- Do you remember ever being told that you couldn't do something because of your gender?
- Do you ever feel pressure to act a certain way as a result of your gender?
- How do you feel your gender affects your place/actions at BC?
- Do you have conversations about gender? With who and about what?
- What are the first things that come to mind when you hear the word masculinity? How about femininity?
- Has your idea of masculinity changed over time? How about femininity?
- Did you use the Internet growing up? How much? What sites?
    - How about social media?
    - What types of content do you remember seeing?
    - Do you think this influenced you in any way?

- Do you use social media now? What sites? How much time, on average, do you think you spend on it in a week?
    - Do you think it has influenced your thoughts on gender and gender identity?

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