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Social Media Influence on African American Women Mental Health and Self-Image

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Social Media Influence on African American Women's Mental Health and Self-Image

by

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MSW, Morgan State University, 2012

BS, Towson University, 2009

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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February 2025

Abstract

African American women's perspectives on the influence of social media content on their mental health (i.e., moods, thoughts, and behaviors) and self-image were explored in this qualitative study. The theoretical framework chosen for this study was Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which was used to examine whether there was a logical connection between the study topic and the framework presented. Data were collected through semistructured interviews that were conducted via Zoom. The data from 10 participants' interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, resulting in the following two emergent themes: (a) pressure to compare and emulate and (b) negative influence on mental health. This study is significant to the social work community because it could help bridge the gap for social work practitioners to be more aware of the signs of social media distress. To help combat the influence of social media content, the findings of this study can assist social workers to assess and examine the potential adverse effects of social media on their clientele's mental health and self-image. This research study contributes to positive social change by promoting social work practitioners' continued identification, support for, and incorporation of educational tools on mental health and self-image to help African American women suffering from the harmful components of social media distress.

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Dedication

This capstone is dedicated to social workers who provide their clients with insight and guidance on how to heal and maintain a positive lifestyle. As you embark on empowering others and providing support, remember to continue to be compassionate and understanding to those individuals we serve.

To all the African American women who struggle with the daily influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. Remember to provide yourself with positive self-care and to bestow on yourself lots of grace and love.

Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this capstone to my family and friends. To my mother, Hattie, I love you. Thank you for instilling strength and determination within me. I am proud to be your daughter, and I am even more proud to have you as my mother. To my children, Tileyah, Lyus, and Lennix, you are my entire world. Everything I do in life is for you. I am so grateful and honored to be your mom. To my sister, Willie, it's not a day that goes by that I do not think about you. I love and miss you so much. Thank you for molding me into the woman I am today. To Mr. Mike, thank you for being such a great father figure and helping me in so many ways. To my dad Louis, thank you for being such a great inspiration on what I wanted out of life. To my cousins/sisters, Jessie Mae, Tenia, Alchavias, Barbara, Latavial, Jamilla, Kia, Latrice, Raven, Joy, and Jackie, thank you so much for being my support system, when life started falling apart. I love all of you. To my mentor, Dr. Tanesha Mayo, I cannot thank you enough for everything you have provided for me. I value our friendship, and I appreciate your words of encouragement and wisdom you have constantly bestowed upon me. To Dr. Toni, thank you for everything you have helped me with. You have been nothing but a true blessing throughout this journey, and I'm so grateful to have met you. To my many friends, you ladies are the best. Thank you, ladies for being supportive and encouraging when I needed a kick in my step. Lastly, to Jamar (Jay). Thank you for being a constant support with your inspiring words of encouragement. I appreciate you challenging and pushing me when times got rough. I cannot thank you enough. I love you.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Introduction

Social media has become an essential aspect of how society communicates and socializes in today's modern times (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). A popular worldwide tool, social media is an interactive form of technology that has helped individuals share personal and professional information to a platform of followers. Social media enables influencers to share a range of content, including pictures and videos, to gain likes and comments for attention and approval (Kang et al., 2019). Berryman et al. (2018) explained that social media has allowed individuals to follow and keep up with what interests them in other individuals' day-to-day lives and situations.

Several studies have implied that women use social media more than men (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023). As a result of social media's popularity as an interactive social tool, new potential adverse effects among women followers are starting to emerge (Hou et al., 2020). Bosco (2021) noted that influencers have increasingly begun to alter their bodies and exaggerate their lives or social status to manipulate and mislead followers. Berryman et al. (2018) explained that social media can often give the perception that White, attractive, physically fit, and wealthy women are the ideal society standard. Previous studies have been conducted to explore the influence of social media content on women's mental health and self-image; however, research on social media's influence on African American women's mental health and self-image is limited. In this qualitative study, I explored the influence of social media content on the mental health and self-image of African American women aged 30–45 years old.

In this section, I outline the scope of the problem and purpose of this study as well as provide the research question that guided this study. The nature of the study and its significance are also discussed to shed light on its importance to the field. I also provide an overview of the theory that was used to support this study and present a review of literature related to the topic of this study. The review of existing literature includes discussions of recent studies related to the topic of this study. In the second section, I will describe the research design that was most aligned with this study and the data collection and analysis procedures before presenting the findings of this study. The last section will include a discussion of this study's implications and possible applications of this study to the field.

Problem Statement

The problem that was explored in this qualitative study was African American women's perceptions of the influence of social media content on their mental health and self-image. Prior to this study, literature related to the perceived influence of social media content on African American women's mental health and self-image was limited. Kasaboski (2021) conducted a study on women's social media followers being exposed to social media content and found that women followers with preexisting self-image concerns appeared to be easily influenced by social media posts. Several studies have shown that social media content can stimulate certain thoughts, moods, and behaviors amongst their followers, which can influence followers negatively and positively (Ali et al., 2024; Bennett et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2021).

Most of the available research on the topic of social media effects did not isolate Black women as the target population to explore the impact of social media content on women's mental health and self-image. I explored African American women's perspectives on the influence of social media content on their mental health and self-image in this qualitative study to close the gap in research about the experiences of African American women, a demographic group that is often overlooked. A systemic review of social media's impact on mental health found that women social media users were more likely to suffer mental health challenges than men users (Karim et al., 2020). However, African American women are more likely to internalize harmful messages that exacerbate perfectionist tendencies rooted in the strong, Black woman persona (Liao et al., 2020). Therefore, it was important to develop an understanding of how social media use impacts this group.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore African American women's perspectives about the influence of social media content on their mental health and self-image. Using Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory as the framework, I found a connection between the influence of social media content contributing to African American women's negative views of themselves mentally. The following research question guided this study: What are the perceptions of African American women, age 30 to 45, about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image?

Key Terms

African American: A person who identifies as having African heritage (Bentley et al., 2020).

Mental health: An individual's condition pertaining to their psychological and emotional well-being (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Self-image: A personal view or idea of what an individual thinks about themselves, based on appearance, intelligence, personality, talent, and wealth (Audrey et al., 2020).

Social media: A valuable communication method that allows individuals to network and keep in touch with one another locally and worldwide. Social media includes several apps and online websites that focus on influencers sharing daily information on various topics to keep their follower's attention (Nashville Film Institute, 2023).

Social work practitioner: An individual who strives to help people improve their overall quality of life by providing resources, interventions, and advocating for the desired basic needs of the client (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

To explore African American women's perceptions about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image, I conducted a basic qualitative study. A basic qualitative study was the most appropriate design to gain an understanding of a phenomenon or the experiences of individuals closest to a central phenomenon (see

Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I collected data to answer the research question through semistructured participant. Semistructured interviews allowed me to explore individuals' perceptions and identify emerging themes or similarities among the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure consistency, I used an interview protocol that contained a list of interview questions that each participant was asked.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study is significant because in it I examined the perceived influence of social media content on African American women's (aged 30–45 years old) mental health and self-image. Many previous studies on social media, mental health, and self-image have overlooked African American women. Participant samples in these previous studies included few, if any, African American women. Instead, researchers gathered data from White or Asian women, adolescents, or undergraduate, college-aged participants to examine the effects of social media content on mental health and self-image. For example, Niles (2023) examined the association between social media and suicidal ideation among adolescents. Twenge (2020) explored a similar topic, the relationship between social media use and increases in self-harm, depression, and suicide among adolescents. The current study, however, centered an intersectional identity in the margins by acknowledging the existence of the sociocultural influences on African American women's experiences and showed how the negative components of social media content influence African American women's mental health and self-image. Additionally, the results of this study may be used to inform practitioners on how to service and provide treatment using social work practice techniques to meet the needs of

African American women. Increasing social work practitioners' knowledge of and skills for successful treatments and resources when servicing African American women clientele could lead to positive social change.

Conceptual Framework

Social media has been shown to have a greater influence on women and their attitudes about themselves compared to men (Hogue & Mills, 2019). Hogue and Mills (2019) found that women experienced decreased satisfaction with their appearances after viewing the social media content of other women they admire. Furthermore, social media presents increased opportunities for women to compare themselves to people they do not know and might never meet (Hogue & Mills, 2019). To explore African American women's perceptions of the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image, I used Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory as the conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study.

In the social comparison theory, Festinger (1954) explained that people compare their qualities, possessions, and values to those of others. Festinger asserted that people's opinions and perceived abilities are heavily weighed against the external messages they receive from images they see. Festinger's theory was built upon two hypotheses about social comparison: (a) People tend to assess themselves by comparing their viewpoints and abilities to others', and (b) people are motivated to improve themselves; however, external constraints inhibit them. Additionally, Festinger claimed that a person's proximity to the comparison group affected the extent to which that person would value

or aspire to share qualities of that group. Ultimately, social comparison theory may be used to examine the extent to which people will aspire to conform (Crusius et al., 2022).

Perera et al. (2021) recently examined the theoretical connections between social comparison theory and consumer behavior. Using social comparison as the primary theory to support their analysis, Perera et al. found that people often compare their current status with an aspirational status embodied by others, which influences their consumer behaviors. This body of work provided a critical perspective as I sought to understand how African American women were influenced by the messages they consumed on social media. Kim (2022) examined the influence of social comparison on fitness app users' self-efficacy and found that comparison, with healthy boundaries, could have a positive influence on motivation to improve themselves. Yang et al. (2021) found that higher concentrations of social comparison was associated with lower self-esteem. The distinction between a negative or positive influence appeared, depending on the user's preexisting view of themselves and the extent to which they were realistic about their goals (Kim, 2022). Similarly, Koher et al. (2022) found that a user's preexisting anxiety levels impacted their anxiety levels following the viewing of image-conscious Instagram accounts.

I chose social comparison theory to underpin this study because it was most aligned with the problem, research question, and purpose of this study. The main tenets of this theory helped me understand the significance of the problem itself. After all, social media provides a space for people to share and consume information that may be used to compare themselves to others (Safdar & Khan, 2023). Therefore, I designed the research

question that guided this study to learn more about the problem within the context of the conceptual framework. Social comparison theory served as a lens through which I also viewed and analyzed this study's results, identified emerging themes, and made sense of the central phenomenon. Additionally, this theory helped clarify how the pressures African American women face due to social media can contribute to them comparing themselves to unrealistic standards they may never meet. Through conducting this study, I gained a better understanding of how these factors influence mental health and self-image among African American women.

Values and Ethics

In my review of contemporary literature, I found that there was a substantial amount of research focusing on social media's content impacting women's mental health and self-image. However, within the context of social media's influence on African American women's mental health and self-image, research was limited. With limited research on the topic, practitioners may be unprepared to provide therapeutic services to African American women who seek care. When practitioners are not adequately trained or lack knowledge on a topic, this can potentially lead to adverse treatment outcomes. According to the NASW (2021) code of ethics, social work practitioners should be knowledgeable on the importance of competency because it refers to practicing in an area of scope or learning new methods within a particular concentration area. When addressing ethical practice, social workers should focus on the significance of competence by being experienced or becoming knowledgeable by seeking training, certification, and licensure before initially providing professional services. With this said,

the current study's findings can be used to provide social work practitioners with informative knowledge on the perceived influence of social media content on the mental health and self-image of African American women (aged 30–45 years old).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The following literature review was conducted to examine the existing literature about the research problem. To conduct this review, I used sources from a search engine, Google Scholar, and databases accessible through the Walden University Library. I used Google Scholar to locate peer-reviewed articles published in the 5 years preceding this study and used the databases to explore recent research related to the problem. There were several search topics I sought to explore, including the conceptual framework, sociocultural pressures on African American women, social media, and mental health and self-image. To narrow my search, I used the following keywords: *social comparison theory, mental health, self-image, African American women and mental health,* and *social media trends*. My searches were primarily focused on qualitative studies that were conducted in or after 2019. I also searched for quantitative data that could provide statistical references for the variables in this study.

A literature review includes a process of refining one's search to identify literature closely related to the research problem or topic. During this process, I began with a focus that was too narrow in scope and realized that I needed to conduct research that could provide context or support for my research topic. The keywords I chose aided in my review of literature that provided a comprehensive examination of related studies

and findings to strengthen the foundation or basis for this study (see Paul & Criado, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

Social psychologist, Leon Festinger (1954) introduced social comparison theory to describe how humans' opinions and perceptions of themselves and other ideals are shaped by their evaluations of or comparisons to others. According to Festinger, people seek to compare themselves to others who display desirable qualities. In other words, the people perceived to be closely aligned with aspirational qualities, whether physical or social, often serve as guideposts to be compared to (Festinger, 1954). People do not tend to compare themselves to people who exhibit contrary qualities (Festinger, 1954). Hwnag (2019) described the opposite effects of social comparison as an upward and downward comparison. As Reh et al. (2022) pointed out, social comparison may lead to a perceived social threat, which might lead to positive or negative outcomes. On one hand, people might choose to view a social threat as motivation; conversely, people might choose to damage or sever interpersonal relationships.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory has been used to understand the role of media on attitudes and self-perceptions. Social media has been shown to encourage social comparison because people tend to post their most ideal images of themselves and their lives for the world to view, evaluate, and compare (Kong et al., 2021). In some instances, social comparison theory may be used to demonstrate the positive effects of social media, such as when people compare themselves to fit others physically and are inspired to make positive change in their lives (Kim, 2022). This is an example of upward

social comparison. On the other hand, an example of downward comparison is when people compare themselves to others who are worse off than themselves, often to make themselves feel better (Schmuck et al., 2019).

Social Media Trends

The rise of social media may be traced to the early 2000s when internet sites began to connect millions of users all over the world (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023). While social media continues to attract users of all ages, younger people remain the larger demographic (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023). Still, some social media sites, especially ones that serve as platforms to exchange visual media, are most popular with users under 30 years old (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). In a comparative analysis, Cinelli et al. (2021) found that social media, which started as a means to meet people, has become a primary vehicle for information sharing and that most people receive news from social media sites rather than more traditional methods, like reading a newspaper or watching the news on television. Ultimately, the use of social media to receive and spread information has led to increased efficiency with its ease of access; however, as Cinelli et al. (2021) asserted, social media has also become an echo chamber or a mechanism for reinforcement of ideas or biases.

In addition to the function of social media as a platform for information sharing, it has also become a powerful tool for marketing and influence. In fact, social media has reduced the need for traditional marketing firms and campaigns due to its ability to provide influential people, known as *influencers*, with access to millions of people (Cinelli et al., 2021). In a randomized, comparative, quantitative study, Jin et al. (2019)

found that the user-friendly technological advances have made it possible for people with minimal experience to alter visual images to make them more appealing and promote or advertise products or standards of beauty. Jin et al. found that traditional celebrities have less influence on consumer behavior than influencers because influencers are perceived to be more relatable and trustworthy. Marketing companies have begun taking advantage of this social media trend by intentionally soliciting the help of social media users with moderate to extensive follower lists to promote their products (Valsesia et al., 2020). Due to increased accessibility, social media may be used by anyone to perpetuate images, ideals, and messages that influence millions of other users.

Social media platforms are also powerful tools to begin or grow social movements. Alaggia and Wang (2020) conducted an exploratory, qualitative study about the influence of social media on people's decisions to disclose personal experiences such as sexual abuse. The #MeToo movement, started by Tarana Burke in 2006, was the primary example highlighted in the study as an example of the mobilization of people, particularly women, around a social cause. With the use of the hashtag #MeToo, women and other survivors of sexual abuse were able to personally disclose and collectively affirm sexual abuse experiences (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). As Ismail and Munsi (2020) stated, social movements like #MeToo are not necessarily new movements; instead, they reach masses in new ways. Rather than relying on access protest sites, new social movements rely on access to the internet (Ismail & Munsi, 2020). This was also seen following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, with many social media users using hashtags like #Icantbreathe to protest police brutality (Eichstaedt et al., 2021).

Social media has shaped the way people communicate with others. As social media usage increases and evolves, so will the researchers' understanding of its implications for mental and social well-being (Tandon et al., 2022). Frieling et al. (2023) suggested that the implications of increased social media are wide-reaching, especially given that social media remains underregulated. According to Cho et al, (2022) the open nature of social media leaves room for harmful content to reach and have harmful effects on large groups of people.

Social Media and Mental Health

The influence of social media on mental health and self-image is a relatively new topic. Mainstream social media use has only existed for the last 2 decades; however, it has all but obliterated other longstanding forms of media (Twenge et al., 2019). Early indications are that the oversaturation of visual messages on social media has a particularly profound impact on mental health and self-image (Walker et al., 2021). Walker et al. (2021) noted the prevalence of messages about appearance and beauty standards, especially pertaining to women, on social media. These messages have not only been found to influence women's behaviors, such as pursuing appearance-altering or plastic surgery, but women's mental health and self-image as well (Walker et al., 2021).

Users of all ages spend hours daily on social media, which has increased mental health and self-image influence (Karim et al., 2020). Karim et al. (2020) explained that people who spend more time on social media tend to spend less time interacting with people face-to-face, which has been shown to exacerbate mental health and self-image issues. Similarly, Meshi and Ellithorpe (2021) conducted an investigative quantitative

analysis and found a link between increased social media use and increased real-life social isolation, which led to more significant instances of depression and anxiety. These findings suggested that social media itself was not the direct cause of poorer mental health and self-image outcomes for users; instead, the overuse of social media was associated with less time spent with real-life social support networks (Meshi & Ellithorpe, 2021). Haand and Shuwang (2020) reported similar findings, stating that there was no indication of a causal relationship between social media and depression, only a correlation. Additionally, Karim et al. found that depression was more prevalent with social media users than nonusers of social media. Gao et al. (2020) had similar findings, with depression being reported among 48% of social media users. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened mental health and self-image conditions for many users because people experienced heightened fear and anxiety related to information that was being shared online (Gao et al., 2020).

Not all interaction with social media has adverse effects. Naslund et al. (2020) identified opportunities for social media to provide safer spaces for people with mental health and self-image challenges to connect with people online or even seek mental health and self-image treatment without fear of judgment. Many have also used social media to seek support from people with similar lived experiences related to mental health and self-image (Naslund et al., 2020). In a critical review, Chancellor and De Choudhury (2020) revealed that social media tools, such as mood status, might have positive effects on mental health and self-image awareness. This tool promotes safe and elective disclosure of mental health and self-image statuses and might also help destigmatize

mental health and self-image discussions (Chancellor & De Choudhury, 2020). Marciano et al. (2022) also found that social media provides a space for positive interactions that might decrease some feelings of sadness or loneliness.

Sociocultural Pressures on African American Women

African American women have always faced unique sociocultural pressures or expectations due to the intersection of their racial and gender identities – being both African American and a woman (Watson et al., 2019). For example, African American women have been historically oppressed racially, with societal pressures to be lighter in skin tone and experiencing racial disadvantage compared to Whites (Spates et al., 2020). This racial oppression of African American women is compounded by the gendered beauty standards generally placed on all women to be thinner and display certain qualities deemed to be feminine (Watson et al., 2020). African American women must concurrently overcome these dual experiences that are referred to as *gendered racism* (Spates et al., 2020). This critical lens is necessary to fully understand the complex experiences and traumas experienced by African American women.

The sociocultural pressures experienced by African American women are nuanced. While beauty standards have always favored thinness for White women, enslaved African women's bodies were objectified, with favor shown to wider hips and increased body mass because those attributes were thought to embody child-bearing and physical labor fitness (Watson et al., 2020). This historical context has resurfaced, and, while White dominant beauty standards for women favor thinness, African American women face increased pressures for wider hips, larger breasts, and larger rears; these

physical qualities have almost become synonymous with what it means to be an African American woman (Hughes, 2021). This pressure contributes to the body dysmorphia many African American women's face when they do not physically embody society's expectations of an African American woman (Hughes, 2021).

Wilfred and Lundgren (2021) found that African American women's image preferences reflected the sociocultural pressures they face. While African American women showed a preference for curvier bodies than White women, they also showed a preference for physical features typically associated with White women, like straight, long hair (Wilfred & Lundgren, 2021). These preferences have led to increased plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures among African American women (Wilfred & Lundgren, 2021). Moreover, the sociocultural pressure many African American women experience has been further complicated due to the rise of White and White-adjacent women opting to alter their bodies to possess physical qualities (i.e., fuller lips and buttocks) typically associated with African American women (Tolentino, 2019). While African American women still face prejudice due to features they naturally possess, other groups of women undergo surgery to acquire those physical qualities (Tolentino, 2019).

Many of the sociocultural pressures experienced by African American women have made their way into their psyches, as Black women have internalized and upheld stereotypes and expectations (Waldron, 2019). Waldron (2019) described several archetypes of Black womanhood that have, over time, been internalized by Black women and have influenced how they interact with others. For example, in addition to superwoman schema (SWS), Black women have internalized the angry Black woman

trope, which leads to silencing of themselves and others (Stravens, 2021). Other racial tropes of African American women include the *mammy*, or a matriarch figure who is expected to serve and care for everyone, no matter the cost (Kalinowski et al., 2022). These harmful messages about Black womanhood underscore the gender- and race-based sociocultural factors that affect Black women's lives.

Gendered Racial Experiences and Mental Health

Social media uniquely affects African American women's lives and mental well-being. Musgrave et al. (2022) found that Black women were more likely to experience online racial hate. Despite the rise of open discussions about mental health and self-image in open forums, like social media sites, a stigma remains placed on mental health and self-image in minoritized racial communities (Taylor & Richards, 2019). Furthermore, there continues to be a gap in practice related to the mental health and self-image treatment of African American women using an intersectional lens (Vance et al., 2023). This gap can lead to an inadequate and incomplete understanding of the unique experiences of African American women and ineffective treatment for them (Vance et al., 2023). Martins et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to examine the relationships between gendered racial experiences and mental health and found that the higher frequency of gendered racial microaggressions experienced by African American women was correlated to less favorable mental health and self-image outcomes. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2023) discovered that gendered racial discrimination predicted mental health and self-image challenges. Conway-Phillips et al. (2020) reported that gendered

racial experiences were associated with poorer physical health, including poorer cardiovascular health among African American women.

Despite this, mental health and self-image services are underutilized by African American women, and African American women tend to be underdiagnosed with mental health and self-image disorders due to the stereotype of the strong and resilient African American woman (Robinson et al., 2023). The strong African American women stereotype, or SWS (Allen et al., 2019), puts an undue burden on African American women to suppress their feelings about their needs and experiences and, instead, focus on taking care of others (Castelin & White, 2022). SWS is acknowledged as a mindset adopted by many African American women in response to racial trauma and stress (Catabay et al., 2019). Furthermore, SWS has also been blamed for African American women's underreporting of violence and other traumas against them, along with the mental health and self-image issues they might face as a result (Alexander et al., 2021). While often self-perpetuated as a positive quality, the strong African American woman stereotype has been associated with suicidal behaviors among African American women (Castelin & White, 2022). Liao et al.'s (2020) quantitative study revealed that the strong African American woman stereotype was found to be associated with low self- and collective compassion, which affected not only African American women's self-image but interpersonal relationships and positive group identity as well. Abrams et al. (2019) advised against pathologizing strength by mental health clinicians to support African American women with mental health and self-image challenges.

Summary

The literature review revealed a body of knowledge about social media, trends, mental health, self-image, and sociocultural pressures African American women face. According to the literature, social media has certainly evolved from its first inception as a platform for dating and making friends to a platform with endless possibilities, including marketing and activism (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2023). Some have pointed to social media as the cause for a rise in mental health and self-image challenges; however, researchers have asserted that excessive social media use tends to result in decreased in-person social interaction and support (Bányai et al., 2017). Furthermore, social media's visual nature encourages social comparison, which might lead to feelings of inadequacy. For African American women, social media presents significantly increased opportunities for them to experience the gendered racism they have faced historically in everyday life (Sobande et al., 2020).

In the next section, I will present this study's research design and data collection method. Additionally, the trustworthiness of the study and ethical procedures that were used to help ensure the privacy of this study's participants and the overall safety of this study will be discussed.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Introduction

The problem that was addressed by this qualitative study was how African American women perceived the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. With the increased number of women being affected by social media platforms, social workers are needed to help combat the influence of social media content. For women who identify as African American, social media messages may have a compounded effect on them due to their race and gender (Spates et al., 2020). Social work practitioners who work within the mental health field should be knowledgeable and skilled to help clientele suffering from the effects of social media content. Therefore, this research study should help inform and prepare social work practitioners on the topic of social media and how users/followers of these platforms may be influenced, either positively or negatively.

In this section, I present the study's design and methodology. I also describe the data collection and analysis as well as how the trustworthiness of this study was ensured. Next, the ethical procedures employed to protect participants and the integrity of this study are discussed before the limitations, challenges, and barriers of this study are explained.

Research Design

To explore African American women's perspectives of the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image, I conducted a basic qualitative study. The following research question guided this study: What are the perceptions of African

American women, age 30 to 45, about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image? I designed the research question to support the collection of data related to the central phenomenon. Additionally, the question was aligned with a basic qualitative research design with semistructured interviews as the data collection method. Since I was seeking to explore participants' perspectives, a quantitative study design involving the collection of numerical data was not aligned with the study's purpose. A qualitative design, however, allowed me to engage in open-ended exploration and inquiry (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I conducted a basic qualitative study to explore a phenomenon with minimal understanding of African American women's perceptions of the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image (see Swedberg, 2018). Facilitating semistructured interviews allowed me to remain focused, yet flexible enough to ask probing questions to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem (see Burkholder et al., 2016). This type of inquiry would not have been supported by other data collection methods.

Another qualitative research design option was a grounded theory design. This type of design was not aligned with the exploratory nature of this study because it would have involved the creation of a new theory (see Burkholder et al., 2016). A basic qualitative study was the most appropriate design to learn more about the research problem and answer the research question.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, I explored African American women's perceptions about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. A basic qualitative

study design was the best fit for this study because the open-ended research question required an exploratory, open-ended research method. To collect data for this study, I conducted semistructured interviews with African American women aged 30–45 years old. The semistructured interviews were guided by an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to keep the conversations focused and ensure that data are collected in a consistent manner (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While conducting each interview, I recorded a memo to capture my thoughts or questions I might wanted to revisit. In the remainder of this section, I will provide information about the procedures for selecting participants, the data collection and analysis processes, ways I ensured the trustworthiness of this study, and the ethical procedures adhered to throughout the study.

Participant Selection

I recruited 10 African American women (aged 30–45 years old) to participate in this study. While there is no minimum number or participants required, a researcher should continue to collect data until they have reached saturation, or the point at which no new themes emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The purposeful sampling method was used to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling involves the establishment of clear eligibility criteria to ensure that participants are selected based on specific attributes related to the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The use of purposeful sampling helped to ensure that the participation criteria was narrow enough that a smaller sample size resulted in saturation (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) be an African American woman, (b) be aged 30-45 years old, and (c) have at least one social media account. Participants who met these eligibility

criteria were important to this study because they had firsthand experience with the central phenomenon (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021. Specifically, this demographic of social media users was important to study due to their experiences with social media (see Hou et al., 2020).

Instrumentation

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), within a qualitative study, the researcher is considered the most essential instrument. The researcher's role is critical to the study because, within that role, the researcher gains information, such as the participant's thoughts and feelings related to the study topic, and must interpret the data. To explore African American women's perceptions on the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image, I conducted semistructured qualitative interviews via Zoom. I conducted semistructured interviews because they provided consistency and flexibility simultaneously. Although each participant was asked the same set of primary questions, some were asked follow-up or probing questions as I deemed necessary, such as if the participant's initial response was unclear. During the semistructured interviews, I also had the flexibility to ask questions in different orders, depending on the conversation with each participant (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The flexible nature of a semistructured interview made it a desirable instrument for data collection. To ensure the legitimacy of the interview questions, I refrained from using biased language, like leading words or phrases that could guide participants toward a desired response (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Additionally, to avoid confusion during the data analysis process, I avoided asking questions that required a participant to reflect on more than one variable (see Burkholder

et al., 2016). All questions were clearly written so there would be no confusion for the participants.

Procedures for Recruitment, Selection, and Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who met the eligibility criteria of being African American women (aged 30–45 years old) who had at least one social media account. I needed approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to start participant recruitment and data collecting. To receive IRB approval, I completed Form A, submitted additional needed documents, and addressed any ethical concerns that were raised. I received IRB approval to conduct this study prior to recruiting participants.

To recruit participants, I created a public post on Facebook to display the recruitment flyer that was visible to anyone, regardless of whether they were on my friends list. The flyer included details about the study, like the purpose, the eligibility criteria, and my contact information. Additionally, the flyer informed participants that their participation would require consent to be recorded. Interested participants were asked to email me using the email address provided on the flyer so I could share the consent form with them. The consent form contained the purpose of the study and disclosed the minimal risks associated with this study. Participants were required to provide informed consent (see Appendix B) to take part in the study by sending an email to me with the words, “I consent,” in the body of the email. Then, I scheduled a 30- to 60-minute interview via Zoom at a time that was convenient for the participant. I also

reminded participants that any personal information they shared would be kept confidential.

On the day of each scheduled interview with a participant, I read several disclosures to remind them of their rights. Reading from the interview protocol, I only proceeded with an interview once a participant agreed to move forward. All the interviews on Zoom were audio recorded with the use of a digital voice recorder. During the interviews, I also took notes so I could keep track of my thoughts, feelings, and questions about the participant's responses. The audio recordings were uploaded to a USB flash drive for storage. Following the interviews, I sent each participant a copy of their transcript for them to review for accuracy. This process is known as member checking (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Participants were encouraged to contact me if they found any discrepancies and wanted to suggest any changes. No participants reported data discrepancies.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is described as the descriptive and conceptual findings gathered from research tools, such as interviews, observation, and questionaries (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative analysis, conducted after data collection, involves transcribing, arranging, and reviewing the data; creating notes; coding data; acknowledging emerging themes; and producing the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This process allows the researcher to examine whether the research topic results need further exploration. To analyze the data collected during semistructured interviews in this study, I manually coded the data that involved a process of summarizing chunks of data and labeling them

using descriptive words or short phrases (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used a coding process that involved highlighting repeated codes with colors to indicate their prevalence among the data, and this color-coding system allowed me to be fully immersed in the data. Doing this led to increasingly higher level codes or categories and, ultimately, themes.

I employed a multistep thematic analysis method that moved me from basic familiarization of the data to identifying themes. Nowell et al. (2017) described the thematic analysis process as involving six steps to identify themes that answer the research question(s). The data were first transcribed or converted from audio to text prior to thematic analysis (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To transcribe the audio data collected through interviews, I used Microsoft Word's speech-to-text typing feature. To do this, I played the audio recording of an interview while the speech-to-text typing feature recorded the text into a Word document. This method required me to make edits to any mistakes the system made; however, it was beneficial for me as a qualitative researcher to have a real-time opportunity to review the data. I saved each transcribed interview as a Word document on a USB flash drive that only I had access to. After each interview was transcribed, I began the thematic analysis. The first step in thematic analysis is becoming familiar with the transcribed data; therefore, I read the transcripts and recorded precoding memos with my initial reactions or questions that I had about the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Next, I organized the data and prepared it for manual coding. I then coded the data using a process that led to increasingly higher levels of categorization (see

Kuckartz, 2019). To gain a better understanding of the data, I provided discourse about the themes and shared tables to support the data (see Ravitch &Carl, 2021).

Trustworthiness

It is important that qualitative research is seen as rigorous and valid (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The trustworthiness of a study is measured in four ways: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I ensured the credibility of the study by conducting member checks or allowing participants to review transcripts of their interviews. Additionally, I ensured the transferability of this study by providing meticulous details regarding the procedures of this study so other researchers may follow them to conduct similar studies with similar participants. Dependability refers to the extent to which a study is reliable (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Member checking supported the dependability of the data because participants were given an opportunity to confirm, refute, or suggest edits to the data collected during their interview. To support the trustworthiness of this study, I confirmed the results of this study with another researcher in a process known as peer debriefing. I asked this peer to review the study to confirm its accuracy and validity. All these steps helped to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study.

Ethical Procedures

Qualitative researchers must take steps to ensure that participant safety is maintained and the study is sound (Burkholder et al., 2016). Prior to conducting this study, the Walden University IRB reviewed the proposal, including the proposed research procedures, to ensure that I provided thoughtful details about the steps taken to ensure

that the risk to participants would be minimal and the study met ethical standards. After receiving IRB approval #04-04-24-1044449 to move forward with the study, I began participant recruitment efforts in accordance with university standards. For example, I provided opportunities for prospective participants to ask questions and learn more about the study so they could provide informed consent to participate in the study. It is an ethical practice to ensure participants provide consent to participate in a study only after they have been informed of all possible risks and expectations about their participation in the study, which is known as informed consent (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Furthermore, I informed participants about the steps I would take to protect their privacy, such as assigning a unique pseudonym to each participant so that they would not be associated with any data (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Data were stored on a flash drive and locked in a file cabinet that only I can access. The flash drive will be deleted after 5 years following this study.

Limitations, Challenges, and Barriers

While researching additional journal articles on the topic under study, I found that there were very few specific qualitative studies that focused on a similar topic. There were several qualitative and quantitative articles on social media use among other races and populations; however, there were limited resources and data on the topic of social media's influence on the mental health and self-image of African American women (aged 30–45). Due to the limited information on the influence of social media content on African American women's mental health and self-image, I identified that my search for relevant current data and journal articles was limited and difficult.

As a qualitative researcher, I also encountered challenges with the accuracy or completeness of participants' responses due to social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is a phenomenon described as a person's tendency to respond or share information that is deemed socially acceptable to others, while intentionally withholding or fabricating the truth (Meisters et al., 2020). Participation in this study, which involved the voluntary disclosure of personal details during interviews, posed a challenge to participants who perceived mental health as an unmentionable topic. This is an issue that is especially prevalent in African American communities where there has shown to be increased stigma around discussing and seeking treatment for mental health and self-image (Chatmon, 2020). Meisters et al. (2020) suggested using varied question formats to mitigate this challenge. For example, I asked both direct and indirect questions to provide participants with multiple opportunities to share information about the same experience. I also reminded participants that their identities would remain confidential.

Summary

I conducted a basic qualitative study to examine social media content influence on the mental health and self-image of African American women (aged 30–45), Prior to recruiting participants and collecting data for this study, I obtained Walden University IRB approval, which was a vital process to ensure that all ethical considerations were made, and the study was sound. Recruitment of participants commenced following IRB approval, and I scheduled Zoom interviews with African American women who were eligible to participate in this study. All participant interviews were transcribed and

thematically analyzed. The results of this study will be further detailed in the next section.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore African American women's perspectives about the influence of social media content on their mental health and self-image. Understanding the perceived influence of social media on African American women's mental health and self-image is important for those seeking to develop learning strategies for social work professionals and other mental health advocates to effectively support African American women. I conducted individual semistructured interviews to explore African American women's firsthand experiences with social media and answer the following research question: What are the perceptions of African American women, age 30 to 45, about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image?

In all, 10 participants consented to semistructured interviews for this study. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online video-conferencing platform; lasted between 30 and 45 minutes; and were audio recorded. After saving the audio recordings on a USB flash drive that only I have access to, I transcribed the recorded data or converted the audio to text. To manually transcribe the data, I used Microsoft Word's speech-to-text typing feature while playing the audio recording of an interview so that the text was entered into a Word document. This method required me to make edits to correct minor mistakes the system made when converting the speech. Nonetheless, this process allowed me to immerse myself in the data prior to analysis. I saved each transcribed interview as a Word document on the USB flash drive. After each interview was transcribed, I began the thematic analysis.

In this section, I describe the data analysis process used to identify codes, categories, and themes related to the research question. I also share the findings from this study along with excerpts from participants' transcripts to support the findings. The section concludes with a summary.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data Collection

Upon receiving IRB approval, I started recruiting participants for this study using purposive sampling. First, I shared a recruitment flyer that provided information pertinent to this study, including contact information that prospective participants could use to reach out with questions. This flyer was posted to my personal Facebook page, which was public for anyone to view and share. Information regarding the study was also shared to Walden University's participant pool page. I continued to post the recruitment flyer on my personal Facebook page until at least eight participants had been recruited. Two additional participants reached out to inquire about participation in this study because they were made aware of the study through participants who had already provided consent. In total, 10 participants were recruited for this study over a period of 4 weeks.

I asked all individuals who expressed an interest in this study via email whether they were African American women (aged 30–45) and whether they had at least one social media account. If participants answered "yes" to both questions, they were deemed eligible to participate in the study. I emailed all eligible participants a copy of the consent form and asked them each to reply with the words, "I consent," in the body of their email. Next, I scheduled semistructured interviews with each participant via Zoom. Each

interview was scheduled for 1 hour to provide sufficient time; however, all interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were completed over a period of 2 weeks.

I conducted 10 interviews via Zoom and audio recorded them using the Zoom app and the voice recorder on my phone. Participants were notified of the audio recording in the consent form, and all agreed to have their interviews recorded for data collection purposes. All audio recordings were saved on a USB flash drive that only I have access to. Reflexive memos were also recorded during the data collection process. After each interview, the audio data were transcribed or converted to text to facilitate thematic analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis is a process during which a qualitative researcher extracts increasingly higher levels of meaning from data, moving from precoding processes through the identification of themes that answer the research question (Nowell et al., 2017). I began thematic analysis of the data by preparing the data for coding. Coding involves the identification of words or short phrases that summarize chunks of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). First, I organized the data for an efficient method of manual coding, category-based analysis, or the coding of data across interview questions (see Kuckartz, 2019). This process was an efficient way to begin to identify similarities or patterns among the data, which were organized by interview questions and aligned to the research question. During the manual coding process, I became immersed in the data rather than relying on computer-generated codes (see Williams & Moser, 2019).

To mitigate issues related to personal bias in the thematic analysis process, I chose to use an inductive coding method, or deriving codes from the text rather than a predetermined set of ideas (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I coded the data using a highlighting method. Each new idea was highlighted using a different color so I could keep track of the different codes and begin to make note of similarities among them. Next, I listed the codes and reread the text excerpts where the codes were highlighted to be sure each code accurately summarized and represented a chunk of data. I then began to closely examine relationships between and among codes, identifying higher level codes, or categories (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Lastly, I identified themes by reviewing the list of categories and codes as well as the data that supported each. This was done so I could confidently share the stories being told by the data as themes that answered the research question (see Williams & Moser, 2019).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study is substantiated by the extent to which a researcher takes steps to ensure its credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Burkholder et al., 2020). I took several steps to ensure that the findings of this study would be accepted as valid. The steps taken to establish trustworthiness in the current study are described in the following subsections.

Credibility

The credibility of a qualitative study is also referred to as its reliability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I took several steps to ensure that this study and its results were credible. For example, I audio recorded all interviews and stored the recordings on a flash drive that

only I have access to. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and participants were provided with a copy of their transcripts that they could review to be sure the data accurately reflected their views, a process called member checking (see Nowell et al., 2017). Member checking was also used to ensure early on that there were no discrepancies among the data. Additionally, I composed reflexive memos to record any thoughts or questions I had during the data analysis process to be aware of my personal bias.

Dependability

Dependability is another indicator of trustworthiness, and it refers to the reliability of a qualitative study and its results (Burkholder et al., 2020). To ensure that this study was dependable, I provided rich descriptions of all the steps taken in this study so that future researchers could follow them. Additionally, I developed an interview protocol that was aligned to the research question and used the protocol to guide the semistructured interview sessions. Furthermore, I used peer debriefing to ensure that researcher bias did not impact the results of this study and to review the study's methodology to attest to its replicability.

Transferability

Transferability refers to a study's generalizability, or the extent to which a study's results may be applied to another setting (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To support the transferability of this study, I provided the assumptions I held as well as limitations and delimitations that might have impacted this study. Additionally, I detailed all steps used in this study, including those involved in participant recruitment, data collection, and data

analysis. This was done so that researchers wanting to study the same problem in a similar setting may replicate this study.

Confirmability

The final indicator of trustworthiness is confirmability, which is also known as validity (Burkholder et al., 2020). I used member checking to confirm the accurate recording of interview data. Additionally, I asked a peer researcher to review the study and debrief with me regarding the study's methodology and results. Lastly, I composed reflexive memos to ensure that I reviewed the data objectively, without bias.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the number of participants. This study included 10 participants. To gain information related to a broader range of experiences, a study with a larger participant pool should be conducted. Additionally, this study relied on the collection of open, honest feedback in response to interview questions. Therefore, the accuracy of the data collected was beyond my control. However, I assured participants that their privacy would be protected to encourage them to share freely and without fear of judgement.

Findings

African American women who were aged 30–45 years old and had at least one social media account were recruited to participate in this study. I used the interview protocol to guide the semistructured interviews of the 10 participants. Each participant was asked all questions listed on the interview protocol; however, some participants were also asked probing questions to provide clarity or additional details when necessary. Prior

to asking questions related to the research question, I asked demographic questions to gain a better understanding of the participants' identities related to their ages and their social media habits. Table 1 shows the participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Age	Social media accounts	Social media use per day (in hours)
1	45	Facebook, Instagram	7–10
2	43	Facebook	1–3
3	42	TikTok, Instagram	2–10
4	42	X, Facebook, Instagram	6
5	30	Instagram	1.5
6	43	TikTok, Facebook	4
7	40	Facebook, Instagram	8
8	34	Facebook, Instagram	2–3
9	34	Instagram, Pinterest	No estimate provided
10	31	Instagram	6

Thematic analysis of the data yielded two themes related to the research question: (a) pressure to compare and emulate and (b) negative influence on mental health. Each theme was supported by codes and categories of codes. Table 2 shows an overview of the codes, categories, and themes that were identified during thematic analysis. After identifying the themes and confirming they were each supported by codes and categories, I reviewed the transcripts to locate sample excerpts to support each theme. A thorough description of the findings is provided in the following subsections.

Table 2

Overview of Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
Aspire	Influence	Pressure to compare and emulate
Discern	Comparison	
Marketing	Immersion	
Exposure	Motivation	
Jealous		
Façade		
Portray		
Fake		
Validation		
inadequate		
Involved		
People's lives		
Repetitive exposure		
Sucks you in		
Personal connection		
Advance		
Amp up		
Copy		
Body image	Self-image	Negative influence on mental health
Representation	Mental health	
Mold		
Less desirable		
Insecurities		
Stereotypes		
Unrealistic beauty standards		
Body shaming		
Expectations		
Shame		
Helpless		
Overthink		
Mental health		
Disturbed		
Crazy		
Somber		
Irritated		
Destroying		
Afraid to share		
Frustrated		
Bothersome		
Drained		
Upset		

Theme 1: Pressure to Compare and Emulate

This theme emerged unanimously as all participants acknowledged social media's powerful influence over African American women's thoughts about themselves and consumer behavior. While some participants reported witnessing the influence of social media on other women, other participants admitted to questioning themselves or their lifestyles based on social media images that were incessantly portrayed. This was supported by Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. However, as Verduyn et al. (2020) asserted, social comparison tends to have greater negative influences on passive social media users, or users who unintentionally get consumed with information they are not necessarily seeking, like updates about other people's lives. For instance, P1 described the up-close encounters with others' lives offered by social media, stating,

> You can get all involved in the postings. You get to be involved in people lives daily, especially when people are posting things you are interested in. Like what's going on with certain family members' lives or relationship and also the bad stuff is the best stuff. Social media gives people insight into people legit private business.

P6 discussed the fact that she recognized the power of social media and its intrusion into her life, yet the personal measures she took to mitigate the issue proved to be ineffective as she continued to be bombarded with unwanted content. P6 recalled,

> I feel like if I'm not watching it…like I if I deleted their pages, why am I still seeing this stuff every time I turn around? I haven't been following them for like over 3 months now, and I still always seem to catch their stuff on my page, and

> this is…I'm trying to get away from it. Y'all keep trying to force me to watch. So, to me, that's annoying. Like, that's really annoying.

Another participant, P2, shared similar thoughts about social media's influence on African American women's comparative behavior, saying,

> So, sometimes, because sometimes you get wrapped around… when people post…I think things, you know. Hey, I got this new car, or, you know, look at this new outfit, or whatever. And sometimes you start to think, oh, that looks nice. I wonder will it look nice on me, or I like that car, or I like that color. So, it can influence you.

P2 went on to share,

> I think sometimes women look at social media, and they feel like they start to compare themselves, so they'll do a comparison. If you see a woman with a new, you know, hairstyle, you know you're like, oh, I wonder if I can get my hair like that.

Despite social media's up-close experience with others' lives, some participants explicitly stated their awareness that social media users tend to only share the most positive or idealistic aspects of their lives. This creates a false sense of accomplishment that African American women strive to attain. Tiggemann and Anderberg (2020) described a practice that involved socially conscious social media users exposing content that portrayed unrealistic or fake representations of life or bodies. As Tiggemann and Anderberg shared, this practice of exposing social media was aimed at discouraging

people from comparing themselves to unrealistic expectations. P3 shared personal experiences with social media's fake portrayal of reality:

> I think that it's really destroying a lot of women. I know a lot of my friends that are going through struggles with social media just because people portray their relationships like it's perfect. People portray life as if it's perfect, but I just feel like they should think of it as no one's going to spill most of their dirt on social media. Now some people do. But the grass…you just can't compare yourself. I think they need [to] stop comparing yourself to other people.

Similarly, P9 also shared,

> Because social media portrays this fake ideal of people. And sometimes I find myself getting angry that people are portraying this, that I have to realize…that's not me. And I just keep on about my business that in that aspect also…just when you see different people, it's not so much a monetary thing. But if I see people…with their families and things like that, sometimes I'm saying, "Dang, I wish I had that." But again, I just get off and be like, oh, well, that's not on my plate. So I'm moving on.

Social media's influence on African American women's behavior or thoughts of comparison is not limited to being related to posts by familiar people. Some participants reported comparing themselves or their lives to content posted by celebrities. However, celebrity status is not just assigned to famous musicians, actors, or other industry figures; rather, social media celebrity status may be attained by anyone with a large following,

earning them role of an influencer (Aw & Chuah, 2021). P10 shared a personal perspective regarding social media content and social comparison:

> I do believe that social media does help influence me to compare myself to others, because, on Instagram, I follow a lot of celebrities, models, actresses, and they show off their bodies, or they show off their money and their wealth. And it makes me feel upset and depressed because I would love to do those things that they're doing. I would love to have a body like those celebrities have. So, it does make me feel upset.

P4 could relate to being influenced by social media content posted by celebrities, stating,

> I know that I can go down a rabbit hole when it comes to social media, and I know that I try to make efforts to limit my amount of time on there. Before I know it, it's 11 o'clock at night. I went from looking up stuff on CNN to now I'm looking up what this anchor was wearing to…now I'm on the Gucci's website. Now it's just…it's like a rabbit hole.

In addition to the ways social media content was reported to influence African American women to achieve a certain status or lifestyle, some participants described ways that social comparison due to exposure to social media content led to them experiencing increased motivation for career and other lifestyle advancement. This was especially true for one participant when she noticed her peers making strides. P2 shared,

> So, from a professional standpoint, you know, I use it as motivation. So, it's more positive for me on a professional standpoint versus body image. Because when I've seen, you know peers and people doing things, it served as a motivation for

> me. Not so much…jealousy or anything like that. But it's like, you know. Hey? Can you help me? How can I? How can I be? You know. How can I get on that level? We completed a doctoral degree, and as a result of that, I've seen other people taking classes, and …[that] was something that I always thought I could do. I was just afraid to, but when I see other people doing it, it kind of motivated me a little bit, especially people that I knew.

P4 agreed,

> You know, because you just never know who didn't finish high school, and you're motivating them to get there, to even start to get on their degree path, you know. So people that look like me…brown girls [with] tattoos, you know, just aspire to do more for themselves with families, and just going against the odds.

Theme 2: Negative Influence on Mental Health

Theme 2 emerged as participants described specific ideals and stereotypes that were upheld by social media content. These messages negatively influenced the way participants reported feeling mentally and emotionally. While some of the content that was reported as having a negative influence reflected gendered stereotypes, others reflected racialized ones, or a combination. For African American women, being subjected to negative messages at the intersection of gender and racial identities can have compounded effects. This is especially true when ideals that center Whiteness and youth are upheld through social media messages and images (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). Social media reinforces stereotypes related to beauty that alienate some African American women users (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2020).

For one participant, these social media images influenced her self-image and made her want to refrain from posting content of her own for fear of inadequacy. P10 shared,

> It makes me feel upset and depressed because I would love to do those things that they're doing. I would love to have a body like those celebrities have. So, it does make me feel upset…I feel really down, upset, and depressed. I believe all the time…I feel like I don't want to show [myself] off on my Instagram page, because I feel like I look abnormal compared to [others].

P7 discussed coping with unrealistic expectations placed on African American and their bodies, sharing,

> Everybody's talking about having big backs, but then everybody will post about food. It just makes it unrealistic like you can't eat everything that you see on TV and still pop up with the slim waist. But people make it seem like you can…It's not realistic. No matter how hard you work out. No matter what you do. So, it just once again sets those unrealistic expectations, and it's like, if you don't look like this, then nobody will love you. Nobody will like you. Nobody will want to be with you, and that's so far from the truth.

P7 replied,

> I think just a comment on body shaming. I think it's a lot because, as you like on my social media. I'll post a lot which kind of made me do it in a way like, especially when I'm on vacation. I like started posting like my bathing suit pictures, and as a big plus sized woman with rolls and rolls and everything else.

> You know, it was weird how people would like DM, me like, well, what are you wearing? Where'd you get that from? You have such confidence? And so…when I did actually make my page public one time…I posted stuff and there would be some mean comments. I'm like man. Forget this. I'm going private.

Interestingly, social media trends have notably shifted in terms of beauty standards, and the shifts have not been favorable for African American women. For instance, features that were once attributed to Blackness, such as fuller lips and hips, were also once seen as undesirable. However, social media users have seen Blackness being appropriated and exploited in ways that have been harmful to African American women, especially those who do not possess the "Black" features that society expects them to have been born with or that other women have purchased from plastic surgeons. Social media influencers and well-known celebrities have been accused of "Blackfishing" or trying to look Black, even though they are not (Stevens, 2021). Blackfishing can be seen when people who are not Black elect to have surgery to make their lips or other areas of their bodies fuller. This coopting of Blackness on social media further harms Black women and creates an isolating dynamic within the Black community of women (Stevens, 2021). As P8 shared, "And the body perception is sad, [it] you know, celebrates thicker women. Thick can be beautiful, too. But they're based on likes and comments and things." P1 also said,

> And another thing that bothers me is the type of body image that is supposed to represent us African American women, which is big butts, small waist, and long hair. Women and body image can sometimes represent and mislead women. I

> found myself looking into getting surgery to fit that new mold. But I'm glad I joined a gym and did it on my own. But I sometimes slip back to those thoughts if I see something on social media about surgery.

P5 also described how stereotypes about African American women has influenced the way they feel. Specifically, as P5 mentioned, there are double standards for African American women and other women – standards that have minimized the harsher realities African American women face. P5 stated,

> But then you have all of these different memes and videos and things where it kind of makes fun of women and it makes women feel like they have to be a certain type of way and we are not allowed to have certain emotions and certain weaknesses, because, if not, the world will view us a certain way. So, that we start to shift ourselves to be in these…as people have been saying a lot lately…we're not living in no soft girl era. In a sense, we have to feel like we have to be these strong individuals all the time because that's the way that the world paints us.

The current study findings suggest that African American women perceive social media to have a negative influence on their mental health and self-image. Specifically, participants' responses were aligned with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, because social media influenced them to compare themselves to others. Further, these comparisons yield negative self-perceptions and feelings.

Summary

The findings of this study suggested that social media use pressures African American women to compare themselves to and emulate others. The findings also

suggest that these behaviors as a result of social media use have a negative influence on the way African American women see themselves and feel. Participants in this study reported being immersed in social media content for hours each day – hours of receiving messages about who they are or ought to be. The themes that were revealed from the data answered the research question and supported existing literature related to the study's topic. The themes were also aligned with Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory because they describe how social media content influences African American women to compare themselves to the images or messages they consume.

For some participants, comparing themselves or their lives to social media postings had an obviously negative influence on them. Others indicated a potentially less obvious negative influence, as they shared that social media motivated them to achieve higher personal or professional status. Nonetheless, the evidence that social media influences African American women to evaluate their worth – negatively or positively – was overwhelming. The results of this study shed a light on implications for social workers who provide services for African American women.

In the next section, I will share details about this study's application to social work practice before describing recommendations based on this study's findings. Implications for social change will be shared and a summary will conclude the next section.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore African American women's perceptions about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. Qualitative research enhanced my understanding of African American women's experiences in a manner that would not have been possible with other types of research. Using a basic qualitative study design, I collected data from semistructured interviews of participants with firsthand knowledge and experience related to the study's problem and research question.

As an African American woman social worker, I recognized there was little research related to African American women and their experiences with mental health. Nelson et al. (2020) asserted there was a possible explanation for the limited research: African American women's internalization of the strong Black woman trope and society's expectation that African American women uphold that image. To better understand how African American women perceived the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image, I interviewed 10 African American women aged 30–45 years old. The findings of this study resulted in the identification of two themes: (a) pressure to compare and emulate and (b) negative influence on mental health.

The results indicated that social media encourages African American women to compare themselves and it has a negative influence on their mental health. In addition to learning more about the influence social media has on African American women's mental health and self-image, I learned ways some African American women work to counteract the negative experiences with social media. For example, participants shared ways to

affirm themselves to negative messages of inadequacy. Participants also offered usage monitoring techniques to limit social media content exposure and mitigate the internalization of negative messages. These strategies were useful and may be shared with other African American women by social media users and social workers as they provide mental health support to African American women. Social workers may provide clients with these strategies for limiting exposure and the internalization of negative messages on social media to decrease depressive symptoms in African American women and improve their self-image.

In this section, I describe how the results of this study may be applied to professional ethics in social work practice. I also offer my recommendations for social work practice and discuss the study's implications for social change.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

I conducted this study to address a gap in knowledge related to social work. Understanding African American women's perspectives regarding their mental health and self-image is important because the data collected may be used to develop appropriate and responsive strategies for providing services to African American women. This is especially important since African American women tend to face internal and external pressures to avoid seeking mental health support; therefore, their mental health issues often go underdiagnosed (Hall et al., 2021). In fact, according to Abrams et al. (2019), less than 10% of African American women seek treatment for mental health-related concerns. Furthermore, Abrams et al. asserted that there is a connection between internalized stereotypes about strong Black women and symptoms related to depression.

Therefore, the current study's findings may be used to inform ethical and practical social work practices that may be effective with African American women. After all, the unique needs and experiences of African American women have historically been ignored in research and in practice, which is a clear social injustice (Coles & Pasek, 2020).

Social workers are uniquely positioned to challenge social injustice through their practice and education (NASW, 2021). By learning more about cultural humility and culturally responsive practices, social workers may be better equipped to provide meaningful support for African American women whose needs are often left unmet. Additionally, increased learning opportunities for social workers may lead to reflexive practice that involves self- and peer evaluation to ensure that social work services are free of bias. For African American women to feel emotionally safe to seek and maintain mental health services, social work professional must commit to understanding their experiences and learn ways to affirm African American women in their care (NASW, 2021).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

This study was conducted to explore African American women's perspectives about the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. From data collected during semistructured interviews, I learned more about ways social media influences African American women to view themselves in a negative light and question their worth in comparison to standards of beauty and success that are held in high regard. The findings of this study, along with the existing literature about African American

women and mental health, have informed the following recommendations for broader social work practice.

Recommendation 1

According to the NASW (2021), social workers should engage in ongoing learning opportunities to enhance professional knowledge. Therefore, I recommend that social work professionals engage in preservice and in-service professional learning related to cultural humility and culturally responsive practices. These learning opportunities will support social workers in learning to de-center themselves and affirm the experiences of African American women, even if their clients' experiences are different from their own. Additionally, social workers will learn to lead with curiosity to reduce bias or assumptions that African American women experience injustice in the same way as all women or African American men. This is important issue to address because the "colorblind" approach to providing social work services may lead to missed opportunities to provide culturally responsive, relevant, and effective services to African American women (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2023).

Recommendation 2

Another recommendation is for social workers to seek to include group therapy opportunities for African American women. Given that many African American women feel silenced around their struggles with mental health, they are less likely to seek professional help and are more likely to negative or understate the true impact of negative stimuli for fear that something is wrong with them. However, in group settings, African American women may be more likely to be vulnerable and feel affirmed by the shared

experiences of other African American women (Chineso et al., 2020). However, even in group settings, social workers must give attention to detail regarding how they build trust with African American women and help them build trust with each other (Bauer et al., 2022).

Recommendation 3

Participants in the current study referred to ways social media may be used to support positive self-image and mental health. In their responses, participants shared mental health professionals and other influencers who use social media platforms to spread positive messages and offer advice and wellness tips. Therefore, I recommend that social workers consider social media an effective tool for sharing resources with African American women. Because participants in this study spent hours each day on social media platforms, there is a strong indication that social media may be used to counteract negative messages consumed by African American women and increase awareness and access to mental health resources.

As an advanced social work practitioner, I will incorporate these three recommendations into my own practice. Although I am an African American woman, I understand that African American women are not a monolith. This means that the experiences of African American women are as diverse as the shades of their skin. Therefore, I will commit to seeking out professional learning experiences that encourage me to reflect upon my own identity and cultural references as well as learn to recognize the differences in those experiences that exist among other African American women to be more responsive to them. This will be important to my professional growth so I may

avoid perpetuating unconscious bias in my practice and may work to mitigate the possible erasure of the nuanced experiences of African American women.

Additionally, I will incorporate strategies to increase positive metacognition into my social work practice so that African American women will be more aware of what they are consuming and what they are thinking and feeling while on social media (see Harren et al., 2021). A heightened level of awareness of personal thoughts and feelings will position my clients as active social media users rather than passive consumers of information (see Harren et al., 2021).

This study's findings are transferable to the field of social work practice because they highlight important considerations for practitioners that work with African American women, especially those who use social media. Participants reported comparing themselves to images and messages they consume from social media and experiencing negative thoughts and feelings as a result. Given the conceptual framework and its relevance to all groups of people, this study's findings are more widely transferable to various demographics of people who use social media and report experiencing decreased self-image or mental health issues.

This study's transferability and generalizability make it useful to the broader field of social work, including to the growing body of social work research. For social work researchers, understanding the influences of social media on mental health and self-image can inspire further research to help identify ways to mitigate this issue and continue to support practitioners as they improve the effectiveness of their practice. This is especially important for social workers who have an ethical obligation to strive for positive social

change through their transformative work. This study's findings may also inspire deeper conversations among African American communities and evoke a sense of urgency around seeking professional help for mental health issues.

Limitations

No study is without limitations, or elements beyond a researcher's control (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The primary limitation of this qualitative study was the self-reporting nature of the data collection method used. During semistructured interviews, I assumed each participant would provide open and honest feedback to each of the interview questions. However, given stigmatization related to mental health among African American women, I am unsure of the participants' levels of honesty. To address this possible limitation, I did ensure that participants' identities would remain confidential to encourage transparency in reporting.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study highlighted the unique experiences of African American women, aged 30–45, and their perceptions of the influence of social media on their mental health and self-image. Although the results of this study have positive implications for social work practice, I recommend that future research be conducted to continue to fill the gap in knowledge related to African American women's mental health and self-image. One recommendation is that quantitative or mixed-methods research be conducted to determine whether there is a relationship between income or education levels and mental health outcomes related to social media. Participants in this study reported comparing themselves to the perceived financial status or professional attainment of others.

Therefore, I recommend that researchers determine whether a negative impact on mental health and self-image is greater, lesser, or about the same across education levels or socioeconomic status.

Another recommendation is for researchers to conduct studies to determine the effects of different stereotypes on mental health and self-image. For example, participants in this study mentioned several stereotypes related to skin color, body type, and lifestyle. However, this study's results may not be used to quantify whether certain stereotypes have a greater effect on mental health than others. Therefore, I recommend a meta-analysis to further explore this issue.

My final recommendation is for studies to be conducted in the future with African American women who have used social media from childhood. For participants in their 40s, social media has advanced more recently than for participants in their early 30s. By studying participants who were born in the 2000s, or around the rise of social media, researchers will be able to determine whether social media has greater effects on younger generations of users versus older generations.

Dissemination of Findings

I will email a summary of the findings, in the form of a one-page attachment to all participants of this study via email. I will also seek to publish a final, approved copy of this study in a peer-reviewed journal.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study have implications for positive social change related to mental health awareness, social work practice, and collective healing for African

American women. Mental health in the African American community remains a topic that is not widely discussed. For African American women, the silence around mental health perpetuates the internalization of the strong Black woman persona (Liao et al., 2020). This internalization further upholds a culture of silence related to mental health because African American women feel they are expected to be strong and can be made to feel like mental health challenges are signs of weakness. However, the results of this study highlight the fact that African American women are not alone in the mental health and self-image challenges they face, especially related to social media content. Therefore, the results of this study may be used to promote the collective healing of African American women from unrealistic societal pressures and expectations. As Chioneso et al. (2020) asserted, collective healing, or the healing of communities of African American women, may occur through storytelling. The results of this study highlight the stories of African American women who have been negatively influenced by social media. They also underscore the need for social workers to advocate for social justice to end the marginalization of African American women in society and mental health spaces (see NASW, 2021).

The results of this study may also be used to inform culturally responsive social work practices, including group therapy sessions for African American women to engage in collective healing. For social workers, these practices may be crucial to motivating African American women to seek support in spaces that affirm their experiences from a racialized and gendered standpoint. Furthermore, those spaces may be used to invite other African American women to seek help from professionals who understand the unique

experiences at the intersection of race and gender, thus reducing the silence among African American women and increasing their access to mental health resources. The results of this study may be used to inform practices that promote emotional safety for African American women, in accordance with NASW (2021).

Summary

I conducted this study to explore the influence of social media on African American women's self-image and mental health. An even greater purpose for this study was to gain insight into the unique experiences of African American women so that social work professionals may consider culturally responsive strategies for treating African American women who seek mental health services. With social media having risen to the top of communication modalities, it is likely that social work professionals will need to continue to learn about the influence of social media on African American women's lives and overall well-being. As the results of this study indicated, social media images and messages have a profound influence on the way African American women see and feel about themselves. However, just as social media messages can have a negative influence on African American women's self-image and mental health, social media may also be used intentionally by mental health professionals and other positive influencers to support African American women's mental well-being.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Title of Study: Distortion: Social Media's Influence on African American Women's Mental Health and Self-Image
Date:
Location:
Time of Interview:
Interviewer: Terressa Sanchez
Interviewee:

Greeting:

"Hello and thank you for taking the time to be interviewed today. My name is Terressa Sanchez Gamble, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I have worked in the social work field for many years and this study will help me better understand how social media affects the mental health a self-image of African American women. I have received your Thank you for providing informed consent via email. However, I want to be sure I still have your consent to move forward with your participation in this interview. *(Pause).* Remember that you may decide to no longer participate in this study at any time. You have no obligation to be interviewed. If you decide to withdraw consent, I will immediately stop the interview and delete all your information. Please know that I will do all I can to protect your privacy. Therefore, I will not report any personal data collected during this process. Your name and any other personal information about you will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions for me about the study or anything I just shared with you?

Checklist (for interviewer):

____Participant has provided consent via email.

____Participant still wishes to participate at the time of this interview. (If not, stop here, thank participant, and delete participant information.)

Interview Norms (Review with participant.):

- Share only your personal experiences.
- Please do not share others' personal information.
- Please ask stop me or ask me to repeat a question if you are unsure.
- Please let me know if you wish to stop the interview at any time.

"Do you have any questions before we continue? Do you want to continue?"

Background/Purpose:

"This interview is designed to help me your thoughts about the influence of social media on African American women's mental health and self-image. I want you to share openly and honestly and give as many details as you can. This interview will be recorded, and you will notice that I will be taking notes. This is so I do not forget any important details you share and so that I may ask follow-up questions if needed. The questions I will be asking you were prepared ahead of time, but I might have to ask follow-up questions if I need clarification or would like additional details from you. Do you have any questions for me right now? Do I have your permission to continue with this interview and recording?

Questions:

Demographic-related Questions

1. This study is focusing on African American women aged 30-45. How old are you?

2. Which social media accounts do you use and about how many hours do you spend each day on each site?

Questions Related to the Research Question

3. Describe the ways you primarily use each of your social media accounts.
4. What, in your opinion, makes social media different from other forms of media (television, print, etc.)?
5. Do you perceive social media influence's you to compare yourself to others? How so?
6. Describe how you typically feel about yourself after using social media.
7. How has social media content caused your mood, thoughts, or behaviors to change for the better or worse?
8. In what way do you believe social media content influenced the way women cope with mental health and self-image problems?
9. When engaging with social media, which content causes symptoms of unstable moods for you? And why do you believe this occurs?
10. As an African American woman, what intervention methods would you suggest help decrease your mental health and self-image problems, due to social media content?
11. When observing content on social media, what content do you feel you most compare yourself to?
12. How has social media content influenced how you view and compared yourself personally and professionally?

13. How has social media content cause African American women aged 30 to 45 to compared themselves to other female social media influencers?
14. As an African American woman, what interventions and coping methods have you used to help eliminate or decrease the influence of social media content?

Probing Question examples:

- *Please explain…*
- *Can you give me an example of…?*
- *Why do you say that?*
- *What did you mean by…?*

Closing:

"Thank you for your time. I am grateful for your participation in this study. Please remember that your interview responses will be kept confidential, and you may withdraw consent at any time. I will follow up with you via email so you may review the transcript of your interview to ensure accuracy. Do I have your permission to contact you for a follow-up email? Thank you and have a great day!"