

9-1-2024

Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Social Media Impact on the Well-being and Mental Health of African American Women

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Shamenese Robinson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Social Media Impact on the Well-being and Mental
Health of African American Women

by

Shamenese Robinson

MS, Walden University, 2020

MA, Liberty University, 2018

BS, Virginia State University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Clinical Psychology

Walden University

August 2024

Abstract

In this qualitative study, I investigated African American women's lived experiences and perspectives regarding their use of social media and its impact on their mental health and well-being. While social media serves as a powerful tool for communication and connection, it is also known to have adverse effects on mental health. This research specifically addressed the potential negative impact of social media on the mental health of African American women, who represent a significant consumer group of social media in the United States. Grounded in Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, this study focused on African American women aged 24–39 through open-ended interviews. A phenomenological approach was employed to gather in-depth information from participants, offering insights into their experiences navigating the intersection of social media and mental health. The primary aim was to explore and understand the lived experiences of African American women within the context of their social media use. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. Key insights included the detrimental effects of social comparison and exposure to negative content, contrasted with the benefits of community support and empowerment through positive content and connections. By exploring these experiences, the study contributed valuable insights that can inform positive social change through interventions, support systems, and strategies tailored to promote the mental well-being of African American women in the context of social media use.

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Dedication

This letter is dedicated to you. In a world where social media often magnifies societal pressures and unrealistic standards, your strength, resilience, and authenticity shine brightly. I want you to know that your feelings are valid and that many share your experiences.

Social media can be a double-edged sword. While it offers a platform for connection and expression, it can also amplify feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and isolation. The constant comparisons, the pressure to present a curated version of yourself, and the often-unrealistic portrayals of beauty and success can be overwhelming.

You are more than the images and posts you see online. Likes, comments, or followers do not define your worth. You are unique, valuable, and deserving of love and respect, just as you are. Your journey, with all its ups and downs, is a testament to your strength and resilience.

It is okay to take a step back, to prioritize your mental health, and to seek support when needed. Surround yourself with positive influences, both online and offline. Engage with communities that uplift and empower you. Remember, it's perfectly fine to set boundaries and take breaks from social media to focus on your well-being.

Your mental health matters. Your voice matters. Your presence in this world is important. By taking care of yourself, you are honoring your own worth and setting an example for others to do the same.

You are powerful, you are beautiful, and you are enough. Never forget that.

With deep admiration and respect.

Acknowledgments

I am profoundly grateful to everyone who has supported me on this journey, both near and far.

First and foremost, my deepest thanks go to my dissertation committee, Dr. Magy Martin and Dr. Denise Horton. Your unwavering guidance, insightful feedback, and continuous encouragement have been invaluable in shaping this dissertation. It has indeed been a rollercoaster of emotions, yet here we are.

A special thanks to the participants of this study and their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives made this research possible. Your voices are at the heart of this work, and I am honored to have had the opportunity to learn from you.

I am immensely grateful to my family and friends for their endless support and understanding. To my parents, thank you for your unconditional love and encouragement. To my best friend, Aysha, thank you for your unwavering support and friendship.

I also want to acknowledge my colleagues and peers for their camaraderie and support. Your feedback, discussions, and shared experiences have been instrumental in my academic growth.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to An Achievable Dream Academy. Since early childhood, this organization has instilled leadership and success principles in me. I am forever grateful to be part of a trailblazing legacy that empowers individuals with a vision for success.

This dissertation is a testament to the power of believing in God and the collective support and encouragement I have received. I sincerely appreciate everyone who has been part of this journey. Thank you all.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

This study explored the impact of social media on African American women's mental health and well-being. Mental health is essential to human health, yet it often receives insufficient attention and is subject to stigma. While social media has penetrated influence globally, African American women represent a significant portion of social media users in the United States (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Despite their socioeconomic status, they encounter elevated susceptibility to anxiety and depression and represent the highest suicide risk among all demographics (Akinyemi et al., 2023). This study is critical because it is essential to study the contributions of social media on mental health, develop targeted interventions and support systems, and address protective factors for at-risk groups.

In this chapter, I define and provide context surrounding the impact of social media in today's society and literature related to the scope of the research. I address the need to explore the lived experiences of African American women and social media use integration concerning mental health and overall well-being. I provide the research questions and discuss the intersectionality theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study and the rationale for this phenomenological design. I discuss essential definitions identified in the study, assumptions, the scope of the study delimitations, and the significance of the study.

Background

Social media encompasses web and mobile platforms facilitating virtual connections among individuals on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or LinkedIn. These platforms, often called social networking sites (SNSs), enable the sharing, co-creation, or exchanging diverse digital content, encompassing information, messages, photos, or videos (Naslund et al., 2020). Nowadays, social media has dominated the culture, becoming an essential part of everyday routine from morning scrolling to evening catchups. Mendez-Diaz et al. (2022) reported that the average American spends 37 minutes to 2 hours and 16 minutes on SNS, surpassing any other internet activity. Due to social media's heavy influence and the new means of human connection, research has been conducted to explore the impact of social media on mental health. Studies have found that while social media can provide avenues for connection and support, it also exposes individuals to stressors such as discrimination, harmful content, and stereotypes, which can contribute to mental health issues. African American women may face unique challenges in navigating social media platforms, including heightened exposure to stereotypes and discrimination. Additionally, studies have indicated high levels of social media engagement among African American women, which could potentially present poor mental health outcomes. This study addresses the research gap by contributing a greater understanding of specific experiences and the potential implications for mental health outcomes among this demographic.

Problem Statement

The social problem addressed in this research is the potential negative impact of social media on the mental health of African American women. Naslund et al. (2020) suggested that social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and other SNSs are now indispensable in people's daily lives, particularly among women. Amongst many, social media is viewed as a coping mechanism. Others may argue that social media can lead to many other challenges that can affect a person's way of thinking, mood, and emotions in day-to-day activities, leading to mental health illnesses. Many studies have established a correlation between social media usage and mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Naslund et al., 2020). Despite the growing body of research on the relationship between social media use and mental health, most recent research focuses on general populations or non-Black individuals (Park et al., 2024). While there is considerable literature concerning adolescents and young adults within the African American community, there is a lack of research focused on adult Black women, particularly regarding the impact of social media usage on mental health. Furthermore, there is a need to explore marginalized overlapping identities (Park et al., 2024).

Being positioned at the intersection of marginalized race and gender in the United States, Black women encounter a web of stressors encompassing racial, gender-specific, and general strains that collectively influence their mental well-being (Liao et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a need to explore how African American women navigate social media platforms, negotiate their identities, and manage the potential impact on their mental well-being. Consistent research indicates there is less understanding of Black

women's health and the role social media plays in the "strong Black woman" (SBW) ideal. The SBW schema has taken a toll on the emotional well-being of African American women. As it is personified as a sign of strength, it keeps her from identifying what she needs and reaching out for help (Liao et al., 2020). Furthermore, researchers found a direct link between SBWs and thoughts of suicide (Green, 2019).

Despite Black women having the highest rates of suicidality and being among the most frequent users of social media, they are often underrepresented in the literature compared to their White counterparts (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). According to a trends report analyzing data from the National Center for Health Statistics, Joseph et al. (2023) observed an increase in suicide rates among Black women aged 15–84, from 2.1 per 100,000 in 1999 to 3.4 per 100,000 in 2020. The high rate of suicidal ideation among Black women stems from the stressors associated with their intersectional identity as both a disadvantaged race and gender (Green, 2019). Moreover, African American women are less likely to recognize signs of mental health issues and seek professional help compared to individuals from other racial backgrounds (Price & Khubchandani, 2019).

While social media may present challenges affecting mental health and well-being, it undoubtedly shares many benefits, such as connection to people, sharing resources, access to information engagement, and support. However, Black women face the risk of adverse effects from social media use, making it a double-edged sword in this context (Karim et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to provide insights into African American women's lived experiences and perspectives in the context of their use of social media. The study explored how Black women aged 24–39 seek, process, and use information on social media platforms and how these activities affect their mental well-being.

Research Question

The primary research question was “What are the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women’s social media use and its impact on mental health and well-being?”

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Intersectionality theory was the theoretical foundation for this study. The intersectionality theory originated from the need to understand African American women’s societal challenges and connect personal experience to broader social issues (Crenshaw, 1989). Recognizing the specific health inequities experienced by Black women, shaped by the intersection of race and gender, is crucial. However, these disparities have frequently been overlooked, as the focus tends to be on race or gender separately rather than acknowledging their combined impact (Lewis & Williams, 2023).

While the theory originated in Black feminist theory, it has been used by several researchers. For example, a team of researchers examined associations of exposure to ethnic discrimination in social media with symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety in adulthood and Hispanics (Cano et al., 2021). The study instead highlighted online ethnic discrimination, and mental health should consider examining gender

differences. Outcomes from this study revealed that higher social media discrimination was associated with higher symptoms of depression and generalized anxiety. The intersectionality approach helped to explore the degree to which dimensions of identity intersected in shaping one's experience.

When applied to the context of Black women, social media, and mental health, in this research, the intersectionality theory highlighted the complex interplay between (a) social media representation and self-esteem, (b) racism and social media, (c) mental health and social media, (d) social support and coping, and (e) resilience and empowerment. The theory relates to the study approach by recognizing the intersecting systems of power and privilege that shape Black women's experiences in digital spaces.

Nature of the Study

This research included a qualitative methodology congruent with the exploratory character of the research question. I sought to understand the experiences of African American women and the contributions of social media to mental health, guided by the research question, "What are the perceptions and experiences of African American women aged 24–39 social media use and its impact on mental health and well-being?" Further, I used a phenomenological design to guide the interview process.

An interpretive phenomenological approach focuses on revealing the unique individual experience to convey its essence (Williams, 2021). For this study, data were collected from semistructured interviews. This method allowed participants to share their personal stories, experiences, and emotions, providing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences with social media and its impact on their mental health (Neubauer et al.,

2019). Thus, I determined that a qualitative research methodology was appropriate. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, where participant narratives facilitated the emergence of various themes related to this phenomenon. These themes described individuals' perspectives on their mental health and social media use, providing researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of these viewpoints. Through this analysis, I developed detailed descriptions and interpretations of the experiences of African American women using social media and the connections between their social media use and mental health.

Definitions

Social media: Social media is defined as web and mobile platforms that enable individuals to engage with others in a virtual space (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or LinkedIn), facilitating the sharing, collaboration, and exchange of diverse digital content such as messages, photos, and videos across private networks (Naslund et al., 2020), also known as SNSs.

Mental health: A condition of the mind marked by emotional wellness, positive behavioral adaptation, minimal anxiety, and impairing symptoms, and the ability to form healthy relationships and effectively manage the typical challenges and pressures of everyday life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Strong Black Women (SBW): The SBW embodies the ideal of African American women characterized by unwavering strength, juggling multiple roles, and prioritizing the care of others. It acts as a protective barrier and cultural adaptation mechanism to restrain and manage instances of racial and gender oppression. (Liao et al., 2020).

Assumptions

When conducting a research study, researchers often make assumptions regarding the nature of the study. The assumptions for this study centered on African American women's participation. I established the assumption that participants would be honest and open in answering interview questions and self-disclosing. I trusted that participants would be able to freely share their thoughts, feelings, and emotions as they related to their personal experience navigating social media and disclosing any mental health symptoms related to the content viewed. Participants were expected to respond based on their knowledge and experiences rather than seeking input from peers during this process. These assumptions are vital considerations due to concerns surrounding anonymity and confidentiality.

Additionally, it was assumed that participants would be proficient in speaking and understanding English, facilitating seamless communication during interviews without language barriers. Lastly, it was anticipated that participants would adhere to the instructions for the scheduled date and time, whether in person or virtually, based on their preferred meeting mode. These assumptions collectively contribute to the integrity and effectiveness of the research study.

Scope and Delimitations

This study explored how African American women aged 24 to 39 navigate social media platforms and how these experiences affect their mental health; that focused on this demographic group, the research aimed to delve into various facets of social media

engagement among African American women, including their frequency of use, preferences for different platforms, and the purposes served by their online interactions.

This study's delimitations outline the boundaries and constraints within which the research will operate. Firstly, the geographic scope of the study was limited to a specific region or community, thereby constraining the generalizability of findings to other populations of African American women in different locales. Additionally, participants were restricted to a predetermined age range, ensuring consistency in experiences and minimizing potential generational influences on social media usage and mental health outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations existed within this study that warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of responder bias and inaccuracies, as participants may provide information based on memory or subjective interpretation. Additionally, ethical considerations, while prioritized, may also pose limitations, as participants may feel compelled to provide socially desirable responses or may experience discomfort discussing sensitive topics related to mental health.

Significance

The link between social media and mental health is increasingly alarming (Bekalu et al., 2019). There are few studies related to African Americans, social media, and mental health, most focusing on African American youth that connects their social media engagement to heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Bekalu et al., 2019; Dodemaide et al., 2022). However, research shows African American women are the

highest among racial groups in social media consumption (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Additionally, Black women's identity contributes to various interconnected forms of oppression due to race and gender, even in their online interactions. This study seeks to elucidate how social media content may influence critical aspects of mental health amongst African American women, such as self-esteem, stress levels, feelings of anxiety, and manifestations of depression. This study captures the knowledge base by capturing Black women's nuanced and individual perspectives, allowing for a rich understanding of their unique experiences and interpretations. By honing in on these specific parameters, the study aimed to contribute valuable insights into the intersection of social media use and mental health within the context of African American women's lives.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the research by providing background information on the use of social media among African American women and its potential impact on mental health. The chapter outlines the problem statement, highlighting the lack of representation in existing literature regarding the intersectionality of race and gender in social media experiences. The research question was posed to guide the investigation into the lived experiences of African American women, focusing on the use of social media and its implications for mental health. The significance of the study is underscored, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support systems. The chapter also acknowledged the limitations of the research, such as potential biases in self-reported data and the subjective nature of data analysis. The purpose of Chapter 1 was to introduce the study. Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive review of relevant literature, exploring

existing theories and empirical studies on social media use, mental health, and the experiences of African American women.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I aimed to provide further insights into African American women's perceptions and lived experiences using social media and its influence on mental health. Previous studies have established a link between social media and mental health; however, few studies explored African American women and the intersecting use of race and gender (Naslund et al., 2020; Park et al., 2024). I addressed the research problem by providing further insights into the lived experiences of African American women using social media and mental health outcomes.

This chapter discusses the methodology for identifying pertinent literature, the theoretical framework, the study's demographic, and an overview of research themes concerning Black individuals' experiences on social media. Additionally, Crenshaw's intersectionality framework is introduced in this chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

The databases used for this topic included ProQuest Online, SAGE journals, APA Psych Info, and Google Scholar. The following search terms were used to explore this topic: *Social media, Black women, African American women, self-esteem, mental health, lived experiences, social networking, emotions, identity, young adult, middle-aged, self-report, social support, gendered racism, interpersonal relations, connectedness to Black women, women's health, phenomenological, qualitative method, and psychological well-being*. The search engine was used to input keywords individually or in different combinations to yield the most pertinent search results aligned with the research topic

and inquiries. The literature review scope was limited to research published within the last 5 years.

Theoretical Foundation

Intersectionality theory was the theoretical foundation for this study. The intersectionality theory, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, was developed by Black feminist scholars to illuminate the marginalization experienced by Black women and their encounters with intersecting systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1993, 1994). The theory highlighted the significance of various overlapping identities (e.g., being both Black and female) in comprehending the impact of gendered racism on the well-being of Black women and how they navigate the adverse effects of encountering discrimination based on race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's arguments for intersectionality and how they shape the lives of women of color are described in three aspects: structural, political, and representational intersectionality.

Structural Intersectionality

Structural intersectionality involves how individuals within a particular identity category have different qualitative experiences based on their intersecting identities, such as class, race, and other social characteristics (Crenshaw, 1993). Structural intersectionality also indicates the unique challenges faced by Black women and women of color when compared to men of color and white women. Crenshaw (1989) specifically examined battered immigrant women of color to explore how individuals, particularly in the context of healthcare services, experience disparities due to their identity factors (e.g.,

language, culture, and residency status) and unequal power dynamics (Anders et al., 2024).

Political Intersectionality

In her exploration of political intersectionality, Crenshaw (1994) recognized the intricate relationship between social identities and political processes, underscoring the significance of confronting intersecting forms of oppression in both policymaking and activism. Within this framework, she acknowledged that Black women occupy intersecting marginalized positions—as both female and Black—resulting in a distinct experience of racism and sexism compared to Black men and White women, respectively. Additionally, Crenshaw emphasized the importance of forming coalitions to address systemic inequalities and drive social transformation collectively.

Representational Intersectionality

Representational intersectionality is a concept that looks at how race and gender portrayals in our culture come together to form specific stories about women of color. This is frequently observed in media portrayals that mimic derogatory, oversexualized characterizations and behaviors of Black women, which devalue their worth and undermine their experiences (Crenshaw, 1994). In other ways, representational intersectionality is described in ways in which women of color are not represented or shown in the media.

Using the intersectionality framework, I sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of African American women's experiences navigating social media and its contributing impact on their mental health. Amid the nationwide crisis of coronavirus,

massive unemployment, and racial injustice, there has been a surge in social media usage, leading to worse mental health outcomes for many people (Funk, 2022). With the most recent killings of Black people by police brutality of high-profile cases, such as Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and George Floyd, to name a few, social media exposure has resurfaced feelings of traumatization and brought many to question equality and the prevalence of racism even in today's society. An intersectional perspective examined the stressors stemming from race and gender that Black women encounter as a result of racial and gender-based oppression. The theory acknowledges that African American women may experience unique challenges due to the complexities of the identified social groups. This is critical to explore as African American women use social media to cope.

Furthermore, the intersectionality approach is a perspective that offers a multidimensional view of identity that can help to understand better-perceived narratives, images, and social media content and their impact on African American women's mental health. In the present study, I aimed to illuminate Black women's narratives and perspectives, emphasizing the necessity for tailored interventions and support systems.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Social Networking

Mass media is an essential source of information at the macro level in most countries (Dodemaide et al., 2022). Social network sites are online platforms that enable users to create a public or semi-public profile within a specific framework, connect with other users, and explore the connections of others within the system. As social media

continues to gain popularity worldwide, social networks are experiencing a steady increase in usage.

Social media is a digital platform for personal engagement and sharing content, interests, and ideas. There is growing evidence that social media undeniably influences human behavior. In 2021, 4.3 billion people had a social media account. Adult users classified as 18 years and above are almost 79% of all adults in that age group (Braghieri et al., 2022).

The highest social media platform for women aged 25–34 is WhatsApp at 15.7% and Instagram at 20.0%. Black American women are among the most prominent social media consumer groups in the United States (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Research also reveals that people utilize different platforms for different purposes (Park et al., 2024). For example, Facebook is mainly a place for connecting with old colleagues and communicating with family, whereas TikTok consists of short-form videos that contain content, entertainment, and comedy.

According to the media dependency theory, individuals have a heightened need for information and understanding in times of significant social disruption, with mass media typically seen as the primary source to fulfill these requirements (Park et al., 2024). Recent studies on social media have focused on exposure to mass trauma and vicarious trauma (effects of the COVID-19 pandemic) and mental health.

Racism and Social Media

African American women have been faced with structured gendered racism tracing back to their dehumanization during slavery (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Since then,

Black women have remained at the forefront of civil, political, and cultural activist movements (Ross et al., 2022). The harmful impacts of systematic gendered racism have become apparent in the misrepresentation and stereotypical view of Black women portrayed in the media. Black women are susceptible to internalizing these stereotypical perceptions about themselves. They may also support such views, leading to further concerns about the psychological impact on Black women's mental health and overall wellness. Although this research study is relevant to African American perceptions of social media on mental health, previous studies have discussed how African American women represented stereotypes in mass media, including radio and television, to gain a further understanding of how Black women are portrayed in the media.

Mass media is a primary channel for transmitting and sustaining societal stereotypes (Coleman et al., 2020), constructing a framework around marginalized groups, and shaping a collective perception of their identity. People from racial or ethnic minorities, consistently depicted through stereotypes in media portrayals, may tend to see these negative portrayals as accurate representations dominated by the ownership of white men. Specifically, African Americans are frequently stereotyped in mass media as aggressive, excessively sexualized, and resilient, often epitomized as SBWs (Coleman et al., 2020). Other commonly referenced stereotypes of African American Women include Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy (Robinson et al., 2020), and continue to evolve as well as their labels gradually. These stereotypes often progressed into conversations within hip-hop culture where a Black woman's body is the center of objectification and sexualization. Present-day Jezebels are labeled as "hoochies," "hos," or "freaks."

Sapphire, the “angry Black woman,” is portrayed as loud and hostile. This has resulted in a negative characterization that Black women are confrontational and problematic. Collectively, these stereotypes are thought to rationalize and validate the ongoing marginalization of Black women, serving as potent instruments for propaganda and upholding the existing societal norms (Ward et al., 2023).

African American women are the highest television consumers, viewing 6–7 hours daily on average (Coleman et al., 2020; Cox & Ward, 2019). This fact is underscored by an exploratory study examining the representation of Black women on scripted television shows. This study examined characteristics linked to traditional femininity and those specific to Black women. Findings of this indicated that Black female characters are frequently depicted as being sexualized, dressed in revealing clothing, and shown working in lower-ranking positions (Cox & Ward, 2019). Another study involving 115 young adult Black women investigated the influence of Black-oriented reality television on the acceptance of three stereotypes: Jezebel, Sapphire, or SBW. The findings showed that there was no significant impact on the perceptions of Black women themselves (Coleman et al., 2020).

Moreover, recent findings have become more diverse compared to earlier content, which showed African American women in lower-status roles. In contrast, some films highlight influential experiences, such as Issa Rae’s television series *Insecure*, which illuminates Black women on the screen as she unapologetically embraces Black culture, simultaneously dismantling stereotypes against the Black community. Notably, Black women have broken barriers and reached heights previously deemed unreachable for

women in general, particularly Black women. These women also own the popular television channels One, BET Networks, and OWN.

Other researchers have suggested that elevated gendered racism among Black women is connected with poorer mental health, characterized by heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Jones et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers have suggested that to cope with experiences of gendered racism, Black women frequently resort to identity shifting, altering their behavior and language to align with prevailing environmental standards, which can be detrimental to their mental health (Loyd et al., 2023). The concept of whiteness, often synonymous with the general notion of humanity, establishes a societal norm where anything outside of this standard is deemed unacceptable. Identity shifting can manifest consciously or unconsciously, in which people of color may shift to “acting white.” A study involving 239 young adult Black women explored the role of identity shifting and gendered racial identity centrality in mental health outcomes. The results suggested that identity shifting does not moderate the relationship between gendered racism and anxiety or depression. Racial identity and centrality do influence depression symptoms (Jones et al., 2021).

Repeated exposure to instances of police brutality directed at Black individuals on social media platforms has the potential to trigger racial trauma within the Black community. Recent discussions on social media have focused heavily on the adverse effects of racial trauma experienced by African Americans. Racial trauma encompasses instances of perceived or actual racial discrimination involving feelings of threat, harm, shame, and humiliation (Williams, 2021). In response to systemic gendered racism and

anti-Black gendered violence, Black American women have utilized social media platforms as public spaces to foster community, advocate for activism, and challenge prevailing narratives, promoting empowerment among Black American women (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). These discussions often revolve around widely witnessed incidents, such as the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, and others, which are frequently documented and circulated across various online platforms, particularly on Black Twitter. This digital space provides a platform for Black individuals to connect, bond, and address issues pertinent to the Black experience through shared communication, humor, language, and culture (Auxier, 2020). As a vital tool within the Black community, Black Twitter centers on Black perspectives and remains a preferred social media platform. These tragic events have catalyzed the formation of numerous movements initiated by Black women, underscored by hashtags such as #sayhername, #theblackyouthproject100, #theblackallianceforjustimmigration, and #blackgirlsvote (Ross et al., 2022).

Notably, Black women are overrepresented in creating influential hashtags within racial justice and feminist social networks compared to other demographic groups (Jackson et al., 2020). Hashtags on Twitter and other online platforms serve as a means to draw attention to police brutality and advocate for social change. To delve deeper into how Black users respond to instances of police brutality on Twitter, a qualitative study involving 27 participants was conducted. This study shed light on several key themes, including Black Twitter's role as a digital archive for remembering police brutality, opposition to dominant narratives, and collective sharing of trauma. Another

investigation revealed that Black college students experienced enduring psychological effects from watching police brutality content online. In a study about the perceptions of police brutality videos on college students of color, researchers found that most college students learned of incidents of police brutality on social media, and the majority of them experienced anger, frustration, sadness, and grief after viewing such images (Campbell & Valera, 2020). Moreover, the study underscored social media's impact on Black Americans' psychological well-being. This study builds on this research focusing on African American women.

There is an increasing number of individuals using social media as a platform to voice their dissatisfaction regarding the apparent lack of care and understanding for the well-being of Black women and girls. Researchers contend that this deficiency is primarily attributed to their life invisibility, sparking protests and policy reformation and the relationship between perceived racism and activism, mainly focusing on the experiences of Black individuals (Ross et al., 2022). Perceived racism involves three primary levels: interpersonal, institutional, and cultural, with associations found between perceived racism and adverse physical and mental health outcomes for Black individuals (Ross et al., 2022). Some researchers have suggested a connection between experiences of racism and activism, viewing activism as a response to racial oppression (Campbell & Valera, 2020). An examination of activism among Black Women in America highlights recent contextualized discriminatory events, including police brutality cases, as potential contributors to the rise in activism within the Black community (Ross et al., 2022). The significance of these events for Black women's activism is emphasized, noting that

discriminatory experiences often drive their participation in movements for change.

Black women, influenced by critical consciousness and Black feminism theories, engage in collective action with a communal understanding of racism's effects. The anticipation of a relationship between perceived racism and activism is discussed in the context of fostering change and addressing social inequities. These insights were crucial to my study in identifying how experiences of gendered racism on social media can impact one's mental health.

Self Esteem and Social Media

Studies have shown that self-esteem is an essential variable in understanding the psychological well-being of others. SNS usage strongly predicts social comparison behavior, which correlates positively with fear of missing out and depressive symptoms via rumination. Additionally, it is inversely related to overall self-worth, perceived physical appearance, and perceived social acceptance (Burnell et al., 2019).

Millions of internet users engage in social media platforms to post, reply, and share personal content that can be seen and endorsed (i.e., "liked") by other users; this can relatively be traced to psychological and behavioral characteristics (Marengo et al., 2021). These comments and likes gain interest from other users, collectively forming a means of attraction likely to increase one's self-esteem. Consistent with the sociometer theory, likes could be a resource to boost self-esteem as it depends on social feedback. On the contrary, having no likes can harm one's well-being as it can come with social comparisons and envy (Marengo et al., 2021). In a study with 236 participants in South Korea, the effects of social comparison on SNS on individuals' psychological well-being

(Lee, 2022). Findings indicated that social comparison negatively affected psychological well-being. Furthermore, studies have shown that individuals with lower self-esteem use SNSs more actively to fulfill their desire for social acceptance (Lee, 2022). They are more involved in the online community, anticipate more significant responses from online friends, and share posts on SNSs in anticipation of receiving more attention and feedback from their connections.

Other research suggests that the more an individual posts on social media, the more social support and receiving positive feedback. This experience is described as receiving a social award, eliciting positive feelings. Additionally, social media allows one to create self-presentation by self-monitoring uploaded information, focusing on specific ego needs, and increasing self-worth and subjective well-being (Marengo et al., 2021). Therefore, self-esteem is essential in a person's life, affecting health, job performance, and relations with others (Krause et al., 2021). This identified three processes influencing self-esteem: social comparison, social feedback processing, and self-reflection.

Social comparison is one of social media's contributions as users interact in a "perfect world" where individuals mainly upload the best versions of themselves. Researchers have explored a trend on Instagram called "Instagram vs reality," where women share both idealized and natural photos of themselves (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Participants were shown different sets of these images in a study involving 305 women aged 18–30. Results showed that seeing "Instagram vs reality" and authentic images reduced body dissatisfaction compared to idealized ones. Also, comparing appearances had less negative impact when viewing "Instagram vs reality" and authentic

images. This suggests that such posts could boost women's body satisfaction on Instagram. Overall, the study highlights how these images influence women's body image perceptions in the digital age.

Combined media streams of television and the internet explore the impact of chronic or temporary exposure to social media-based social comparison on self-esteem (Olayinka et al., 2021). This also addresses the importance of physicians and surgeons recognizing the psychosocial impact of mainstream beauty standards on patients. Internalizing social media beauty standards can lead to dissatisfaction with one's appearance (Olayinka et al., 2021). The focus then shifts to the unique challenges faced by American women of African ancestry due to historical factors, where traditional beauty standards often marginalize Black women. There are societal advantages for lighter-complexioned individuals within the Black race and the policing of Black women's hair. The discussion introduces the #BlackGirlMagic movement initiated by Cashawn Thompson (Olayinka et al., 2021) in response to derogatory remarks about the physical attractiveness of Black women. This movement aims to empower Black women by celebrating their achievements and affirming their beauty. This is extremely important while mitigating social media and being subjective to society's beauty standards. The results of a survey conducted among 134 young Black women on Instagram revealed that a significant percentage had experienced racial discrimination (Olayinka et al., 2021). Many participants desired to change features associated with their race, such as hair texture, skin complexion, and facial features. The survey indicates that most respondents believed the #BlackGirlMagic movement positively impacted their self-esteem, with a

significant percentage reporting improved self-esteem after engaging with the hashtag (Olayinka et al., 2021).

While research emphasizes the intricate nuances of the SBW ideal and its impact on Black women's mental health and well-being, there is a limited comprehension of how social media contributes to them navigating this ideal (Liao et al., 2020). The question remains how Black women's involvement with race-related social media, including Black-focused blogs and hashtags, might contribute to their overall well-being and potentially serve as a protective factor against the pressures of the SBW ideal.

Mental Health and Social Media

The correlation between social media usage and mental health has increasingly become a topic of concern. As defined in this study, mental health encompasses feelings of well-being, effective management of life's challenges, success in the workplace, and positive influence on others (Karim et al., 2020). Psychological well-being is an individual's ability to align their life with their core values (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Generalized anxiety disorder stands out as one of the most prevalent mental health issues among Black American women (Cho et al., 2013). Studies indicate that generalized anxiety disorder symptoms may manifest differently among Black women compared to their White counterparts, often appearing more severe or chronic. Within the cultural context of Black American women, the SBW archetype empowers this demographic to exhibit remarkable resilience, independence, and strength despite facing adversity and systemic challenges. This was highlighted in a study exploring the experiences of Black women working in critical sectors amidst the concurrent crises of COVID-19 and racism,

revealing themes of emotional turmoil, diverse coping strategies, and the pressure to maintain resilience (Godoy et al., 2023).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with increased social media usage, has exacerbated mental health issues for many individuals (Funk, 2022). The pandemic has disrupted social lives and daily routines, with over 7.7 million confirmed cases and at least 213,876 deaths in the United States as of October 2020, disproportionately affecting African Americans. Consequently, a higher percentage of African Americans now experience stress, anxiety, and depression (Snowden & Snowden., 2021). Due to limited physical interactions, social media has served as a primary source of information and connection. Individuals dealing with mental health challenges have turned to social media platforms to share experiences, seek information, and connect with others (Naslund et al., 2020).

However, not all studies confirm the adverse association between mental health and social media. In a study investigating how adolescents aged 14 to 17 perceive social media's impact on their well-being, participants emphasized the importance of social interaction, such as gaining more followers, which contributed to enhanced self-esteem, increased support, and positively correlated with overall well-being (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Similarly, Bekalu et al. (2019) included social media positively correlated with well-being when utilized routinely.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge how gender and race influence social media use for mental health information-seeking and its impact on well-being. For instance, research has shown that African American and Latinx adolescents experience

heightened psychological distress and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression due to exposure to traumatic online content targeting racial minorities (Tynes et al., 2019). Another study explored the relationship between discrimination, social media use, and chronic stress in African Americans, revealing a positive correlation between recent discrimination experiences and increased chronic stress (Zeligmari et al., 2022). Hence, this study investigates women's perceptions of social media use and its impact on mental health.

Social Support and Coping

Research confirms that social support is significant as it pertains to protective factors against poor mental health outcomes and psychological distress. Coping involves individuals assessing resources that aid them in dealing with or mitigating the adverse impacts of perceived stressful stimuli. Black women are seemingly always connected. Existing research explores how African American women are likely to cope with stress with spirituality, prayers, social support, or avoiding the stressor. Black women reported needing, expecting, and receiving more significant support from other Black women through togetherness and connectedness offline and online. A longitudinal study specifically for older African American women who faced perceived discrimination that these individuals expressed more depressive symptoms (Qin et al., 2020). African Americans were more likely to seek support from family and close friends to cope with negative experiences.

On the contrary, how does a Black woman cope when their highest form of connectedness is through social media; social media is embodied with perceptions of

macroaggressions, racism, police brutality, and social comparisons that have been proven to be inevitable. This research can serve as a basis for intervention, resources, and prevention strategies that promote positive online experiences, understanding women's online experiences through a new lens to support and sustain the mental health of African American women using social media.

Social support can act as a coping mechanism against various mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. For instance, research focused on depression indicates that African Americans who experience higher levels of emotional support and maintain more frequent connections with extended family members demonstrate a reduced likelihood of meeting the criteria for major depressive disorder. Other adaptive strategies have been shown to harm attitudes towards seeking professional mental health services. In return, this behavior leads to self-silencing and emotional suppression, which can contribute to heightened anxiety. Critically important research highlights the critical need for Black women to shift from "coping" to "healing" (French et al., 2020). This offers propaganda that will no longer require African American women to be in "survival" mode but develop meaningful clinical interventions that cultivate radical healing and wholeness (French et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to identify specific ways Black women cope as a result of perceived mental health outcomes from social media.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 provided the literature review. Overall, the literature review synthesized research on social media's impact on self-esteem, mental health, racism, and coping,

providing a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex dynamics at the intersection of social media and the well-being of Black American women. This research held significance for both academic and practical domains. Academically, it contributed to the literature on social media and mental health by providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences of a specific demographic that has been underrepresented in existing studies. Practically, the findings informed mental health practitioners, social media platforms, and policymakers in developing targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the unique needs of African American women. In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed overview of the research design, methodology, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. I also addressed concerns about my study's validity and reliability and highlighted ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This study aimed to explore the impact of social networking on the mental health of African American women. In the following sections, I offer an extensive examination of the research methodology, encompassing data collection methods, data analysis approaches, and the measures taken to guarantee the credibility and consistency of the results. The insights derived from this qualitative study contributed significantly to exploring an underrepresented demographic in existing studies and developing targeted interventions specific to the needs of African American women.

Research Design

The research design included a qualitative descriptive study using a phenomenological approach to deeply explore and understand African American women's experiences and perceptions regarding their social media use and its implications for their mental health and well-being.

For the data collection methods, semistructured interviews asked open-ended questions to gather information about participants' experiences. This format allowed participants to express their thoughts and feelings in an open-ended manner while guiding the conversation with specific questions to ensure coverage of the research topics. Purposive sampling was used to select knowledgeable participants who could provide rich data based on their encounters with social media and its contributions to mental health and well-being. The target sample size for saturation in this study was 10–12 participants, sufficient to reach thematic saturation of the data collected.

Rationale

A qualitative approach was explicitly adopted to address the research question in this study, aligning with the exploratory nature of the inquiry. The methodology sought to explore the complexity of the social issue by delving into the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women regarding their use of social media and its potential negative impacts on mental health and well-being. This research aimed to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of African American perspectives on the relationship between social media and mental health, thereby addressing the unique needs of this population. A phenomenological design was selected as the foundational framework to capture insights derived from the personal worldviews of African American women.

Role of the Researcher

Recruitment is fundamental in qualitative research, and the researcher's responsibility is to select participants who meet the study criteria and can provide valuable insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Negrin et al., 2022). This process also marks the beginning of rapport-building, where trust and respect are established to foster open communication and collaboration. A comfortable environment was created for participants to dialogue and share their perspectives. Maintaining professionalism throughout recruitment is essential, especially when potential candidates may include personal or professional acquaintances.

Before collecting data, obtaining informed consent and addressing ethical considerations are paramount. This involves securing participants' consent and ensuring

confidentiality through meticulous data storage and anonymization procedures, safeguarding personal or identifiable information.

Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences and interpreting their narratives to uncover underlying meanings (Ahmed, 2024). This holistic approach shapes every aspect of the research process, from framing questions and selecting methods to analyzing data and reporting findings. As the qualitative researcher, my role during data collection encompassed observing, analyzing, and accurately documenting participants' responses. This included conducting one-on-one interviews, ensuring participants comprehended the questions, and adapting sensitively to their reactions and feedback to maintain their comfort and willingness to participate. Additionally, I was mindful of my biases and beliefs that may influence the study outcomes, prioritizing transparency and reflexivity to uphold research credibility and ethical standards.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The study focused on a specific criterion and target population, which included women aged 24–39 who identify as African American or Black, have been active users of one or more social media platforms for at least one year, and use social media for well-being. To recruit participants, I initiated the process on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Twitter, using a flyer outlining the study's purpose and participant criteria. The proposed recruitment process began on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Twitter

using a flyer that briefly listed the details about the study, such as the purpose and participant criteria, to obtain interested participants in the United States.

My sampling strategy for selecting participants consisted of purposive sampling, also known as “purposeful sampling,” involving cases that are “information rich” (Campbell et al., 2020) with particular attention to selecting individuals with varied experiences in terms of the length of social media use, the diversity of platforms used, and different levels of engagement for well-being. The purpose of adopting a purposive sample in this study was to identify and select participants who possessed relevant knowledge and could contribute effectively to the research objectives. It prioritizes individuals’ readiness, enthusiasm for participation, and ability to articulate experiences and opinions eloquently and reflectively (Campbell et al., 2020). In a purposive sample, saturation is a qualitative study’s guiding principle and goal. Saturation can be defined as the point where no new themes have emerged throughout the interviews. The targeted sample size for saturation in this study was 10–12 participants, which aligned with the recommendation to use a small sample size to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Wa-Mbaleka, 2020).

Instrumentation

Semistructured Interviews

The data collection instrumentation consisted of a semistructured interview protocol. As the interviewer, I developed a detailed interview guide (Appendix B) with open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, comprehensive participant responses. These questions covered various topics related to the research objectives, such as personal

social media usage habits, perceived effects on mental health, personal coping mechanisms, and views on community support via social media. This included prompts and follow-up questions to explore.

Recording Equipment

Before each interview session, I prepared by ensuring that high-quality digital audio recorders were fully charged and had sufficient memory. These devices were used to capture all interviews and will remain in the researcher's possession. Additionally, I conducted a test before the start of each session to ensure that the recording device was functioning correctly.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

The participant recruitment procedures began with identifying potential participants through purposive sampling, focusing on African American women who are active social media users of one or more social media platforms and between 24–39 years old.

Outreach. For outreach purposes, recruitment for this study was advertised through social media. Interested individuals were encouraged to contact the researcher for a screening interview to ensure they meet inclusion criteria and understand the study details. Upon selection, participants receive detailed informed consent forms, electronically or in person, to fully understand the study's purpose, their involvement, potential risks, and rights.

Screening. Interested individuals were required to complete a pre-screening survey to ensure they meet inclusion criteria and understand the study details.

Participants were instructed to click on the QR code or use the link on the recruitment flyer to complete the pre-screening questions to ensure participants meet inclusion criteria and understand study details.

Informed Consent. Upon screening and selection, participants were provided with detailed informed consent forms, which were provided electronically. It is imperative to ensure that participants comprehensively understand the study's purpose, the nature of their participation, the potential risks involved, and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This process aimed to uphold ethical standards and prioritize participant autonomy and informed decision-making.

Participation Procedures

Upon verifying that the selected participants met the study's criteria, I contacted each individual to schedule one-to-one interviews at a time that works best for the participant. Participants had a choice of completing the interview either virtually or in person, depending on participants' locations and other desired preferences. Reminder emails were sent a day before to minimize no-shows.

Sessions were conducted in comfortable, private settings via secure online platforms. Data collection began by reiterating the study's purpose and confidentiality measures, followed by semistructured interviews using prepared guides and recording with participant consent.

Data Handling

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim after participants' explicit consent. This approach simplified the focus on interview content and spoken cues. During transcription, I ensured the anonymization of all identifying information. Data are securely stored in compliance with institutional guidelines and privacy laws. I retained the audio recorder for safeguarding purposes. Follow-up procedures included offering participants access to study findings summaries and providing referrals to mental health resources if needed during the study.

Data Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis was the chosen method for data analysis in this study. This approach allowed for identifying emerging themes and patterns within the qualitative data obtained from interviews. Ensuring a diverse range of experiences and perspectives among participants was paramount in collecting these data. After transcribing the interviews and reviewing recorded videos using manual coding and thematic categorization. This method enabled a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of social media on the mental health and well-being of African American women. Any discrepant cases identified during the study were carefully addressed. This involved exploring underlying factors contributing to divergence from established themes or recognizing new meaningful patterns or subthemes. Transparency was maintained throughout the research findings, openly acknowledging any discrepant cases encountered and how themes were identified for the validity and reliability of the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Ensuring credibility is crucial to establishing the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings. Qualitative research is descriptive research that provides sufficient contextual support to establish the four essential components: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Johnson et al., 2020).

Credibility

Credibility in research hinges on transparently addressing biases and how they were identified and mitigated. This honesty safeguards the reliability and trustworthiness of a study by honoring the subjective experiences, perspectives, and emotions involved (Ahmed, 2024). Acknowledging biases and personal opinions related to the subject matter is crucial for researchers to establish credibility. This fosters trust among participants, encouraging them to share their experiences openly without fear of judgment, thus improving the quality of research. One effective strategy to enhance qualitative research credibility is peer debriefing, a collaborative process where colleagues provide impartial feedback on the study. I incorporated peer debriefing by engaging with my dissertation committee members, utilizing their insights to refine research findings and stimulate meaningful conversations that deepen understanding of the phenomenon. Triangulation aims at validating the study results using multiple approaches (Adler, 2022). I implemented triangulation using multiple data sources, including observation, interviewing notes, and offering unique perspectives.

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which another researcher can replicate the study and produce the same results (Nassaji, 2020). An audit trail serves as a means for checking the accuracy and reliability of the data. An audit trail includes keeping a detailed record of all data collected, how data were altered, and the decisions made during the research process. I incorporated an audit trail by maintaining raw documentation and analysis of research data using a journal to take notes throughout the research process.

Transferability

Transferability pertains to the degree of applicability of research findings across various settings (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). In qualitative research, enhancing transferability involves offering detailed descriptions and thoroughly outlining the research context. Confirmability aims to align the research as closely as possible with “objective reality” (Stahl & King, 2020). This principle guided the research study by providing comprehensive sampling information, including participant selection criteria and their experiences.

Confirmability

Confirmability depends on the precision and accuracy of data collection, ensuring that others can verify the data (Nassaji, 2020). One strategy to achieve this is through reflexivity, where biases are addressed proactively, and a journal is used to examine shared thoughts and biases throughout the research process. Additionally, confirmability was ensured by adhering to ethical guidelines and maintaining participants’ confidentiality, fostering trust in the research process and its outcomes.

Ethical Procedures

Ethics is the discipline of morality that is an essential component of clinical research. Walden University maintains specific ethical guidelines for students planning to conduct a research study that must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning any study. The IRB ensures that Walden University research complies with ethical standard guidelines, ensuring the well-being and rights of human participants. I received IRB approval (05-31-24-0682433) before initiating my proposed study. The recruitment strategy did not discriminate against potential participants based on other demographics irrelevant to the study's scope. There were no agreements to gain access to participants as participants volunteered by invitation. Participants received an email invitation with an informed consent form attached. The candidate adhered to the IRB guidelines by giving their informed consent, which involved sending an e-mail back to the researcher containing the phrase "I Consent" to confirm their willingness to participate. Participants were asked to sign a consent form that outlines the aspects of the research study in a language that is easy to understand. As the researcher, I ensured that participation was completely voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study without any penalty due to the potential sensitivity of the research topic.

Confidentiality is a significant and critical component in this study as participants disclose personal information, release emotions, and share feelings related to their lived experiences on social media. Confidentiality was reviewed and discussed thoroughly to protect the identity of research participants, as all data were treated with such regard as

per IRB documents. Data are stored on a password-protected computer, secured and stored in my possession for the duration of the study, and will be immediately destroyed after 5 years. The voice recorder is also in my possession. I am the only person with access to this data information. All participants were treated with benevolence and respect throughout the research study, ensuring no harm was done to the research participants.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to describe the qualitative study, which included the research design and methodology, recruitment, participation, data collection procedures, and data analysis. In this study, the researcher collected data from in-depth interviews using open-ended questions to explore the lived experiences of social media on African American women's mental health and well-being. Thematic coding was used to make the relevance of patterns and themes derived from the transcription of interviews. The instrumentation for the variables, as well as credibility, dependability, and reliability, was mentioned. Additionally, concerns of validity and ethical considerations are included in the study. Chapter 4 discusses the study results and data analysis generated from the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This qualitative study examined the experiences and perceptions of African American women as they navigate social media. The goal was to offer insights into their lived experiences, emphasizing the effects of social media on their mental health and well-being. This chapter outlines the research methods and presents the findings. It addresses the central research question: What are African American women's lived experiences and perceptions regarding social media use and its impact on mental health and well-being? The chapter starts by describing the research environment, including the outcomes of using a social media flyer and purposive sampling to recruit participants. Next, it explains how data were collected through open-ended interviews using a structured protocol form. A table of participant demographics is included for comparative purposes. The chapter then introduces four key themes identified through data analysis: social comparison, positive content, and community, highlighting anxiety and depression and managing negative emotions, and examples of subthemes that illustrate commonalities and differences in the participants' experiences. Each section of this chapter will address the central research question by exploring various aspects of the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Setting for Research

Social Media Flyer

The social media flyer successfully attracted potential and qualified candidates who met the study requirements. While only a few visitors "liked" the participation

invitation flyer, many others clicked the shared link to fill out the pre-screening survey form, indicating their interest and granting consent to join the research study. This method ensured a broad reach and efficient recruitment of participants.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilized as the sampling frame for the qualitative method. This process involved intentionally selecting participants who met specific inclusion criteria: females aged 24–39 who identified as African American, had been active users of one or more social media platforms for at least one year, and used social media for well-being. The pre-screening survey ensured that participants met these criteria and understood the study details. I selected individuals who met the inclusion criteria, aiming for maximum variation to understand the diversity of experiences. All selected participants were contacted via email, signed consent forms, and completed the interviews.

Open-Ended Interviews

I successfully conducted open-ended interviews with the participants, gathering rich data that revealed their personal experiences and interactions via social media. After completing the pre-screening form, selected participants reviewed and signed the consent form with the words “I consent,” as directed by the IRB. I prepared Zoom links and sent them to participants and the interview schedule. Participants had the option for in-person or virtual interviews, ensuring privacy and confidentiality as advised by the IRB. Reminder emails were sent a day before the scheduled interviews.

I prepared an audio recorder to ensure accurate transcription and used a secure Zoom link for virtual interviews. The sessions proceeded smoothly and were uneventful. An interview protocol form (see Appendix B) was used, incorporating uniform questions derived from the research objectives and including a mental health check post-interview. Participants were not in distress and exhibited overall positive wellness.

The audio recorder was used to store data on the device securely and protected by a password. I followed transcription guidelines, produced Word documents for each interview, labeled participants using double digits, and began the coding process.

Demographics

Ten participants met the study criteria, including African American women, active users of one or more social media platforms, and those using social media for mental health and well-being, completed interviews for this study. Other identifiers included age, gender, and ethnicity (see Table 1). The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 35, with a mean age of 30.4, a median age of 31, and a standard deviation of 3.45.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
01	25	Female	African American
02	33	Female	African American
03	32	Female	African American
04	30	Female	African American
05	24	Female	African American
06	32	Female	African American
07	30	Female	African American
08	29	Female	African American
09	35	Female	African American
10	34	Female	African American

These demographic characteristics had been chosen to ensure a focused exploration of the experiences of African American women, a group significantly affected by social media usage in the context of mental health.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced shortly after IRB approval. Sixteen participants responded to the study invitation and completed the pre-screening survey. Five individuals did not meet the study's criteria as they did not use social media for mental health and well-being, and one potential candidate did not appear. I proceeded with the remaining 10 participants, who self-identified as African American women, who were active users of one or more social media platforms and used social media for mental health and well-being. The 10 participants preferred to conduct face-to-face virtual interviews using a password-protected Zoom invitation. Each participant was interviewed once, lasting between 17 and 44 minutes. The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 35, with a mean age of 30.4 and a median age of 31.

I initiated data collection by disseminating the recruitment invitation flyer via social media. Interested potential participants were directed to complete a pre-screening survey, followed by a consent form detailing the purpose of the study, involvement, risks, rights, and agreement to be audio recorded. Participants were also informed that not all interested candidates might be selected due to the necessity of meeting the inclusion criteria. I utilized a secure online platform, Zoom, and prepared guides to conduct the interviews. The interviews were semistructured and open-ended, enabling participants to elaborate on their personal experiences. This approach allowed participants to provide

comprehensive data and enhanced conformability. I selected participants using purposive sampling as part of a phenomenological analysis. I crafted the interview questions to create an open platform for African American women to share their unique experiences with specific social media content and its potential impact on their mental health and well-being. Each interview consisted of three demographic questions and 18 open-ended questions directly related to the research questions.

After the interview, participants were asked to complete a mental health check-in, given a scale of 1–10 to assess their overall well-being. They were also allowed to add any information they wanted to share and provide comments on their interview experience. The participants used this opportunity to provide feedback on the data collection experience.

There were no significant variations from the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3, and the sessions proceeded smoothly without any significant unusual circumstances, except for one potential participant not showing up for the scheduled interview.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on thematic analysis, which explored patterns and meanings across the data to identify themes. This process began after transcribing and editing the interviews, involving multiple reviews of each interview and comparison with the software-generated transcriptions. This decontextualizing and recontextualizing approach was particularly suited to this study as it focuses on identifying and understanding significant themes and their relationships within the qualitative data.

After familiarizing myself with the data by reviewing the transcriptions, I assigned initial codes to organize the data. For example, codes such as “anxiety,” “support groups,” and “racial discrimination” were used to capture recurring concepts in the participants’ responses. These codes were then grouped into categories, such as “Negative Emotional Impact,” “Community Support,” and “Experiences of Discrimination.” These categories were further refined into broader themes.

Through this analysis, I observed patterns and consistencies that helped describe the experiences of African American women and the impact of social media on their mental health and well-being. For instance, the theme “Mental Health Challenges” included categories like “Negative Emotional Impact” and “Coping Mechanisms.” Repetitions in the participant data strengthened the thematic progression, enhancing the trustworthiness of the data, including its credibility and confirmability.

Quotations from participants were used to illustrate these themes. One participant shared, “Being part of online support groups for Black women has been a lifesaver. It is a space where I feel understood and supported,” highlighting the theme of “Community Support.”

Addressing discrepant cases was not a significant issue in this study, as most participants provided consistent responses. However, one participant expressed skepticism about online support groups, stating, “Sometimes, these groups can feel performative rather than genuinely supportive.” This feedback was factored into the analysis to ensure a balanced representation of experiences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

With the growing recognition and value of qualitative research, it is crucial to conduct it rigorously and methodically to produce meaningful and valuable results. To establish trustworthiness, researchers must demonstrate that their data analysis is precise, consistent, and thorough. This is founded on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is essential to the study's trustworthiness and relies on honest and transparent reporting of the results (Johnson et al., 2020). I functioned as the data collector, utilizing a computer and a voice recorder to capture data for analysis accurately. This approach also provided a foundation for ensuring reliability and validity. During the interview calls, I took notes to add value to the transcripts in striving for accuracy and increasing credibility. Narrative quotations from the data were included to support the interpretative findings. To address bias, I employed bracketing to gain a clear understanding of participants' experiences (Weatherford & Maitra, 2019). Reflexivity was used throughout the research process to neutralize the influence of subjectivity. Additionally, triangulation was applied by using data collected from interviews and observations to strengthen the robustness and integrity of the research findings.

Transferability

Transferability is the second pillar of trustworthiness. Similar to quantitative research, qualitative research aims to apply findings from one environmental setting to another. This transfer heavily depends on providing thick descriptions, which include rich

details necessary for applying the findings in different contexts (Stahl & King, 2020). To ensure transferability, detailed descriptions of the participants' backgrounds, the context of their social media use, and the specific settings of the interviews were documented. This approach provided sufficient context for applying the findings to other settings.

Dependability

Dependability, a fundamental component of trustworthiness, pertains to the replicability of a study, often referred to as the “trust” in trustworthy research. Several rigorous practices were implemented to ensure dependability, including maintaining an audit trail to document the research process comprehensively. Additional strategies involved using an interview protocol, sample interview questions, voice recorders, conferencing, transcription, and editing tools. Participants engaged in open and transparent dialogue about their experiences with social media and its impact on mental health and well-being. Data responses were captured based on participants' personal experiences across various social media platforms. Participant quotations were utilized to highlight and connect themes, supporting the data and enhancing the study's dependability.

Confirmability

I demonstrated confirmability by using semistructured interview questions to guide the interview process. I developed open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their experiences, both positive and negative, regarding social media and its potential impact on mental health and well-being. This approach aimed to approximate objective reality (Stahl & King, 2020). The participant responses were analyzed for

thematic consistency, as revealed in the transcriptions. To enhance transparency and provide insights into the researcher's subjectivity, I documented my reflections in a reflexive journal, contributing to the confirmability of the findings.

Results

Ten African American women between the ages of 24–39 consented to participate in an interview using Zoom conferencing. This allowed participants to share about their social media use and psychosocial outcomes. The interview questions used in the interview protocol were intended to answer the research question, “What are the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women’s social media use and its impact on mental health and well-being?” The participant responses were recorded, transcribed, edited for clarity, and repeated for respondent validation. Thematic codes were represented based on repeated participants’ expressions identified throughout the interviews. The four themes were social comparison, positive content and community, highlights on anxiety and depression, and managing negative emotions. With the support of these codes, the research question provided the foundation for the detailed thematic analysis.

The following section reports on the themes drawn from the 18 open-ended questions. Four themes identified within this content were social comparison, positive content, community, and highlights on anxiety and depression and managing negative emotions. This section highlights the thematic content identified through the code analysis of the interview data. This section indicated the perceptions of social media on mental health and well-being in African American women. The semantic themes were

identified and then grouped at a broader level, maintaining participants' original language as much as possible. Positive behavioral adaptation and the ability to navigate daily life activities define mental health and well-being.

Theme 1: Social Comparison

Participants' responses highlighted their inadequacy when active on social media, often comparing themselves to their peers. Participant 1 stated, "I think social comparison can happen anywhere; it is not something I feel like I deal with." Participant 2 emphasized the importance of maintaining perspective: "I try to tell myself to run my race. I try not to get caught up in the social media world because I know many people portray themselves as happy, but they're actually not." Similarly, Participant 3 noted, "When it pertains to comparison, if it happens, it's unintentional." Participant 4 described experiencing a mentality of comparison rather than engaging in direct social comparison: "It just brings about a mentality of comparison, like, 'Oh, they're doing this or they're doing that,' which often places people in a state of perceived lack instead of allowing them to appreciate the gifts they do have." Participant 5 shared similar beliefs, stating, "It's weird because we are watching each other basically maneuver through life." Participant 6 expressed that body shaming on social media significantly impacts her well-being. She said, "

It's a lot of body shaming, and that is just mean. I think that's the biggest thing. If you don't look like the girls on social media, then you're not pretty. So, I think, for me, that's the biggest thing that can cause depression.

Conversely, Participant 7 identified how social comparison could be used positively, expressing, “I can do more ... if he or she can do it, so can I.” According to Participant 8, seeing many young Black female influencers and entrepreneurs can make her feel like she is not doing enough or is inadequate in her own career. She stated,

Even seeing a lot of my peers getting married or having children or they’re graduating or accelerating in their careers can make me sometimes feel behind, even though I know we all have our own timelines when it comes to growth.

Participant 9 echoed these sentiments, emphasizing, “It’s a really big deal,” regarding social comparison on social media. Participant 10 concurred, adding, “I cannot deny it is an unwanted emotion I have experienced on social media.” These narratives underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of social comparison on social media, illustrating its detrimental impacts and the potential for positive motivation.

Theme 2: Positive Content and Community

Participants highlighted several practical ways African American women engage with social media, including connecting with others, learning new hobbies, and mastering new skills. Participants reported reasons for using SNSs, such as:

- “for interior design and decorating” (Participant 10)
- “entertainment, funny videos, fashion and beauty, cooking” (Participant 6)
- “health and wellness, to find workout videos” (Participant 9)

Additionally, participants mentioned developing professional and business networks, accessing and sharing information, seeking entertainment, boosting their mood, and “escaping from reality” (Participant 10). Social media has provided a creative space for

women to display talents, explore, and create, unlocking opportunities to reach a broader audience, while others simply browse for new content. Participant 1 described, “For me, my personal experience, social media is more positive than negative,” whereas Participant 4 shared “social media is a coping skill for me. It makes me feel good when I get on there, I do not want to get off.”

The following subthemes were found in relation positive content and community empowerment, positive impact on mental health, connection, and friendship.

Empowerment

One related subtheme is empowerment. This section emphasizes the sense of belonging and connection within the Black community, particularly among Black women. Most participants felt a sense of identity when associated with “Black Girl Magic.” They shared their personal perspectives on what the phrase means and how it influences their sense of identity and connection. Participant 3 stated, “Black Girl Magic to me is a Black woman doing something that is positive in the community, either positive for her family or for the community. She’s doing something great.” Participant 6 shared,

It does make you feel like you are a part of the community. When you do see that, to me, it means Black women walking in their purpose, inspiring other Black women that care about their image and how they portray themselves, whether that be online or in our day-to-day life.

Participant 9 added, “Black girl magic, to me, forces empowerment and exudes confidence. For example, I will post a picture with my natural hair out big and poofy, put

some makeup on, and post it with ‘my Black is beautiful.’” This subtheme underscores the powerful role of community and mutual support in fostering self-confidence and empowerment among Black women.

Positive Impact on Mental Health

Participants shared that certain content and pages followed have positively impacted mental health and well-being. About mental health pages followed on Instagram, Participant 2 stated,

It’s non-judgmental and specifically caters to the Black community, addressing the day-to-day struggles we may face, whether in the workplace, religious spaces, or family-oriented environments. These pages provide guidance on how to deal with ongoing issues and manage symptoms effectively, preventing a sense of being overwhelmed. I find them very helpful because they offer a positive influence not only for those with mental health issues but for everyone in general.

Another participant described transitioning through motherhood and being able to be encouraged by other women navigating through similar life events. She stated,

I recently just started following this new page because I’m new to motherhood.

The page is called ‘Undeclared Moms.’ They basically just teach moms how to be encouragement sharing daily quotes that are uplifting to them. When I do run across it, it makes me feel like, okay, I’ve got this. You can keep doing it. Other people are in the same predicament or having the same feelings as you and that is a life saver. (Participant 5)

Participant 10 stated as a content creator she has found a passion and joy encouraging other women. She stated, posting encouraging content on social media is a routine that brings her joy. She enjoys motivating and inspiring other moms and women, which positively impacts her mental health by allowing her to express herself and connect with others positively.

Participant 6 reflected on her ability to find humor and joy in social media. The participant mentioned that watching proposal videos and other romantic content brings her joy, even though it sometimes makes her reflect on her own life. This duality shows that while she may feel a longing for similar experiences, she also finds happiness in seeing others' joyful moments. Furthermore, she shared that following positive content like the "B. Simone podcast" helps uplift her mood, providing laughter and a positive perspective. Her engagement with social media communities offers a sense of belonging and validation, which are crucial for mental health."

Connection and Friendship

Connection and friendship were subthemes developed from the positive impact of social media on mental health. This revealed the positive experiences African American women have found to enhance their sense of community and/or social support.

Participant 6 mentioned that she follows "Black Girls in Social Work" on Facebook, a community that allows her to connect with other Black women in her profession. While she does not actively post about her mental health struggles, the group offers a supportive environment where shared experiences are discussed. Participant 10 shared that social media has allowed her to establish meaningful connections:

I have received messages from women in Africa expressing that my content has inspired or assisted them in various ways. Additionally, I had the opportunity to meet a young woman I connected with on social media, and we developed a close friendship as a result.

Participant 1 reflected on connections following positive influencers,

I feel comfortable. I feel like, in a sense, she's a friend or somebody that I can relate to. I just feel, I don't know, I feel relaxed. I feel like I can see myself in her and what she does on her day-to-day basis.

This participant finds relatability in the influencers daily activities and lifestyle which strengthens online connections and supportive networks.

Participant 9 discussed using social media for business connections related to health, such as training and health education, rather than for social purposes. She stated, "I am learning to use my platforms to help generate income and achieve similar goals. I am looking to connect not only with people I know but also with those I don't."

However, some participants, found that their time spent on social media was not a positive experience. Participant 7 believes social media can be used in a positive light to inspire, she stated "you can influence people through social media in a good way or a bad way." Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "Social media is, it's a gift and a curse. It's a fine line. To navigate social media in a healthy way, you really have to know who you are."

Other participants highlighted various negative experiences with social media, including:

- **excessive use:** "Hmm.. its terrible, I am on social media every day ... its crazy from the time I wake up until I go to sleep" (Participant 6).

- **mood changes:** “My mood changes when I am on social media and when I am off. It’s weird, I cannot explain it” (Participant 7).
- **exposure to racially insensitive content and traumatic events:** “Recently, I don’t know what’s up with the algorithm, but my page, like, my Instagram, has been filled with sad, traumatic events. Like people getting in accidents or, like, children being killed by their mom or family member. ... I just sat there and cried” (Participant 10).

These experiences can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation.

Participants had a variety of perspectives on which specific platforms were more helpful or harmful than others when trying to manage their overall mood and well-being.

One participant explained her experience in sharing:

I like Threads; it’s similar to Twitter but better. It’s a platform where people engage in meaningful conversations. They discuss business, share spiritual guidance, and talk about living their best, most healed lives. You can also find valuable business and financial tips.

Another participant reported, “YouTube is a really good distracting for me, I can get lost in lifestyle videos all day, it definitely encourages and put me in a great mood”

(Participant 8). Instagram was noted as most popular regarding time spent and also regarding unrealistic expectations as Participant 2 stated, “social media is not a real

place,” while another participant shared, “I feel like most judged on Instagram, I don’t know maybe it’s the content I am exposed to.” Tik Tok was reported as “open and free.”

Participants referred to Tik Tok as an outlet, “nothing is serious” (Participant 1). While another participant shared, “I laugh the most when I am on Tik Tok” (Participant 7). Participants reported Facebook as intentional regarding connecting, reconnecting, and sustaining relationships. “I use Facebook to maintain relationships when people I’ve connected with over the years. I engage with most of my family members on Facebook” (Participant 1).

Theme 3: Highlights on Anxiety and Depression

Participants described experiencing a range of negative emotions due to social media use, including anxiety, sadness, and feelings of unworthiness. Participant 4 elaborated: “Emotional challenges or stressors that I faced while using social media? Anxiety, for sure. Sometimes I can’t really put a word on what is making me anxious, but definitely anxiety. Definitely sometimes feelings of unworthiness or feeling less than.” Participant 6 emphasized the detrimental effects of observing others’ seemingly perfect lives during tough times: “Seeing people live their seemingly perfect life can be detrimental to watch on social media when I am going through tough times.” Participant 2 discussed how depression might manifest differently among Black women, often being misinterpreted and leading to misunderstandings:

I think depression can come off as anger or attitude if not diagnosed. So, I think that’s where the angry Black woman concept may come from. A lot of times, Black women remain silent on how they feel because they may feel like they may not be heard or accepted in certain spaces.

These accounts collectively illustrated how social media can intensify emotional distress, leading to heightened anxiety, sadness, and a pervasive sense of unworthiness among users.

Theme 4: Managing Negative Emotions

Participants also shared insights on how they manage negative emotions and employ effective coping strategies while using social media:

- **Taking breaks:** Participant 7 stated the following:

If I realize that it's getting overwhelming for me, I'll just get off of it and try to keep myself away from it for a little bit. I have taken breaks from social media before for months at a time because of that.

Participant 8 stated that to manage these feelings, she tries to use social media less and reminds herself that social media often showcases highlight reels, not the full picture. However, she admitted, "I have not found a proper coping mechanism at this point."

- **Engaging in therapy:** Participant 6 stated, "I think a lot of Black women are seeking therapy, and I honestly think it is what's best for our mental health."
- **Support systems:** Participant 7 explained, "It's important to realize there is life beyond the screen. We all need a support system, whether it be family, friends, or a counselor. Personally, I have been in therapy for several years now. ... I love it." Participant 3 said, "I follow spiritual leaders like Sarah Jakes Roberts. She is very uplifting, and her posts always make me feel connected and grounded spiritually."

- **Spiritual practices:** Participant 1 said, “When social media is overwhelming, I am done for the day. Other times, I’m like maybe I need to pray.”
- **Positive interactions and content:** Participant 10 stated, “Social media is my coping mechanism.”

Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I presented the study results, building upon the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. The results section detailed the research setting, including outreach methods such as social media flyers and purposive sampling. Data collection involved open-ended interviews with consenting participants. Participant demographics were then presented in a table, allowing for comparison among the different participants in the study. The data collection method referenced the protocol instrument used for each interview (Appendix B) and included sample interview questions. Data analysis involved hand-coding to identify codes derived from participants’ responses. This process facilitated the separation of codes, identifying consistent thematic elements within the data.

Trustworthiness measures were employed to ensure the data’s validity and reliability, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The process results included recalling the research question and establishing four key themes: social comparison, positive content and community, highlights on anxiety and depression, and managing negative emotions. These themes and their subthemes were connected to the research questions regarding the perspectives of social media on African American women’s mental health and well-being. The participant data supported the

majority of the subthemes. The findings revealed that both positive and negative impacts characterize social media use among African American women. Key insights include the detrimental effects of social comparison and exposure to negative content, contrasted with the benefits of community support and empowerment through positive content and connections.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological study explored African American women's experiences and viewpoints concerning their social media usage. The research investigated how women aged 24-39 sought, processed, and utilized information on social media platforms and the subsequent effects on their mental well-being. This study aimed to comprehend social media's contributions to African American women's mental health. The research was guided by the question, “What are the perceptions and experiences of African American women aged 24–39 regarding social media use and its impact on mental health and well-being?” Participants provided their experiences and reflections on their engagement in social media, content, and various platforms that influenced mental health and well-being. The study underscored the dual nature of social media, showing that while it could be a source of connection and inspiration, it also posed significant risks to mental health, particularly for African American women. Participants’ experiences varied, reflecting a complex relationship with social media encompassing benefits and challenges. This section includes a discussion of the study results, conclusions, and recommendations based on the context of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study confirm, disconfirm, and extend existing knowledge within the discipline by aligning with, challenging, and expanding upon the insights presented in the peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. Regarding expectations,

the findings aligned with some anticipated outcomes while presenting unexpected insights.

In terms of alignment with expectations, it was expected that social media would contribute to negative emotions such as anxiety, sadness, and feelings of unworthiness. This is consistent with broader literature on social media use and mental health. Additionally, the role of social media in exacerbating body image issues and comparison was anticipated, given the visual and curated nature of platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

However, the study also presented unexpected findings. The variety of coping mechanisms, particularly the emphasis on spirituality and therapeutic support, was more diverse than initially expected. This highlights African American women's adaptive strategies to maintain their mental health. Another unexpected discovery was the extent to which participants identified positive uses of social media, such as finding community support and educational content. This finding suggests that the narrative around social media's impact is more complex and not solely negative.

Confirmation

The study supported the established understanding that social media can significantly impact mental health. Participants' experiences of anxiety, sadness, and feelings of unworthiness were aligned with findings from recent research indicating that social media use can exacerbate negative emotions (Vannucci et al., 2020). This corroborated the notion that extensive engagement with social media could lead to mental health challenges. Consistent with the literature, this study highlighted how social

comparison on social media could lead to negative self-perception and emotional distress (Dodemaide et al., 2022). Participant 6's account of feeling detrimentally affected by others' seemingly perfect lives mirrored findings that social comparison on social media often reduced self-esteem and increased feelings of inadequacy. The findings also affirmed that African American women were increasingly seeking therapy to manage mental health issues, which is a growing trend documented in recent studies (Smith & Trimble, 2020). The discussions by Participant 6 and Participant 7 concerning the positive impact of therapy aligned with this trend, suggesting a shift towards greater acceptance and utilization of mental health services within this demographic.

Disconfirmation

However, the study also disconfirmed some aspects of previous research that coping strategies are not uniform within demographic groups and revealed a broader range of coping mechanisms among African American women, including taking social media breaks, engaging in therapy, and utilizing spiritual practices (Robinson et al., 2020). This finding suggested a more nuanced approach to coping than previously documented, indicating diversity in how African American women manage social media-induced stress.

Extension of Existing Knowledge

Finally, the study extended the existing knowledge base by introducing new dimensions. The emphasis on spiritual practices as a coping mechanism for social media-induced stress is a significant extension. Participant 1's mention of turning to prayer when feeling overwhelmed provides a deeper understanding of how African American

women incorporate spirituality into their mental health strategies, which has received limited attention in the literature (Allen et al., 2019). The findings also highlight the role of positive content and supportive online communities in mitigating negative emotions, which extends the current understanding of social media's impact. Participant 10's reliance on social media as a coping mechanism and Participant 3's engagement with uplifting content from spiritual leaders like Sarah Jakes Roberts offer insights into how positive interactions online can foster mental well-being (Braghieri et al., 2022).

In summary, this study confirmed many established findings on the relationship between social media and mental health, challenged some assumptions about uniform coping strategies, and extended the literature by highlighting the significant roles of spirituality and positive online communities in the mental health of African American women. These insights provided a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impacts of social media on this demographic.

Theoretical Framework

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding how various social identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersect to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Applying this theory to the findings of this study revealed more profound insights into the lived experiences of African American women regarding social media use and its impact on their mental health.

The intersection of Race and Gender

Unique Challenges Faced by African American Women

The study's findings underscored the intersection of race and gender in shaping the social media experiences of African American women. Participants reported experiencing a range of negative emotions, including anxiety, sadness, and feelings of unworthiness, which are exacerbated by their racial and gender identities. For instance, Participant 4 described emotional challenges such as anxiety and feelings of unworthiness while using social media, which can be tied to the broader societal context where African American women often face both racial and gender discrimination.

Social Comparison and Stereotypes

Participant 6 highlighted the detrimental effects of comparing herself to others' seemingly perfect lives on social media. This aligns with Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality by illustrating how African American women may internalize societal standards of beauty and success, which are often Eurocentric and patriarchal. This comparison can lead to heightened feelings of inadequacy and emotional distress. Additionally, Participant 2 mentioned that depression might manifest as anger or attitude, leading to the "angry Black woman" stereotype. This stereotype is a product of intersecting racial and gender biases, which can further marginalize African American women and invalidate their emotional experiences.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Seeking Therapy and Support Systems

Participants' coping mechanisms also reflect intersectional influences. The finding that many African American women are seeking therapy to manage mental health issues, as highlighted by Participant 6 and Participant 7, indicates a shift towards recognizing the importance of mental health within this community. This shift is significant because it challenges the historical stigma associated with mental health care in African American communities, which is rooted in mistrust of medical institutions and cultural norms that emphasize resilience and self-reliance.

Spiritual Practices and Positive Content

The use of spiritual practices as a coping mechanism, mentioned by Participant 1, further illustrates the intersectionality framework. Spirituality and religion have historically played crucial roles in African American communities as sources of strength and resilience against systemic oppression. Engaging with spiritual content on social media provides a sense of connection and grounding, which helps mitigate negative emotions.

Structural Inequalities and Social Media

Exposure to Racially Insensitive Content

Participants frequently encountered racially insensitive content on social media, which added another layer of emotional distress. This exposure can reinforce feelings of marginalization and trauma, highlighting the ongoing impact of structural racism in digital spaces. The intersectionality framework helps us understand that these experiences

are not just isolated incidents but a lack of understanding of microaggressions and how to respond.

The Role of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms often fail to address these issues, allowing harmful content to proliferate adequately. This lack of intervention can exacerbate the mental health struggles of African American women, who are already navigating a complex landscape of intersecting identities and oppressions. The algorithm-driven nature of social media, which often amplifies sensational and negative content, further compounds these challenges.

Applying Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to the findings of this study revealed the multifaceted and interconnected nature of the challenges faced by African American women on social media. The theory helped elucidate how race, gender, and other social identities intersect to shape their experiences, both positively and negatively. Understanding these intersections is crucial for developing more effective support systems and interventions that address the unique needs of African American women in the digital age. This study confirmed and extended existing knowledge and highlighted the importance of considering intersectionality in research on social media and mental health.

Limitations

This study's inherent subjectivity and potential bias in self-reported data were a limitation. Self-reported data are subject to recall bias and social desirability bias, where participants might alter their responses to present themselves in a favorable light. The

study ensured anonymity and encouraged honest responses. Despite these efforts, the influence of these biases cannot be eliminated, potentially affecting the accuracy and reliability of the findings.

Another primary limitation was the sampling strategy. I used purposive sampling, which can lead to issues with generalizability, as the findings from the purposively selected sample may not apply to other groups or settings. For instance, the experiences and perceptions of African American women aged 24–39 regarding social media use and mental health cannot necessarily be extended to women of other ages, races, or ethnicities or even to African American women in different age ranges. Also, purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias, where the selected participants may not fully represent the broader population. Geographical limitations could have arisen as participants were not from multiple states across the United States, potentially overlooking regional variations in experiences and perceptions. Political limitations might also affect the findings, as participants from different political contexts or with varying access to social media platforms may have diverse perspectives not captured in the sample.

Virtual interviews via Zoom may have also influenced the depth and quality of responses. Potential technological distractions or the lack of in-person interaction might have affected participants' comfort levels and openness during the interviews. Although virtual interviews provided a convenient and accessible way to collect data, they might have introduced limitations in capturing the full range of nonverbal cues and in-depth insights that in-person interviews could provide.

These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and in future research. Expanding the sample to include a more diverse demographic and employing multiple data collection methods could enhance the generalizability and robustness of the study.

Recommendations

One suggestion for future research is to examine the effects of different social media platforms individually to understand platform-specific impacts on mental health in African American women. Different platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok may have varying effects due to their unique features, user demographics, and content types. For example, Instagram's focus on visual content might exacerbate social comparison more than text-based platforms like Twitter. By distinguishing among these platforms, researchers can provide more targeted recommendations for users and policymakers.

Additionally, this study suggests the need for effective coping mechanisms to mitigate the negative effects of social media. Future research could explore the effectiveness of various intervention strategies to improve mental well-being among African American women. Potential interventions include mindfulness training, mental health education, and promoting positive content. Investigating the most effective interventions can help develop tailored strategies to support this demographic. For instance, if mindfulness training is found to be particularly beneficial, programs could be designed specifically for African American women to enhance their mental resilience against social media-induced stress.

Moreover, considering the study's findings on the role of spirituality as a coping mechanism, future research could examine how integrating spiritual practices with digital interventions might enhance their effectiveness. This could include studying the impact of faith-based digital communities and content on mental health and well-being.

These recommendations are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study and align with the gaps identified in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. By focusing on specific platforms and intervention strategies, future research can build on the insights gained from this study to further understand and improve the mental health of African American women in the context of social media use.

Implications

This study contributed to the emerging evidence, providing valuable insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of social media's impact on mental health and well-being in African American women.

Positive Social Change

The findings from this study could significantly raise awareness and understanding of the unique mental health challenges faced by African American women due to social media use. Increased awareness can lead to more informed public discourse and a greater appreciation of the intersectional issues that influence mental well-being in this demographic.

Informing Policy and Practice

The insights gained can inform the development of targeted policies and practices aimed at mitigating the negative impact of social media on mental health. Policymakers

and mental health professionals can use this research to advocate for regulations that promote safer and more supportive online environments. For instance, policies that enforce stricter content moderation to reduce exposure to harmful content and promote positive and diverse representations of African American women can be advocated.

Development of Tailored Interventions

Mental health professionals and organizations can develop interventions to support African American women navigating social media. These could include community-based support groups, digital literacy programs, and mental health resources that address the unique stressors identified in the study, such as body image issues, comparison stress, and exposure to racial discrimination.

Education and Training

Educators and trainers can incorporate the findings into programs that educate young African American women about the potential mental health impacts of social media. Schools, universities, and community organizations can use this information to create curricula and workshops that teach digital resilience, critical media literacy, and healthy social media habits.

Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Implications

Methodologically, this study demonstrated the value of qualitative approaches in understanding the nuanced experiences of minority groups. Theoretically, it supports the application of intersectionality theory in exploring the compounded effects of race and gender on mental health. Empirically, the findings contributed to a growing body of

literature on social media's impact on mental health, particularly among African American women.

Explicit recommendations for each level:

- Individual level: Digital literacy programs can empower African American women to navigate social media healthily.
- Family level: Encouraging discussions on social media use can foster support systems within families.
- Organizational level: Organizations can implement training for mental health professionals on the specific challenges African American women face.
- Societal/policy level: Policymakers can advocate for moderation policies that protect against harmful content and promote positive representations.

Conclusion

This study shed light on the significant mental health impacts of social media on African American women, revealing a spectrum of experiences that range from heightened anxiety and depression to feelings of unworthiness. By exploring these lived experiences, the research underscores the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by African American women in digital spaces. Effective coping strategies identified include taking breaks from social media, engaging in therapy, leveraging support systems, and highlighting the need for accessible mental health resources. This study advocates for future research to further investigate the intersectionality of race, gender, and social media use, aiming to foster a more inclusive and supportive digital environment. The insights gained from this research are crucial for

developing targeted interventions and policies that promote mental well-being and social equity for African American women.

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Appendix A: Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Participant # _____

Date: __/__/__

Interviewed By: Shamenese Robinson

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your knowledge. This questionnaire will remain confidential and be disposed of six months after completing the study.

1. What is your current age range? Circle one.
 - a. 24-29
 - b. 30-35
 - c. 35-39

2. Which of the following best describes your race or ethnic identification? Circle one.
 - a. African or Black American
 - b. African Caribbean
 - c. Caribbean American
 - d. African (origin)
 - e. Other (please describe): _____

3. What is your gender identification?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other _____

Appendix B : Participant Semistructured Interview Questions

Research Question: “What are the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women’s social media use and its impact on mental health?”

1. Can you list the social media platforms you use and describe how frequently you use each?
2. Do you follow any social media accounts that focus on mental health for Black women? If yes, can you mention a few?
3. What motivated you to start following these mental health accounts? Were specific events like experiencing trauma, anxiety, or depression influential?
4. In your experience, how helpful have you found these mental health-focused social media accounts?
5. Do you feel that social media sometimes worsens your feelings of depression or anxiety? Please share specific experiences or examples.
6. Do you feel that social media sometimes worsens your feelings of depression or anxiety? Please share specific experiences or examples.
7. If you’ve experienced negative feelings due to social media, how do you manage or cope with these feelings?
8. If you’ve experienced negative feelings due to social media, how do you manage or cope with these feelings?
9. Do you engage in any online support groups for Black women? How do these groups impact your mental health?

10. What type of content do you engage with most on social media? Why do you think you are drawn to this type of content?
11. How frequently do you encounter racially insensitive content or discrimination on social media, and how does it affect you?
12. What does the term ‘black girl magic’ mean to you, and does it influence your sense of community on social media?
13. From your perspective, how do African American women typically handle depressive symptoms? Are there common strategies within your community?
14. How do you feel after encountering distressing or uplifting events on social media?
15. What social support network do you have on social media? How do these connections help you?
16. How do you believe your race, gender, and age influence your social media experiences and usage?
17. What are some emotional challenges or stressors you face while using social media?
18. Could you describe your general patterns or habits of social media use?
19. Are there particular platforms or types of social media content that you find beneficial for managing your mood and well-being?
20. Would you be interested in a curated list of mental health resources available on platforms like Instagram?”

Post-Interview Check-In

- Close the interview by thanking participants
- Mental health check 1-10 check-in scale
- Remind participants of the requirements to maintain the confidentiality of participation and dispose of information after six months of completing the study
- Post Interview Statement: Again, thank you so much for contributing your feedback to this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me (provide contact information).