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College-aged women on Instagram: an analysis of gender and social media

Hanna McGuire
Vassar College

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Hanna McGuire

College-Aged Women on Instagram: An Analysis of Gender and Social Media

May 1, 2017

Media Studies Senior Project

Colleen Cohen

Heesok Chang

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Introduction

In 2015, BuzzFeed posted an article about how to properly craft an Instagram post. BuzzFeed staff member Sam Stryker asked his sixteen-year-old sister, Grace, to guide him in the art of social media. According to Grace all social media users must follow strict rules when posting content. First of all, timing is everything. Don't post in the morning: "Sunday evening is 'prime time' for likes because 'everyone is bored and not doing homework.'"¹ She also says not to post too much, unless there's something really important happening, like prom. When it comes to selfies, Grace has firm guidelines: "Be spontaneous and fun. Do them sparingly. If you think you look good in a selfie, fine Instagram it, but wait a while before you do it again. Selfies are not to be taken seriously. And selfies should only be when you have a good one."²

Grace emphasizes she's adamantly against Instagram filters, but does use other apps to edit her photos. She has even more specific rules for captions: "Don't tag people in the actual caption (it's too messy) and use emojis to spice it up. As for hashtags? You should only be using them ironically!!!"³ Grace also has a lot to say about followers. In order to establish and maintain an "on point" follower-to-following ratio, users must "unfollow people who don't follow you back, unless they are celebs."⁴ She further notes, "If the bae (a crush) likes your photo you're golden!!!" and "praise the person who was your eleventh like."⁵ As far as whether accounts should be private or public, Grace believes, "You should set your profile public because like, you should have nothing to hide."⁶ And finally, she says above all, "Have some fun and don't take it too seriously. It's Instagram, after all."⁷

Facebook, the biggest social media network on the Internet, has almost 2 billion monthly active participants and has created an advertising hub for more than 1 million businesses.⁸ Since 2004, the application has grown exponentially;⁹ significantly changing the way people communicate and connect. Thanks to Facebook, the public can reconnect with old friends, share content through written posts, create digital photo albums, and stay updated on the news. No other social media platform has impacted society in such a significant way.

Created after Facebook in 2010, Instagram is a social media platform centralized around the image. It acts as a digital album where users create a public or private account to share photographs and videos. Where Facebook's content includes a diverse spread of images, videos, and shared links, Instagram features an image with a single caption. Similar to Facebook, Instagram users can "like," repost, tag, and message content. Instagram has more than 400 million active users, 95 percent of whom also participate on Facebook.¹⁰ The two platforms overlap considerably, making an analysis of one integral to the other.

This BuzzFeed article does more than outline Instagram rules; it reinforces how social media play an undeniably large role in how people connect virtually and in person. Instagram focuses on the image, making it a particularly rich object of inquiry, especially in the realm of gendered performance. The image, Instagram's primary focus, strengthens gender performativity within our society. As Grace's post suggests, the selfie is a gendered product because women primarily post such images. Photographs including the selfie reflect a user's persona, gender, sexuality, and much more. The culture industry has impacted this gendered performance

online. Human actors, in particular men who make movies, television shows, Internet porn, and advertisements, create a motive of profit for social media users to participate in industrial mass production of the image performed on Instagram. According to Grace, all of these unspoken rules for posting on Instagram help users gain likes and followers. And everything she says is about creating a particular self-presentation to achieve Instagram success. Users analyze all of the content they post online because of self-esteem and the chance of hitting it big as a social media site (SMS) celebrity.¹¹ Social media content also creates relationships. Users interact and express their feelings, including romantic interest, by liking or commenting on a post. Reacting to any content relays a message of approval, which measures the user's importance. Negative reactions, or none at all, have a completely different meaning, but one just as impactful.

Instagram is a very popular and powerful means of self-representation through selfies, image curating, and self-branding. This self-presentation for women traffics heavily in provocative, sexualized images that draw on the visual idioms of the cultural industry like advertising, Hollywood, and pornography. This paper will focus on the relationship between Instagram and gender, and how and why women post certain images. To begin my research, I conducted an online survey to understand general usage of Instagram. I posted the survey on my Facebook and Instagram pages, and college-aged women represented the majority of responders. I then coded Instagram profiles belonging to sorority women to observe and critique a particularly image-savvy sub-set of college-aged women. Greek life in and of itself is predicated on the image, which contributes to what drives sorority women to

produce such sexualized content online. I argue that to gain fame within their university and beyond, sorority women use Instagram to market themselves and their sorority's brand, which often means reproducing a white, wealthy, straight, and beautiful image. Finally, to compare and contrast SMS behavior, I interviewed two female social media users. Katie welcomes the attention Instagram has brought her, while Charlie deleted her accounts to escape pressure she felt from her SMS accounts. Through an analysis of college-aged women in the United States, this paper will explore how twenty-first century women both perform femininity through social media and - challenge gendered stereotypes while doing so.

Chapter I

Social media allows for the semi-public/semi-private representation of a user's identity. The private-public distinction makes social media sites valuable because users can create a profile that coincides with who they think they are, who they want to be, and how they want others to see them. The presentation of images is up to the discretion of the users; the public can only see the content that any given user decides to post. Author David Shields articulates how social media, in his case MySpace, created a platform for users to advertise themselves. He says:

A MySpace user can choose a sound track for his page, post pictures of himself, post downloads, and redesign the graphics however he wishes. Many people update their pages constantly and provide running commentary on their lives in the blog function that comes with a site. Millions of little advertisements for the self. Every page is a bent version of reality – too unsophisticated to be art but too self-conscious to be mere reportage. In this new landscape, everyone gets a channel.¹²

As Shields point out, social media representations are not reality because users mold the image too much to make it completely real. The MySpace user Shields speaks of can shape and recreate their identity through virtual representation. Social media grows the image into a commodity for private and personal consumption and in this respect holds potential for fame. While most users never achieve SMS notoriety, the sheer possibility of celebrity status places pressure on users to post content, in line with the cultural industry. In other words, social media contributes to a jackpot economy that drives free private-public image production.¹³

Andrew Ross's "In Search of the Lost Paycheck" explains how technology and new media helped facilitate change in what Marx calls "the relations of production." After the recession in 2010, employment changed; corporations moved many of

their operations offshore which meant they didn't need workers in the North, so employees faced cuts, freezes, and layoffs.¹⁴ As technology advanced, people began participating online as a hobby, which turned into labor.¹⁵ Free, or token-wage, labor significantly grew, which turned "the whole gamut of contestant volunteering that has transformed so much of our commerce in culture into an amateur talent show, with jackpot stakes for a few winners and hard-luck swag for everyone else."¹⁶ Social media sites gave people a platform to work without exploitation and with the potential for fame, albeit without pay. This economic shift to neoliberalism changed the economy from "the gainful labor of cognitive workers...to the self-promotion of ordinary, unpaid individuals."¹⁷ But whom did these online users seek attention from? Who could bring users success within this jackpot economy? Businesses and companies – often those the SMS participants sought to stay away from – could propel users to fame. In the wake of this flexible economy, businesses strategized how to harness this free labor in a way that would benefit them and simultaneously make users feel independent.¹⁸

The jackpot economy did not originate with digital technology. Since 2001 the growth of reality television has skyrocketed, especially with the production of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*.¹⁹ Not all reality shows take off, but just like SMS participants, those that do create celebrities in their actors (and bring millions to the production house without much expense). Achieving individual fame means one has hit the economic jackpot. Neoliberalism has turned individuals into entrepreneurial actors, and has made consumers accountable for their own success through reality television, and more prominently today, social media.²⁰ Therefore, a

social media identity, like a reality television persona, is not simply an idealized self, but one that holds incredible weight for the participant.

Neoliberalism and the jackpot economy incite competition and reinforce the entrepreneurial principle of “equal inequality for all.”²¹ Because everyone is on an equal entrepreneurial scale, users must find a way to differential themselves online. This places pressure on users to perform a particular identity, which I argue reinforces gender performativity on social media. Editing is one way users work to create a successful social media identity. Built into Instagram, for example, are 24 filters that change the color, tone and overall presentation of the image. Furthermore, apps like FaceTune can alter a photograph even further. This new app completely transforms one’s body by slimming a waist, shrinking a nose, covering up blemishes, changing hair color, or whitening teeth – much like plastic surgery. And FaceTune isn’t the first of its kind that completely alters appearance. By comparison, makeup can only change so much; these apps make users entirely different looking people to make them more desirable to the public. The beauty myth tells women they aren’t skinny, pretty, or sexy enough, which makes them turn to apps like FaceTune, or cosmetic surgery, to achieve public success.²²

In her book, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, Nancy Jo Sales researches and interviews YouTube star Amanda Steele, better known as MakeupByMandy24. At the young age of ten, Steele started making makeup tutorials on YouTube, which immediately gained traction, resulting in millions of follows and subsequent internet fame. When talking about her image, Steele says:

'You're really all about pleasing the audience, but sometimes people will also judge you no matter what you do; so it's always, like an inner thing, like, Should I put myself out there, being totally myself? Or should I kinda lean toward what people want to see more?'²³

In her interview with Steele, Sales uncovers how the YouTube star is completely different than her virtual image. When the camera comes on, she transforms into the bubbly, girly-girl fans love. Steele's fans appreciate how she appears "just like them," and Steele herself says she's just trying to be herself. At the same time however, she molds her personality to reflect the demand she feels from her fans. Steele's cheerful and vivacious online persona mirrors how dominant culture wants women to behave.²⁴ Sales found that while very few users become Internet famous many, particularly women, adhere to what the culture industry finds attractive on social media in hopes of making it big like Steele. Culture has made women - even Steele - insecure about their bodies by teaching them how to see others; popular culture glamorizes the slender body, which has therefore taught women to perceive the ideal body as one that is thin.²⁵ Steele grapples with what to post online because she wants to be herself, but also the self her fans and dominant culture want to see.

Sales discovered that the Internet gives people a platform to be themselves and escape the harsh, unforgiving "real" world; many YouTube stars first turned to the Internet because they were bullied at school.²⁶ While there is something to be said of individuals finding comfort through the Internet, representation on the web often causes a desire for acceptance as everyone else. A Facebook study by Gwendolyn Seidman found:

"Popularity-seeking users tend to disclose information on Facebook, engage in strategic self-presentation, and enhance their profiles...Some individuals,

particularly those high in social anxiety, feel able to express hidden self-aspects on the Internet. Possible and ideal selves may also be presented online.”²⁷

Although people grow up around unique environments, dominant cultural norms still impact most women.²⁸ The media normalizes idealized images of femininity and female beauty to everyone. While each woman’s individual life experiences shape who they are, the pressure to abide by mass culture’s intriguing, yet fabricated images of beauty and success create a homogenous society of women.²⁹

Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee’s study about Facebook friends argues that confidence and presentation go hand in hand on social media sites. Lee notes how “the pursuit of self-esteem based on ‘the desire to believe that one is worthy’ exerts critical influence on how people present themselves to others.”³⁰ Self-presentation is a choice – people decide how, when, and what they post. No matter the level of self-esteem or personality, every user knowingly presents a representation online, which for women often means hyper-sexualization of the body.³¹ What matters most is the artfulness of the presentation that creates a particular social media identity. Because people presume social networking sites public, “friends” and strangers determine presentation. More so on Instagram than Facebook, users encounter followers they do not know personally, which increases the quantity of followers users have to unprecedented numbers and may promote greater degrees of manipulation of the image to meet an ideal. People did not originally build a personal social media brand when Facebook and Instagram first became popular; users rather saw the platforms as a way to connect to others. Neoliberalism and the jackpot economy have transformed social media from a place of connection to a platform of entrepreneurship.³² Self-presentation therefore evolved to emulate a

brand, which influences user participation. Users represent themselves, reproduce images, and edit their content to appeal to public users, even if they are not actually friends in real life.

With this in mind, Grace's final words of wisdom to "not take Instagram too seriously" present a conflict. She tells us to not get caught up in the intricacies of Instagram but then gives us unspoken SMS regulations to follow. All of these assumed rules require concentration, monitoring and perception of the self and audience. If you follow these standards you inadvertently take Instagram seriously because presentation matters within this jackpot economy. As Rosalind Gill points out, women fear invisibility. Receiving looks – or in the case of social media, 'likes' – validate successful presentation of the self; women lose control of their appearance if others don't approve of it.³³ For this reason, women embrace the feminine status quo and actively participate in their own hyper-sexualization.³⁴ Overall, if you want Instagram stardom you better behave like it's all for fun when you're really working very hard to curate content that satisfies male desire.

As well as Grace's rules, gendered expectations establish performance standards on social media. Judith Butler theorizes that people present themselves a particular way because of these preconceived ideas. She explains the culture industry conditions the public to understand gender as a non-fluid construct people must abide by. People therefore perform their gender in order to achieve success and avoid social disapproval. Butler writes:

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to

perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in a sense ontologically necessitated.³⁵

Just as Grace's rules imply, going against the gender-established grain means that in both virtual and real worlds you will be punished. Anxieties about gender representation combined with those about posting content accumulate to dramatically influence presentation.³⁶ As Butler states, dominant culture punishes users when they perform their gender incorrectly; I argue here that social media perpetuates this disapproval. Here is the interesting dichotomy, outlets like Facebook and Instagram encourage users to be themselves; however, users abide by and reinforce the standards these same platforms build their brands on. On social media you cannot be you, but rather the version of you the culture industry approves of.

Anxieties around gender can manifest early within women. Girls as young as seven or eight feel pressure from their male peers to maintain an attractive, thin figure.³⁷ This pressure to align with one's gender and submit to male control contributes to feelings of compulsory heterosexuality where woman's lives reflect male needs and desires, particularly with regard to sexuality.³⁸ Normative ideals of feminism and sexuality reinforce this gendered behavior to the point where women participate in patriarchal bargaining and accept benevolent sexism. When women embrace conventional gender roles men reward them through economic, social, and sexual security. Conversely, women who challenge gender hierarchies threaten male power, and therefore face male hostility.³⁹ Although paternalistic prejudices like benevolent sexism solidify gender inequality, women allow it because they fear

possible punishment.

Beginning in the 1980s, advertisements attempted to challenge this cultural problem by sexualizing women in traditionally male domains, like the workforce.⁴⁰

The ads sent the message that women actively chose to socially and economically compete with men, all the while maintaining their sexuality and femininity.

Goldman points out that these types of ads signaled a particular social moment where, “gender power is now partially lived out at the level of appearances”⁴¹ and “autonomy and control can be obtained through voluntary self-fetishization.”⁴²

Advertisements therefore, placed women within unconventional positions – like the executive businesswomen – only if they appeared within conventional gender roles.

Although women appear independent in these ads, they still uphold the patriarchal bargain because they self-police their bodies for the male audience. Furthermore, these advertisements situate femininity as commodity where women

simultaneously sell a product for other women and sell their body for men.⁴³

Women embraced this dual role because of the reward associated with the patriarchal bargain; if sexy enough men will desire you and women will envy you – and buy the product advertised. I argue social media echo and strengthen these conflicting gendered spaces where women deliberately sexualize themselves both for power and male desire.

High profile stars, like Kim Kardashian, appear sexualized in advertisements,⁴⁴ and also self-sexualize their bodies on social media for public consumption.⁴⁵ Kardashian initially rose to stardom after Thirty-Mile Zone (TMZ) released a sex tape of her and rapper Ray-J online. Embracing the limelight,

Kardashian, along with her entire family, capitalized on the fame the video afforded her, and has since amassed an unprecedented following online and off. She boasts 92 million followers on Instagram and uses this outlet in particular to promote her brand.⁴⁶ Of all the products Kardashian has launched, her *Selfie* book is one of the most iconic. Kardashian is known as the “Selfie Queen” and her book memorializes every selfie she’s taken, including those naked and provocative. Kardashian has created a pornographic image of herself that situates her body as the object of the male gaze. She displays her body for the viewer to see, sexualizing herself by promoting her backside and breasts. This performed and repeated image of Kardashian perpetuates the idea that the selfie, especially the sexy one, reflects beauty. Other influential celebrities include Selena Gomez, Kendall Jenner, Kylie Jenner, Gigi Hadid, and Emily Ratajkowski - who gained fame after appearing completely nude in Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” music video. While promoting body confidence is positive, these women all fetishize themselves on social media, which simultaneously influences and validates the decision of female users young and old to do the same. This online behavior perpetuates a social ideology that sees women as sex symbols and commodities for the male consumer.⁴⁷

Kardashian, as well as other famous women, has hit the jackpot in terms of Ross’s flexible economy. Kardashian’s entrepreneurial success legitimizes her objectification because she has a handle on how to gain a profit within an unpaid labor market. Other female SMS users see how Kardashian hit it big within the jackpot economy through sexualization and attempt similar fame, which results in free labor for sites like Instagram. Where Kardashian makes money off of her SMS,

profiles, most women do not have a strong enough online presence to turn a profit. Like Andrew Lewis explains, “If you’re not paying for something, you’re not the customer, you’re the product being sold.”⁴⁸ SMS applications like Instagram effectively sell images to the public for free, and female entrepreneurs accept this exchange of unpaid gendered labor because they want SMS recognition like Kardashian.

Chapter II

The successes of celebrities like Kardashian suggest that, among other things, the hope for acceptance and fame drives users to create an SMS profile in the first place, and insecurities around failing encourage users to adhere to social guidelines, including Grace's rules. With this in mind, as modern consumers we look with purpose. Over time and in watching others we learn what is important to look at, what we should consume, and how we should consume things.⁴⁹ In this practice, an ideology of looking is animated. As Cartwright explains:

Ideology is manifested in widely shared social assumptions about not only the way things are but the way we all know things should be. Images and media representations are some of the forms through which we persuade others to share certain views or not, to hold certain values or not.⁵⁰

Ideology can be complicated, or as simple as the Instagram rules Grace outlines. As consumers, society tells us not only to act a particular way through these rules but to also view images based on them. As a broad scope the transformation of the "beer commercial" exemplifies this concept. In his article *The Male Consumer as Loser*, Michael Messner historicizes beer ads within the frame of gender. He originally found that these ads focused on the male consumer and relegated women to the background. As time went on, beer commercials brought women to the forefront, but only to accentuate their sexuality.⁵¹

Beer commercials are just a small example of what establish historical understandings of gender and power. Television and SMS constantly inundate us with images like these that impact our perception of other images. As we absorb all of this content, we grow "trained to read for cultural codes such as aspects of the image that signify gendered, racial, or class specific meanings."⁵² Even

subconsciously we learn how to read an image based on these classifications. Along with these groups, social, political, and cultural contexts affect how people consume images.⁵³ During the 2016 Super Bowl, for example, the political climate heavily impacted the advertisements companies chose to run. The normally masculinized beer advert touched on immigration, Audi ran a gendered ad with a father and daughter, and another detailed the struggle of a family coming to America. Without the current political environment, these commercials wouldn't have held such significant meaning. These ads may be difficult to look at or provoke a particular action, but regardless their images solicit reactions based on past and current historical backgrounds.⁵⁴

Along with political messages, these images relay those within a gender framework. Whether on social media, television, or magazines, women understand their place within an image through the frame of gendered power dynamics established by the culture industry and male surveyors.⁵⁵ In explaining the act of seeing, Berger notes:

Women are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.⁵⁶

Men have historically assumed the spectator role, which gives them control of the image. Looking back at technological innovations of the image, this holds true. From sixteenth century painting to Playboy, men have always controlled the apparatus while women appear as the subject within the image, the object of the male gaze.⁵⁷

With the invention of the television and camera we see a similar relationship between object and viewer. When Kodak first came out with its iconic Polaroid

camera, it targeted teenage girl consumers. In advertisements for the camera, Kodak displayed pretty, blonde, white girls taking photographs.⁵⁸ Although the ad placed women in control of the camera, women's economic and social power did not change. Instead, Kodak represents a point of continuity where women gained power as photographers, but remained characterized within stereotypically feminine and idealistic beauty standards.⁵⁹

In "Post Feminism and Popular Culture," Angela McRobbie provides multiple examples of how ads produce sexualized female bodies, which reinforce female subordination under the cloak of post-feminism. She writes:

When in a TV advertisement (1998/9) another supermodel, Claudia Schiffer, took off her clothes as she descended a flight of stairs in a luxury mansion on her way out of the door towards her new Citroen car, a similar rhetoric at work. This advert appears to suggest that yes, this is a self-consciously "sexist ad," feminist critiques of it are deliberately evoked. Feminism is "taken into account," but only to be shown to be no longer necessary. Why? Because there is no exploitation here, there is nothing remotely naïve about this striptease. She seems to be doing it out of choice, and for her own enjoyment.⁶⁰

Although Schiffer undresses herself for consumers, the advertisement implies she's acting out of choice. The advert recognizes and understands the male gaze by having Schiffer autonomously self-exploit her body. The commercial tells the audience that women equal men, and with that in mind, it's again permissible to enjoy the sight of beautiful women.⁶¹ However, all we see in the video is Schiffer; we don't see the crew behind the camera, the Citroen executive in power, or the advertising team that created the commercial idea – likely all white men. This ad tells consumers that Schiffer had a choice, but did she really if men alone created the video?

Advertisements like this tell women they have the sexual choice to act for themselves without men. While this perspective positively implies women have

independence, it overlooks the power structure between genders and how the cultural industry affects women. Gill suggests:

Of course the idea that in the past women dressed in a particular way purely to please men is ridiculous: it suggests a view of power as something both overbearing and obvious which acted upon entirely docile subjects...But this pendulum shift to the notion that women just “please themselves” will not do as a substitute – it presents women as completely free agents, and cannot account for why, if we are just pleasing ourselves, the resulting valued “look” is so similar – hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc.⁶²

Schiffer does not act as a free agent in the Citroen ad; she acts to incite a response from male and female consumers, and she simultaneously renders her body as the female ideal. While women challenge gender appropriation, I submit it will be a long time before women achieve complete autonomy, particularly because gender performativity is deeply ingrained in our culture. In choosing to sexually liberate oneself like Schiffer and Madonna, women place the female body within a context of chosen consumption, but it still does not mean men will view women through a feminist, non-sexual perspective. In the end, men still play a part in idealizing female beauty, and I argue social media perpetuate that. Even today:

Concepts of glamour and sexiness form the basis of most advertising. What counts as glamorous or sexy, however, changes according to shifts in cultural ideas about beauty and visual pleasure. The cultural preference for the full-figured woman was replaced in the late twentieth century by an idealization of a thin or athletic body. As John Berger has written, glamour is the quality of being envied. Monroe’s glamour is derived in part through her apparent accessibility to the camera (and, by extension, to the viewer) through the medium of photography, and the unattainable distance quality of her image. We want what she has precisely because it appears to be beyond our reach.⁶³

Popular culture places women like Monroe and Schiffer on a pedestal as sexually incomparable and unattainable. While contemporary society idolizes some women, it characterizes others as extreme opposites, which is known as the

pedestal-gutter syndrome, or the Madonna-whore dichotomy.⁶⁴ Peter Glick and Susan Fisk's research grew out of this extreme characterization of women where the culture industry negatively stereotypes many and praises few. Popular culture seemingly cherishes women like Monroe, but that only places further pressure on women to maintain idyllic appearances. This plays to the jackpot economy where women strive for admiration in a system where male voyeurs of the dominant culture will most likely characterize them as "whores" or place them within the figurative gutter. Women on social media constantly battle with being themselves while also satisfying male desire and consumer culture.⁶⁵ This contributes to the tug of war women face online with their image and identity. And Instagram, as a visually heavy medium, presents a potential space where this negotiation is in place and reaffirmed, particularly among college-aged women.

Chapter III

In order to understand how gender operates within social media I conducted a survey online about Instagram. Through this examination I have collected a significant amount of data allowing for a critical examination of how college-aged women perform on Instagram.

My survey, conducted through Survey Monkey, included sixteen questions meant to analyze demographics to learn more about social media usage among college-aged women.⁶⁶ The survey received a total of 168 responses after I posted a link on both my Facebook and public Instagram profile. The survey was mostly limited to people I know or have interacted with online. This is called “snowball sampling” and is legitimate. Additionally, I attend a private, small liberal arts college and come from a suburb of Los Angeles, so my survey data findings will be skewed to those demographics. However, the results at large still apply to a general understanding of Instagram usage and performance online. Roughly 80 percent of responses came from people between 18-24 years of age and about 84 percent identify as female. The majority of responses came from individuals from east coast, liberal arts schools with fewer than 5,000 students. Yet, the survey did reach people from all types of schools including southern, mid west, and west coast institutions as well as the Ivy League and Pac-12.

One hundred and twenty-five female identified responders are not in sororities while 21 marked they are. Of male identified responders, only four participate in Greek life. The overwhelming majority of 164 responders do have an Instagram presence, and roughly 81 percent post zero or one photo each week.

Sixteen responders post between one and two Instagrams while four answered to posting five or more per week. About 83 percent, or 138 people, edit their Instagram images and 81 of those users use the pre-set Instagram filters on their photos. Fifty-five people use other editing applications other than Instagram, and two users edit through Photoshop. One hundred and eighteen responders said the number of likes determines the success of an Instagram post. Sixty-six people gauge success through captions while 31 users marked that people in the photo represent success.

Nineteen responders chose “other” and gave their own personal responses to this question. One said, “I don’t care how many people like it. I care if it shows who I am as a person,” while another wrote, “Hashtags and theme maintainence.” In terms of captions, 145 people wrote that humor makes a caption good. As in the question about photo success, 14 responders gave their own unique answers. Most of these users said the caption is good if it addresses what’s in the photo. Others said captions are good if they are “sexy/edgy,” “on brand (you yourself are a brand and echoes your own voice), and “makes me feel happy and fulfilled.”

Overall, 99 percent of responders said they follow their friends on Instagram and 80 percent follow their family. Half of the responders follow acquaintances, 20 percent follow strangers, and 69 percent follow celebrities and public figures. All in all, most people follow a wide variety of users, including those they don’t know. Only 26 people said they know all of their followers personally. Ten even marked they know less than 50 percent of those they follow. One hundred and one responders do not block other users while 65 do. In terms of public and private, 111 responders keep their Instagrams private while 54 do not. Contradicting this last statistic, the

majority of responders think social media is meant for public consumption whereas only 69 users think it's meant for private use only.

One hundred and sixty-four out of the 168 responders use Instagram, which suggests that the application has grown prolific throughout all demographics. No matter the user, people generally post a small amount of photos a week. Just as Grace writes in her BuzzFeed article, most users are hyper-aware of what they post online, which makes them post less in order to appear socially relaxed. Despite this, all responders critically observed other users' posts. As one responder mentioned, users create a personal voice through social media, which therefore creates focus around each individual brand. This lends itself to editing, which 138 responders participate in. Grace is against Instagram filters, but the majority of responders use these pre-set editing settings. No matter the editing technique, the fact that most users do edit shows how people distort images online, whether in a small or dramatic way. Users edit photographs to improve an image to appeal to their audience and build a brand that will potentially go viral.

Finally, although 68 percent of responders keep their Instagram private, 59 percent believe social media is meant to be public. Many people want to consume images posted by other users, but would rather keep their photographs private. This raises an interesting question about public and private spheres. Why are users comfortable consuming other people's profiles, but simultaneously against sharing their own? I observe that social media users observe a public sphere to consume others, but keep their own profiles private to avoid outside analysis. This eradicates potential for judgment, criticism and overall low self-esteem.

Sorority women represent a subset of college-aged women who welcome, instead of shy away from, public consumption of their image. These women are very conscious of their entrepreneurial image, which makes them a particularly intensive grouping of SMS users. They face dual pressure of maintaining a specific online image because their SMS profiles not only reflect themselves, but also their sorority. Through an analysis of the sorority recruitment process, I seek to examine the relationship between Instagram content and sorority rush week.

Chapter IV

The opening clip of *Legally Blonde* shows a scene of sorority sisters. One Delta Nu rides her bike past a group of fraternity boys, who stop and ogle at her as she speeds by to lead us into the sorority house. Once inside the massive mansion, we see women working out, cheerleading, drinking, socializing, and doing their makeup. Mostly blonde, all of the girls are thin, beautiful, and perfectly put together. This intro scene helps create the stereotype of sorority women as white, wealthy, beautiful blonde women preoccupied with their appearance and social status.

Greek life began in 1776 at The College of William & Mary when John Heath created the first collegiate Greek-letter society, Phi Beta Kappa. Heath started the tradition of naming college organizations after the initials of their secret Greek motto. The Kappa Alpha Society, founded in 1825 at Union College, established the model of modern social fraternities. Two years later Union students formed two more fraternities: Sigma Phi and Delta Phi. These three groups called themselves “fraternities,” which derives from the Latin word *Frater* meaning “brother.” This social grouping spread to other campuses, which spurred the creation of national chapters and the ultimate formation of Greek life seen today. In 1851 women at Wesleyan College formed The Adelphean Society, the first secret society for women. The following year Wesleyan women created another sorority, The Philomathean Society. While these sororities are technically the first of their kind, the first Greek-letter fraternity for women was Kappa Alpha Theta at DePauw University, started in 1870. Women at Syracuse University founded Gamma Phi Beta in 1874, which was the first to officially call themselves a sorority. Like fraternity, sorority originates

from the Latin word *Soror* meaning “sister.” Despite difficult times in the first half of the 20th century, the Greek community saw an influx of membership after the end of World War II when men and women returned to college. Greek life continued to grow when students formed cultural fraternities and sororities in the 1960s and 70s.⁶⁷ Today the Greek community boasts over nine millions members nationally, with twenty-six active National Panhellenic Conference sororities.⁶⁸

Although students originally formed sororities to bring together women with similar interests, values, and philanthropic goals, sorority culture has shifted since its creation. As *Legally Blonde* exemplifies, over time sororities have earned a negative reputation as wild party girls who come from wealthy backgrounds. The film’s opening segment isn’t the only scene that contributes to this particular image of sorority women. Reese Witherspoon’s character Elle Woods is a particularly interesting subject because she changes so much throughout the film without losing her sorority girl persona. Broken hearted by her boyfriend Warner, Elle completely uproots herself to follow him to Harvard Law School in an effort to win him back. Ignorant of the real world, Elle attacks every challenge through a sorority-like perspective. For example, she uses her sexuality to get into Harvard when she makes an application video in a bikini. The white, male Deans gawk at her on the screen before agreeing she’s a good fit for Harvard. When Elle later moves into Harvard, she drives in her convertible followed by a caravan of cars filled with clothes and furniture for her dorm. She also carries Bruiser, her Chihuahua, everywhere she goes. And when Elle introduces herself to her assigned study group, she measures herself through her sorority accomplishments, including successfully

putting on a wet t-shirt contest. Unfamiliar with life outside of Beverly Hills and Delta Nu, Elle struggles to fit in among Harvard intellectuals.

Elle's fellow students overlook her because of her sorority girl appearance and personality. The film emphasizes her physical image, which she encourages but also overcomes. Elle's experience in a sorority makes her body and image conscious, something sorority rush reinforces. The process to join a sorority contributes to Greek life's focus on the image, and I argue, the way sorority women represent themselves online.

At schools with Greek life, upwards of 1500 girls go through the rush process each year.⁶⁹ To control the whole system and make it easier for the potential new members (PNMs), each girl is assigned to a recruitment group with a rush counselor to serve as a guide during the week. Usually, there are four days of rush, the first of which is spent with the recruitment group. On that first day, called Open House, each girl must visit each sorority. During the visit PNMs talk for about five minutes with three or four girls, the rush chair speaks and then the recruitment groups move on to another house. At the end of the day each girl cuts a few houses from her list, and the houses do the same with the girls. Second day activities vary by school but typically always involve a house tour. The visits on this day are longer, given the first round of cutting. The PNMs talk to more than one active member before the house tour to learn about the chapter's activities and structure. After the girls visit each house on their list, they again rank the sororities they saw, and the houses rank them. Each school has a different process for the third day – either a second house tour, a skit, or philanthropy discussion. Just as in the first house tour, the PNMs go

back to the sororities remaining on their list to hear more about each house. Again each girl ranks the sororities, leaving them with only three houses at the end of the round. The final, and most serious round of the four is Preference Day. The PNMs often only talk to one girl from each sorority on her list for the entire visit, usually an hour. During this time the girls discuss the traditions, principles, and values of each chapter. To culminate the round all active members explain what their sorority means to them and then present a ceremony that emphasizes the essence of each house. At the end of Preference, the PNMs “pref” two or three sororities in order of where they’d most like to pledge, and then are matched through a computer system with a house.⁷⁰

In its most basic form, the rush process appears simple. However all PNMs and active members must follow strict rules during recruitment week. Once the girls submit a form to start rushing they cannot have any contact with active members, better known as dirty rushing. PNMs must also abide by a firm dress code; the rule of thumb is to always overdress. As the rounds progress outfits get more formal, ending with heels and pearls on pref night. Looks matter during the rush process because clothes measure wealth and image is a gauge of popularity, both of which hold heavy value to a chapter’s social clout. The competition becomes even fiercer with the legacy tradition. If a PNM’s immediate family member (sister, mother, and sometimes grandmother) rushed a particular house, that sorority typically gives her preference over the other rushees. Sororities rarely cut legacies but the voting process is so cutthroat anything can happen. Each sorority has a unique voting method but all usually discuss each PNM and decide as a group after each round.

Some use red and green cards to signal yes or no; regardless of the technique, the system ends up being a complete numbers game that can take hours. Today social media complicates the voting process even more because some schools require the PNMs to make all of their accounts public for each sorority's consumption. As well as the conversations during each round, the active members consider online presence when voting to keep or reject each girl.⁷¹

Sorority recruitment places such an inordinate amount of pressure on girls, most of whom are freshmen, that some PNMs will hire professional rush coaches who consult aspiring sisters on what to wear, how to act, and what to say.⁷² In a 2012 BuzzFeed article, a former rush chair at a Southern chapter of the ZTA sorority talks about the competitive recruitment process. She agrees rush is a difficult week that can often end in disappointment and feelings of failure. She remembers one girl in particular who "got cut from all the sororities (no bid) and got her dad to pick her up in a helicopter, she was so upset."⁷³ With less than a week to get to know active members and five minutes to make a positive impression, it must be hard to not take the rush system personally, especially if you don't get a bid from any house. Similar to what Grace says about Instagram posts, the former rush chair explains, "I know this is going to sound hypocritical, but: trying too hard [is the worst thing a girl who's rushing a sorority can do]."⁷⁴ In a few short minutes PNMs must pitch themselves, but not too much to where it comes off as overeager. With so many rules and fine lines to the system, no wonder some girls pay for recruitment coaches. And for girls who may not be outgoing or completely comfortable pitching themselves, recruitment is that much more daunting. Furthermore, there's added

pressure to rush at schools where Greek life dominates the social scene; if you don't have a house then you don't have a social life. Overall, the rush process may positively unite girls of the same interests and values, but the system also fosters judgment and cattiness between women, and creates an unwelcoming, insecure environment for PNMs who do not get a bid.

Sorority recruitment is a challenging process to go through for all PNMs, but even more so for minority women. Although the National Panhellenic Council does not require Greek institutions to report demographic statistics, stories have surfaced about the inherent racism within sororities and fraternities. The University of Alabama, for example, came under fire when the school's newspaper published an article about Kennedi Cobb, a seemingly perfect PNM who didn't receive a bid from any of the 16 sororities because she was black. This behavior isn't new for the University of Alabama; the school's sororities have only admitted a single black member in its entire history.⁷⁵ A different story in *Marie Clare* also reported on Alabama's exclusivity and whitewashed Greek life culture. The article mentions how someone told a mother that her twin daughters shouldn't rush at Alabama because "sororities don't really take black girls."⁷⁶ Furthermore, the article explains how Alabama sororities cut most black PNMs after the first round and that mistakes have been made where black women received a bid on accident, to the chagrin of active members.⁷⁷ The Alabama sororities legitimize such racist behavior by arguing that having a black member will cause fraternities to stop inviting them to parties.⁷⁸ In other words, desired male attention encourages women to reject other women based on race in order to maintain a particular reputation and social status. This

behavior reinforces the patriarchal bargain where women accept the gender hierarchy because of its rewards like male protection and praise.

Matthew Hughey, associate professor at the University of Connecticut, reports on racism within white Greek-letter organizations (WGLO) in his study, *A Paradox of Participation: Nonwhites in White Sororities and Fraternities*. Through in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, Hughey found that when sororities give a bid to nonwhite members, they earn praise from the university, but scorn from other WGLO's. The Greek system reinforces racial homogeneity, placing white women in power over minorities. Moreover, Hughey observed that even if a sorority accepts a nonwhite PNM, relationships between the women still have racist undertones. A Latina sorority sister he interviewed said:

They told me I should be thankful for being let into a sorority...that no one 'like me' had ever been a member before...and that I better start taking care of the advantages they were so kindly giving me.⁷⁹

When sororities accept non-white women there still isn't inclusion between the sisters. Hughey explains this isn't anything new and exists in all schools, not just southern ones like Alabama. The first Greek organizations were founded in the late 1700s when only wealthy, white men could attend college. As representations of school demographics, fraternities and sororities were reserved for the elite of the elite. When colleges began admitting minorities and students below upper class, Greek organizations became even more exclusive and "offered members protection against would-be social climbers and retained 'whites-only' clauses in their constitutions until the 1960s and '70s."⁸⁰ Like the story of Alabama, many sororities have not adapted to changing times and still promote racial discrimination.

Furthermore, an active member risks being ostracized themselves if they challenge their sorority's behavior. Alabama sorority member Melanie Gotz questioned her house's decision to drop Cobb and eventually chose to be quoted in several publications about racism in sororities. Consequently she faced hostility from her fellow sisters and ended up dropping out of Greek life altogether. In fighting for inclusion, Gotz's sorority labeled her as the girl who betrayed their sisterhood.⁸¹

Although Hughey's findings and countless testimonies prove deep racist problems within the sorority culture, more and more students are choosing to go Greek. A 2015 Washington Post article explains how fraternities and sororities continue to grow despite such negative issues, including sexual assault. For example, a now-discredited Rolling Stones article caused the University of Virginia to ban Greek life until last year, but that did not stop the influx of women rushing – in fact the number of PMNs increased.⁸² Nationally, the number of fraternity members has grown an average of four percent each year for the past decade. Similarly, the amount of new sorority members has increased from roughly 80,000 to more than 140,000 with the number of chapters rising from about 2,900 to almost 3,200 over the last decade.⁸³ The article cites the increase in college applicants as well as the desire to be involved in one's community as reasons for this large spike in Greek participation.

While *Legally Blonde* initially stereotypes sorority culture, Elle does portray positives as well, which may also contribute to the rising numbers of recruits the Washington Post article mentions. Elle challenges the sorority stereotype when she passes the LSAT exam to get into Harvard Law School, all the while abandoning the

party life she's always known. After Warner says she still isn't good enough, Elle studies so hard that she earns a coveted internship spot with her professor's law firm. In the climax of the film she solves a murder case, rejects Warner, and earns the respect of everyone at Harvard. Elle shows compassion towards others, particularly those who second-guessed her capabilities, proving she isn't just another blonde party girl. Elle perseveres against judgment based on her appearance and stays true to herself, sorority sister and all. Furthermore, she's juxtaposed against her fellow sisters. While these minor characters serve as literal cheerleaders for Elle before and during her Harvard experiences, they also appear naïve and materialistic. They represent who Elle was before Harvard, whereas Elle the law school student symbolizes who the sorority girl actually is. In showing Elle blossom in a professional and academic setting, *Legally Blonde* attempts to debunk the sorority stereotype and give a more holistic identity to Greek women. Elle has created a desirable image of the sorority woman to PNMs because she proves there's more to Greek life than meets the eye. However social media has brought sorority culture back within the parameters of the image, reinforcing the stereotype *Legally Blonde* worked so hard to break.

Chapter V

In order to understand if and how recruitment impacts SMS performance, I coded sorority women on Instagram, many of who have become Instagram famous in their own right. Over the course of four months I coded a total of 40 sorority women from 28 different schools⁸⁴ and 12 different sororities⁸⁵ across the country. I chose each woman to code through snowball sampling. I began coding profiles I already followed and searched for other women through those accounts as well as through the search section of Instagram. The algorithm Instagram uses in the search section selects photos from accounts that are similar to those users follow. Therefore, many sorority accounts came up on my feed because I had been looking through that kind of content. Although I selected each account without random sampling, I do not know most of the users I coded and all have public profiles. Twenty-four women have blonde hair, while 15 are brunettes and one is a red head. Racially, 39 women are white and one woman identifies as Brazilian.

All but three of the girls have over 1,000 followers, and similarly all but three have posted more than 100 Instagram photos. Thirty-one of the girls have between 1,000 – 9,000 followers. Two others have over 10,000 followers while a student from USC has over 27,000 followers. One Alpha Phi has over 30,000 followers while her sorority sister from San Diego State University boasts over 65,000 followers. In general most girls have a few thousand followers with a handful of outliers having closer to 100 thousand, all hoping to reach Instagram fame. I categorized all 11,838 photos into nine different groups: selfies, portraits, sorority or school related, swimsuit images, girl groups, groups with guys, family, landscape, and significant

other pictures. Organizing the photos through each of these categories allows for a strong analysis of content within sorority profiles. Often one photo fit many categories. For example, an image could be a selfie of the sorority woman alone wearing a swimsuit, which would fit into three of the nine categories.

Overall the categories with the least amount of photos were those of significant others, selfies, men and women group photos, and family. Out of the 11,838 photos 470 included significant others, representing only 3.97 percent. Social media has grown into a space where users publicize relationships, which made this low number surprising. Selfies only made up 6.33 percent of the total with 749 photos. Unlike the significant other category, selfies have become less popular among users, as these results demonstrate. As Grace mentioned in the BuzzFeed article, selfies should appear far and few between on Instagram for the user to have a successful account.

A 2017 psychology study found that people considered selfies staged, problematic, and potentially damaging to self-esteem.⁸⁶ The study's author suggested a "selfie paradox" where social media users view selfies posted by others as self-promoting, but see their own as ironic, which potentially explains why the women I coded posted less selfies than expected. Furthermore, a 2016 study connected selfies with narcissism, attention seeking, loneliness, and self-involved behavior.⁸⁷ Selfies may illicit negative reception from audiences because of the stigma behind it, which consequently makes women feel lonely and act selfish.

Seven hundred and forty-four images (6.28 percent) included groups with guys and girls. Social media creates an online brand, which also includes details

about relationship status. Unless the caption says otherwise, posting an image with someone of the opposite sex implies more than friendship, which can make a user appear romantically unavailable and therefore less desirable to male consumers. In order to properly categorize these images I read each caption and looked throughout the user's profile to make sure the photograph was of a friend, and not a significant other. The users totaled 892 pictures of their family, or 7.54 percent of the total. Most of these images appeared on holidays where family would typically be together.

The categories with the most photographs include swimsuit images, landscapes, sorority or school related posts, individual pictures, and girl groups. The women posted a total of 956 photos of themselves in swimsuits. The majority of these images are close up photographs where consumers can clearly see the user's body. The women posted images of themselves in swimsuits primarily during spring break vacations, recruitment videos, and sorority related events. Schools typically have spring break during March and April, which is likely why many recent photos featured users in swimsuits. These photographs sexualize the user by focusing on the physical body image. Furthermore, many of these photos included other sorority women in swimsuits, which sexualize the sorority as a whole, bolstering compulsory heterosexuality. Like Kardashian, women intentionally post images of themselves in swimsuits because sex sells in the jackpot economy.

Second, landscape images represent 8.19 percent of the total with 970 images. In general I placed a photo within the landscape category if the image had an object as the subject instead of a person or group of people. Landscape pictures

range from concerts to beach panoramas to food shots. One thousand fifty-eight of the photos featured sorority or school related content including game day shots, recruitment images and those with captions referencing a user's sorority or school. Among profiles where the user attends a large football school, many of these photographs focused on game days. All of the profiles overwhelmingly featured images of their sorority sisters, recruitment, and sorority events like formal, suggesting Greek life plays a strong role in their college experience. Additionally, the majority of women mentioned their sorority in their Instagram description. Portraits represent the second most popular category with 1,097 photographs, or 16.72 percent. When a post only includes the user it centralizes the focus around her image. Despite the large number of individual photographs, many profiles had the category as an outlier within their individual total. In other words, women posted either a large or small amount of individual photos. A public profile opens up one's life to observation, and posting an individual photo magnifies that even more. With this in mind, it makes sense that individual photographs would either cover a profile or hardly appear at all, depending on how open the user intends to be.

Girl group pictures represent the overwhelming majority of images taken at 4,020, or 33.86 percent of the total. There are three highly probable reasons for this statistic. First, posting an image of a group of women takes the focus off of the user. Unlike individual photos where the user receives complete attention, girl group images allow for less pressure for success; the popularity of the photograph isn't only the user's responsibility. Second, the girl group creates an inherent comparison between women; a group shot easily determines who is the prettiest, has the best

outfit, hair, makeup, or figure. Oftentimes, users will post group images where they look good, but others don't, which by comparison makes the user appear more desirable. In contrast to the second reason, women post group images because of the cheerleader effect. Research by University of California, San Diego professors Drew Walker and Edward Vul found that girl group images make women more appealing. While these shots convey users as friendly and popular, the visual illusion of beauty is most important here.

The cheerleader effect is similar to other visual illusions like the Ebbinghaus and moon illusions. The Ebbinghaus illusion is where a medium-sized dot appears larger when around a group of smaller dots, and vice versa. The moon illusion is where people perceive the moon larger when it's on the horizon than up in the sky. With both of these illusions, "what we see depends on both the physical stimulus coded by our visual systems (referred to as bottoms up processing), and a blend of contextual information, expectations, and prior knowledge (known as top down processing)."⁸⁸ The cheerleader effect name stems from looking at groups like the Laker Girls and the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, who appear more attractive as a group than as solo dancers. Walker and Vul found the cheerleader effect comes from the relationship between three different visuo-cognitive processes. First, when people see a group of objects they perceive them as a set and "form impressions on the basis of the collective whole."⁸⁹ Additionally, "we tend to view individual members as being more like the group than they actually are."⁹⁰ For example, sometimes while observing each user's profile I mistakenly thought photographs were of sorority groups when they were actually of family. The groupings made me

assume characteristics of the individuals as a whole. Finally, people find average-looking faces very attractive. According to Walker and Vul:

Composite faces, which are generated by averaging individual faces together, are rated as significantly more attractive than the individual faces used to create them...if presenting a face in a group causes us to perceive that face as more similar to the average, we are likely to find that face more attractive.⁹¹

Curious whether size of the group correlated with perceived attractiveness, Walker and Vul also had research participants observe different sized groupings. Despite their initial prediction, the size of groups had no bearing on attractiveness,⁹² which is why a group of four women creates the same effect of desire as a large group. All of these explanations prove why women would rather post a girl group image than anything else. If these group images make women appear the most beautiful, then such Instagram images will subsequently raise the value of their brand.

Most of the group photographs I coded were of users with their sorority sisters during recruitment, bid day, or Greek events. These photos reflect the challenges of rush and the pressure for PNMs and active members to maintain a perfect online image. A majority of the profiles of active members posted content encouraging others to join their house, which builds the sorority brand. These images and videos mirror the standards PNMs face when rushing because the women in these posts are thin, blonde, white, and beautiful. They promote a particular physicality that many don't fit into. Often videos or photographs feature a racial minority⁹³ to appear diverse, but others don't at all.⁹⁴ Just as the *Marie Clare* article explains, recruitment has underlying themes of racism and Instagram posts often reinforce that. Once in a sorority, women like the ones I coded must positively reflect their house's image online to attract PNMs, fraternities and other consumers.

When these women post Instagram images they appeal to a specific audience to heighten their sorority persona. Whether for their own consumption or for the public's consumption, each of these women build an image similar to Elle Woods – blonde, thin, white, sexy, and fun – which reinforces the sorority stereotype. Unlike Elle, however, Instagram does not allow these sorority women to break out of their performed image. To cater to the PNM audience, as well as the desires of male fraternity members and the public, sorority women like those I coded use the image as a way to sexualize and promote their physical features. As an image-central medium, Instagram resituates women in a sphere where nothing is more than meets the eye.

Chapter VI

Along with a survey and coding, I interviewed two contrasting social media users to better understand college-aged women on SMS profiles.⁹⁵ Katie (pseudonym) attends Lehigh University located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and is originally from Los Angeles, California. Lehigh has a total of about 5,000 undergraduate students, 85 percent of whom participate in Greek life. Katie, a senior at Lehigh, is a member of Alpha Phi. She has 28.9 thousand followers, follows 911 other users and has posted 313 times. Charlie (pseudonym) graduated in 2016 from Charleston Southern University located in North Charleston, South Carolina and is originally from Wilmington, North Carolina. Charleston Southern has roughly 3,205 undergraduate students and does not have Greek life. Where Katie actively participates on Instagram, Charlie deleted her account to avoid social media all together. Their two contrasting perspectives present the dichotomy of women online – those who delight in social media and those who feel overwhelmed by it.

Katie, like a few of the women I coded, has an extremely large following for someone who isn't a celebrity. Katie explains, "It was the beginning of my sophomore year of college (so about two and a half years ago) and I woke up one morning to a notification on Instagram that said, "TFMgirls tagged you in a photo." That was really the start of it all. I gained about 7,000 followers that day and since then other college social media sites like I'm Shmacked and Barstool have all posted photos of me and that's how I got to where I am now! It was honestly totally at random" (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). TFM stands for Total Frat Move, a website centralized around fraternity life – think of the movie *Animal House*. TFM

has an Instagram account with 1.1 million followers and also created a spin off account called TFM girls exhibiting “the hottest college girls in the world.”⁹⁶ Each photo features a girl in a bikini chosen by TFM. Similar to TFM, I’m Shmacked and Barstool showcases fraternity life and sorority women. I’m Shmacked periodically posts images of women with the accompanying caption “Tag Babes!” When Barstool features women, which is much less often than TFM and I’m Shmacked, its captions include the hashtag #smokeshowoftheday.⁹⁷

Although Katie appreciates the attention from these accounts, Charlie felt anxious and sexualized by it. “Sophomore year of college some random fraternity Instagram website posted a picture of me with a seductive caption. Quickly I had thousands of random people wanting to view my social media, and some even wanting to meet me in person all because of this Instagram post. I became consumed and overwhelmed by the feedback I would receive on these accounts. I found myself relying on this feedback to make me feel good about myself. I then deleted all of my [social media] accounts except Facebook” (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017). Many women are featured on these Instagram accounts, and as Katie and Charlie prove, having a public profile allows other people to take content without consent. Although sites like TFM repost to praise the beauty of women like Katie and Charlie, it is within a sexualized context of consumption that can either feel empowering or degrading.

The same goes with comments and likes from strangers. Charlie outlines how men and women solicited her on Instagram. She said, “Male users liked my social media, heart eyes, favorite [the image], you name the emoji. Some would comment

inappropriate things on my accounts and tag their friends. But the funny thing is, girls act so insulted by the fact that males are responding to our posts in this way, but in reality we were asking for it. Female users did not interact with me [online], unless [they were] close friends” (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017).

Katie has had similar experiences with male users, but says women do engage with her, just in a different way. “The messages I get from girls vary from, “Where’d you get that outfit in your last post?” to “How did you get so many followers?” When it comes to guys, some of the things that I get are just unimaginable and it honestly makes me wonder if these guys really think that some of the things they say would actually work to try and talk to me. They send me inappropriate pictures (which I have all pictures in my direct messages blocked), they offer me money for sexual favors or pictures, ask me on dates, offer to buy me things to add them on other social media sites like Snapchat...the list is honestly never ending and so creepy. Some guys are just innocent and say things like “you’re gorgeous” and “I love you,” harmless comments, but the majority are very weird. I think there is such a divide between the men who want to get with me, while girls admire other aspects of my pictures, like what I’m wearing or a place I am at. However, while this divide exists the common theme between the two is that to both male and female users I am an object and a figure, not a human being. They just see me as a pretty face with cute clothes who goes on vacation” (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017).

Katie seems to easily shake off unsolicited comments with the understanding that people mistake her true identity. She recognizes her online popularity will

present her with inappropriate interactions with people, particularly men. Charlie, too, knows public profiles chance receiving sexualized comments, but unlike Katie she argues that women are also to blame for such behavior. Post-feminism touches on this relationship between men and women. It assumes men and women are equal on all fronts, online as well. However, there is still a hierarchy between genders where men feel they can sexualize, abuse, and criticize women. Katie and Charlie's experiences both reflect this situation, but each reacts differently; exemplifying alternate ways women feel when men engage with them online.

With these interactions in mind, I asked both women if they feel pressure to project a particular online image. Charlie said, "One hundred percent I felt pressured to portray an image online. At one point in time, I had random accounts asking for pictures of myself to post on their accounts. I obviously drew the line and said no, but I could not help but think about the other girls saying yes" (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017). As she mentions, there are women who agree to share posts in hopes of gaining more followers and achieving social media fame. However sometimes pressure stems from other places, something Katie expressed. "I think the pressure comes off camera. In a photograph (usually) you're wearing make-up, your hair is done, and you're posed smiling (or modeling). Then you throw a filter on that. The thing that I notice with pressure is making sure you live up to that image on and off screen. When you are posted on promotional pages that solely post pictures of hot girls, you feel the pressure to always be that "hot girl" otherwise people jump at a chance to critique you and call you fake. It's always been so important to me to accurately portray myself and be me, everyone should love

themselves! But “Instagram fame” is so rare for people like me (by me I mean people who literally don’t do anything like model or anything special) so when people get the chance to “hate” and judge me, they do” (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). While Katie doesn’t herself feel pressure from other women, she sees how toxic that can become to the point where it negatively affects self-esteem. Like sorority Instagram profiles, sites like TFM create a particular image that women must live up to if they want to be featured. Such competition for a coveted spot on these sites fosters jealousy between women, just as the sorority recruitment process does. TFM does not pay the women they feature; instead these women gain social fame. This free labor benefits these fraternity sites all the while degrading women within a sexual sphere.

Both Charlie and Katie believe social media perpetuates competition. Charlie mentioned, “Social media is all about showing off...[it] is all about building yourself up. No one posts their flaws, issues or insecurities for people to see” (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017). Katie agrees, but thinks it varies depending on the user. “I know girls who scroll through Instagram and see a picture of a girl in a bikini and they will critique her body, her face, everything about the photo in a way to make that person seem lesser than them. However, at the same time, people scroll through Instagram and see a picture and think, “Damn, I wish I had that body!” ...But the fact that Instagram is all about photos, it opens up a world of judgment and competition. It’s inevitable, everyone wants to be hotter than the next girl” (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). This innate desire to be desired makes women feel they have to show themselves off. And just as Katie argues, the process

is a cyclical one where there will always be a more beautiful, sought-after and successful woman who users compare themselves to.

Outlets like Instagram show women other women, contributing to comparisons and subsequent low confidence. Katie adopts a more positive attitude while on social media, especially when she posts selfies. She said, "I think 'selfies' embody confidence. If you love how you look in a photo, share it with the world! There is such a stigma about selfies. "Oh my god, she posted a selfie. That is so extra, she must be obsessed with herself." Well good for her! I will never be afraid to post a photo because I think society will judge me or condemn me for it" (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). Most women aren't able to observe other women with a confident and encouraging outlook because of competition. Completely disregarding how others see you is the opposite of social media, yet Katie has created her brand for her own enjoyment, which others happen to enjoy as well.

If social media is for personal satisfaction, then why make a profile public? Charlie thinks social media was originally intended to be private, but has evolved into public forums. Katie agreed, saying, "I think at its root, social media is personal. Its sole purpose is for people to connect with people they know to share aspects about their lives. All of my other social media accounts are very personal. I'm only friends with people on Snapchat and Facebook that I am [actual] friends with. But with Instagram it's all just for the public. I think the direction that society is moving in is from private to public" (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). Publicity is not easy for anyone but with so many public platforms and technological advances, people feel their profiles should not be private. Grace believed this as well, saying

there isn't a point to any SMS profile if it isn't public. However, publicity is dangerous on many levels because it exposes users in ways like never before.

Along with inappropriate comments, people receive hate messages. Katie reflected, "People love gossip. They love the chance to spread something about someone else. People think they know me, but all they know is a picture. And because I am comfortable in my own skin, posting half naked photos of myself, that makes me a huge target for judgment and gossip, not always praise for my own self-confidence. It's easy to deal with because I love who I am and I'm confident in myself. Nothing I hear every bothers me or hurts me because how pathetic is it of someone to waste their breath talking about a girl they've never taken the time to meet? And surprisingly enough, I've had people I've become very close with tell me that I am a lot different than they thought because they just thought of me as a pretty face on Instagram" (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017). Katie presents another unique perspective that most women don't see. With so many comments carelessly posted online, it is not easy to block hatred and remain true to oneself. Katie empowers herself by not taking social media personally and maintaining her personal brand the way she wants. Whether that means posting a photo of herself in a swimsuit or with her sorority sisters, Katie is not bothered by the subsequent direct messages, comments, and reposts she receives.

Charlie, on the other hand, could not compartmentalize the negative and sexual interactions with social media as a whole. While Katie feels Instagram gives her strength, Charlie felt most liberated when she deleted her account. "Honestly, at first I felt relieved, relaxed, and satisfied with being disconnected from all the

drama. At times I felt left out, uninformed, and maybe even a little bit sad. It has been almost a year since I deleted my accounts and my close friends are still my close friends. At the end of the day, social media does not define me” (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017). Separating from social media made Charlie feel her best and helped her not obsess over online appearance, something many women struggle with.

With everything they’ve experienced online, I asked both women what advice they would give to young girls on social media. Charlie advised, “Don’t post anything you wouldn’t want your boss to see. Don’t give or tell people everything, make people have to work at getting to know you. And lastly you are you for a reason, stay you” (Interview with Charlie, March 8, 2017). Katie echoed Charlie’s sentiment, saying, “Be yourself no matter what. Whatever you post or however you choose to portray yourself, do it for you! Be confident, be happy and always, always, always love yourself!” (Interview with Katie, March 7, 2017).

Both women shed light on gender, social media, and how the two interact. Neither Katie nor Charlie can help that their posts reflect and enhance their physical beauty and femininity. Society has bred competition between women, often to appeal to the male audience, which is what sites like TFM feed on. Katie in particular hyper-sexualizes herself, like many of the women I coded. As she mentioned, her profile often features her half naked or in a swimsuit, which has gained her a reputation as a sex symbol. She confidently posts sexualized content and disregards any shame she faces from both male and female users. Katie posts for herself but does feel pressure from her audience to adhere to the “hot girl” brand. Before

Charlie deleted her accounts she also constructed an image of herself that her consumers desired. Like Katie, she enhanced her sexuality and her femininity because that was what her followers demanded. Both Katie and Charlie's gendered behavior stemmed from the public nature of social media. Yet each woman reacted differently as social media shifted from a private sphere to that of a public one. Katie uses the publicity she's encountered to increase her brand name where Charlie completely deleted her public online persona. These two reactions represent two sides of feminism. Like Claudia Schiffer in the Citroen commercial, Katie chooses to sexualize herself for the public's consumption. She uses Instagram to reinforce her power of choice, but simultaneously understands how choice also welcomes negative and demeaning responses. In other words, she expects men to react a particular way, but is not bothered by it, rather uses it to embolden herself.

Charlie, on the other hand, rejected such negative male behavior by removing herself from the space that placed her within degrading interactions. Charlie's power of choice helped her create a stronger public identity separate from social media. Katie and Charlie represent two sides of the spectrum of female Instagram users. Most female users strive for the online success Katie has and fear Charlie's complete disconnection from social media. Within the competitive and cutthroat environment social media cultivates, it is challenging to maintain the confident and self-assured attitude both women hold. Instagram is one of many mediums that enable gendered pressure to perform and pit women against each other for male gratification. Although Katie and Charlie have both seemingly grown past this type of debilitating behavior, the same cannot be said of women as a whole.

Conclusion

In the BuzzFeed article about Instagram, Grace outlines the rules users must follow to have social media success. Her guidelines are straight forward and culminate with her final words of wisdom to “have fun and don’t take it [Instagram] too seriously.”⁹⁸ That is almost impossible today, especially for women. Taking social media lightly is not feasible because women face incredible pressure to perform for the online public. Women may appear indifferent about their social media brand, but Grace and all of my results demonstrate that women work extremely hard behind the scenes to cultivate a popular profile for Instagram fame. Women feel social media should be public, but some keep their profiles private because they fear potential negative interactions from the public. This fear is legitimate because the public places women against other women and as objects of the male gaze. When women participate in public consumption, they fetishize their image within neoliberalism and the jackpot economy for profit.

Neoliberalism and the jackpot economy situate women as free-labor entrepreneurs working to build an individual social media identity for possible fame and fortune. The culture industry reinforces femininity and gender stereotypes under the false idea that women can act autonomously as independent sexual beings. Women actively hyper-sexualize themselves as a response to the feminist argument that women can have it all. Female social media users are not selling out online, rather they are complicit in their own objectification to attain power. However, when women perform do their gender, they adhere to dominant cultures and male desires, things they believe to be combating by asserting their sexuality. In

the end, I submit college-aged women accept the patriarchal bargain by policing themselves to reap reward from the male audience and consumer culture.

Sorority women in particular represent a section of the female population that is particularly active on social media and sexualized by society, the media and the male audience. The sorority recruitment process prioritizes physical appearance over personality and intelligence, something Instagram perpetuates as an image heavy medium. Active sorority sisters cannot *really* get to know potential new members, and instead determine their social fate based on idealized beauty standards. Racism also plays a role in recruitment, which reinforces the white elitism within Greek life. Receiving a bid from a sorority is difficult; keeping one's public persona in line with the sorority image is just as demanding and denigrating. That image may align with sorority culture and help women achieve public success, but it is within a sexualized framework. I conclude the sorority rush process contributes to Greek life's focus on the image and therefore the way sorority women represent themselves on Instagram. Similar to college-aged women overall, sorority women accept benevolent sexism because of the benefit of the gender hierarchy.

While I can make conclusions about the relationship between Instagram and gender, I cannot make deeper assertions about male and female interactions on social media. Other questions surrounding specific exchanges – like comments – between men and women would strengthen my findings as detailed accounts of gendered SMS interactions. Furthermore, a survey directly targeting sorority women would provide more evidence to substantiate claims around the relationships between Greek life, social media, and gender. It would also be valuable

to interview sorority women of color to better gauge why they participate in Greek life and the impact it has had on their social media performance. Continuing an analysis of social media, gender relations, and Greek life would add necessary literature to areas that need further critical examination.

Appendix

A. Survey Questionnaire:

1. How old are you?
 - i. Answer:
 1. Under 18
 2. 18-24
 3. 25-30
 4. Over 30
2. What is your gender?
 - i. Answer:
 1. Male
 2. Female
 3. N/A
3. What college/university do you attend?
 - i. Select all that apply:
 1. East Coast
 2. West Coast, Southern
 3. Mid West
 4. Liberal Arts
 5. Ivy League
 6. Public School
 7. Private School
 8. Pac 12
 9. Less than 5,000 students
 10. Between 5,000 – 15,000 students
 11. More than 15,000 students
 12. College
 13. University
 14. Community College
 15. Other (please specify)
4. Are you in a sorority?
 - i. Answer
 1. Yes
 2. No
5. Are you in a fraternity?
 - i. Answer
 1. Yes
 2. No
6. Do you have Instagram?
 - i. Answer:
 1. Yes
 2. No
7. How many Instagrams do you post in a week?
 - i. Answer:
 1. 0-1

2. 1-2
 3. 2-3
 4. 3-4
 5. 5 or more
8. Do you edit your photos?
- i. Answer
 1. Yes
 2. No
9. How do you edit your Instagram photos?
- i. Answer:
 1. Already set Instagram filters
 2. Editing apps other than Instagram
 3. Photoshop
 4. N/A
10. What determines the success of an Instagram post?
- i. Select all that apply:
 1. Number of likes
 2. People in the photo
 3. Type of photo (example: selfie)
 4. Caption
 5. Other (please specify)
11. What makes a good caption?
- i. Select all that apply:
 1. Funny
 2. Ironic
 3. Emojis
 4. Emotional
 5. Other (please specify)
12. Who do you follow on Instagram?
- i. Select all that apply:
 1. Friends
 2. Family
 3. Acquaintances
13. How many of your followers do you personally know?
- i. Answer:
 1. All
 2. 90%
 3. 75%
 4. 50%
 5. Less than 50%
14. Do you block people on Instagram?
- i. Answer:
 1. Yes
 2. No
15. Is your Instagram public or private?
- i. Answer:

1. Public
 2. Private
16. Do you think social media is intended to be public?
- i. Answer
 1. Yes
 2. No

B. Coding Details:

1. The coding results represent 12 different sororities in the United States:
 - i. Alpha Phi
 - ii. Kappa
 - iii. Theta
 - iv. Delta Gamma
 - v. Tri Delta
 - vi. Pi Beta Phi
 - vii. Kappa Alpha Theta
 - viii. Alpha Chi Omega
 - ix. Phi Kappa Psi
 - x. Zeta Tau Alpha
 - xi. Delta Kappa
 - xii. Delta Delta Delta
2. The coding results represent 28 different schools in the United States:
 - i. Lehigh University
 - ii. Santa Clara University
 - iii. University of Southern California
 - iv. Southern Methodist University
 - v. Michigan State University
 - vi. University of California – Los Angeles
 - vii. Cornell University
 - viii. Syracuse University
 - ix. Ohio State University
 - x. Colorado at Boulder
 - xi. University of San Francisco
 - xii. University of California – Santa Barbara
 - xiii. University of Arizona
 - xiv. Villanova University
 - xv. Elon University
 - xvi. Clemson University
 - xvii. SUNY Cortland
 - xviii. San Diego State University
 - xix. Texas State
 - xx. Arizona State University
 - xxi. Virginia Tech
 - xxii. University of Florida
 - xxiii. University of North Carolina – Charlotte

- xxiv. University of Texas, Austin
- xxv. Chapman University
- xxvi. University of California – Irvine
- xxvii. Ohio State University
- xxviii. University of Michigan
- 3. Total number of photos coded: 11,838
 - i. Selfie: 749
 - ii. Individual photo: 1,979
 - iii. Sorority/school related: 1,058
 - iv. Swimsuit: 956
 - v. Girl group: 4,020
 - vi. Girl and guy group: 744
 - vii. Family: 892
 - viii. Landscape: 970
 - ix. Significant other: 470

C. Katie Interview Questionnaire:

1. You have 29.2K followers – that’s amazing! - how did you get so many?
2. How do you pick which photos to post? Is there a particular process you go through when posting?
3. How do male users interact with you online? How do female users interact with you online? Is there a difference between the two? If so, why do you think there is?
4. Do you feel pressure to project a particular image of yourself online?
5. Do you think Instagram liberates women and gives them a place to express their identity, sexuality and personality? If so, how and why?
6. What’s your opinion on selfies?
7. What advice would you give to young girls on social media?
8. How do you think celebrity culture influences Instagram content and users? Are there any celebrities you try to emulate through your photographs?
9. Have you been solicited to advertise for companies through your Instagram?
10. Have you received negativity towards your Instagram? If so, how do you handle hate, and conversely, how do you handle praise?
11. Do you think social media is intended to be public? Why or why not?
12. Do you think Greek life plays a part in the way women participate on social media? If so, how and why?
13. What do you think are the best and worst things about Instagram?

D. Charlie Interview Questionnaire:

1. Before you left social media, what mediums were you a part of? Why did you participate in them? How and how often did you engage online?
2. What made you begin questioning social media and make you think about deleting your accounts?
3. What was the final straw that ultimately made you delete social media?
4. Did you feel pressure to project a particular image online?
5. How did male users interact with you online? How did female users interact with you online? Was there a difference between the two? If so, why do you think there was?
6. Do you think social media fosters competition? If so, how?
7. Do you think social media is intended to be public? Why or why not?
8. Do you think Greek life plays a part in the way women participate on social media? (Thinking here about Total Frat Move, and sorority/fraternity culture)
9. How do you feel now that you've disconnected with social media?
10. Do you think there are benefits to social media? If so, what? And if no, why not?
11. Many women and girls post pictures of themselves in bikinis or clothes that show skin and play up their sexuality. Many celebrities are also doing this – like the Kardashians and Jenners, Emily Ratajkowski, and more. With this in mind, do you think social media liberates women or places them as the object of the male gaze, and therefore in male power?

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