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An Exploration of Social Networking Use and Mental Health in Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, Gender Non-Binary, and Gender Fluid Persons

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AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING USE AND MENTAL HEALTH IN TRANSGENDER, GENDER NON-CONFORMING, GENDER NON-BINARY, AND GENDER FLUID PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) allow for rapid information sharing in public, online spaces. Research in the general public suggests that extended SNS use corresponds with poor mental health outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. However, research regarding SNS use in lesbian, gay, or bisexual populations seems to promote interpersonal connectedness and sexual exploration**,** while also allowing individuals to gain knowledge unique to the LGB community. While such studies tend to include gender non-conforming persons in the results, this group often represents a minimal proportion of participants. As such, there is a paucity of research regarding SNS use and mental health in the gender non-conforming population which requires further exploration. This study sought to explore SNS and mental health in persons identifying as gender non-conforming. A grounded theory approach was used to collect, code, and analyze the data in order to develop a substantive theory regarding SNS and mental health in this demographic. Eight participants were interviewed and each provided feedback regarding their SNS use, mental health, and gender identity. Results indicated that participants largely used SNS for social interaction, which affords them the opportunity to connect to their peers without geographic limitations. Further, the data suggest that SNS generally offer room to explore and a setting to express one's gender identity with a chosen degree of privacy and anonymity. This study found that when SNS are used in a connection-promoting manner (e.g., emphasizing engagement and interaction), and the user has clearly developed SNS preferences, the user will have larger social support network and increased psychosocial wellbeing. Conversely, more non-connection promoting use (e.g., passively viewing images), and exposure to online bullying, are associated with upward social comparisons and negative mental health outcomes. The results indicate a clear necessity for

additional studies that further expand knowledge and refine clinical competencies while considering SNS use and its relationship to mental health in gender non-conforming persons.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As of 2018, 72% of Internet-using U.S. citizens maintain some sort of social networking account (Pew Research Center, 2019), and this ostensibly serves to decrease isolation by expanding one's peer group and increasing diversity in friend groups (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Ja Her, & Rainie, 2009). For transgender, gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, and gender fluid persons the connection and safety afforded by social networking sites (SNS) has the potential to allow them to explore and develop a healthy gender identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Strong cultural messages concerning attractiveness and gender norms viewed on SNS might negatively influence mental health in gender non-conforming communities (Bem, 1981). For example, SNS use can result in increased exposure to gender norms and beauty standards that may further influence one's perceptions of masculinity and femininity (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011). This exposure may further increase the likelihood one will experience poor psychological outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, or anxiety (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2006; Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016).

Studies have found contradictory results regarding mental health and SNS. Research on SNS use in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) populations has indicated that, unconstrained by geographic barriers, SNS can offer opportunities to foster positive self-esteem (Craig & McInroy, 2014), to connect to community (Craig et al., 2015), and to explore and develop sexual identity with a chosen level of privacy (Fox & Warber, 2015). While SNS use can serve to improve self-esteem and foster sexual exploration, research has indicated that it might also have detrimental mental health outcomes with more frequent and extended use (Chou and Edge, 2012; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). Studies that did not control for sexual and/or gender identity

have indicated that increased activity on SNS is associated with high rates of life dissatisfaction (Chou & Edge, 2012), depression (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli 2014), lower subjective happiness (Satici & Uysal, 2015), decreased self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011), and higher rates of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Milivojević & Ercegovac, 2014; Gilbert & Meyer, 2003). These studies often used Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison to explain the relationship between SNS use, upward or downward social comparisons, and the effect on one's mental health and wellness.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth and increased use of SNS has changed the way that many individuals communicate by enhancing existing relationships and extending communication beyond in-person or small group communication (Veenhof, Wellman, Quell, & Hogan, 2008). Literature has shown mixed results regarding the impact(s) of SNS use and these studies—conducted primarily with young adults, university students, or LGB persons—rarely include gender non-conforming participants, even though findings often cluster this population into the results. Additionally, there is the possibility that frequent SNS use might further expose gender non-conforming persons to prominent, societal gender norms that could lead to upward social comparisons (Bem, 1981; Bockting et al., 2006). The mixed findings, the expansive numbers of individuals using SNS (Pew Research Center, 2019), and the dearth of literature exploring SNS use and mental health in only gender non-conforming persons indicates more research is needed. This study sought to develop a substantive theory about SNS use and mental health in the gender non-conforming population in order to further advance knowledge regarding SNS use and mental health in this demographic and to refine clinical competencies that consider a gender non-conforming person's online social presence.

Research Questions

This study's primary question was represented by, "What are gender non-conforming persons experiences with SNS as it relates to their mental health?" Data were collected via interviews with individuals identifying as gender non-conforming and was guided by the following four questions: 1. What are their experiences using SNS? 2. What are their experiences of mental health and SNS use? 3. What are their experiences of social comparisons while using SNS? 4. What are their experiences of gendered social comparisons on SNS?

Project Goals and the Jesuit Mission

The mission statement of the Jesuit-affiliated University of San Francisco states that the institution is a "diverse, socially responsible learning community" that "will draw from the cultural, intellectual, and economic resources of the San Francisco Bay Area...to enrich and strengthen its educational programs" (University of San Francisco, n.d., para. 4). Further, the Jesuit mission calls on members to "do anything or go anywhere to help people" (Jesuits, n.d., para. 1). Gender non-conforming persons represent an underserved, often-discriminated against demographic in the United States. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the gender non-conforming community has actively influenced the city's culture. This study seeks to further highlight their influence by examining one of the myriad issues gender non-conforming persons experience. The study will demonstrate a commitment to social justice by exploring mental health and SNS use in gender non-conforming individuals and will seek to increase the knowledge, awareness, and skills that can be used to positively influence the care of this underserved community.

Project-Specific Terms

The following terminology will be utilized throughout this study and may be used as a guide and reference.

Cisgender: Term describing an individual "whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth" (Human Rights Campaign, 2016, para. 6).

Gender expression: Externally conveyed messages about one's gender, indicated by one's name, dress, chosen pronouns, and body characteristics among many others (GLAAD. 2016).

Gender identity: An internal, deeply held sense of gender that is not necessarily visible to others (GLAAD, 2016).

Gender non-conforming: Exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one's sex (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Sexual orientation: Inherent, inalterable "emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction" to another person (Human Rights Campaign, 2016, para. 1).

Social networking sites (SNS): Online-based services that maintain previously developed relationships and connect individuals to likeminded peers (e.g., shared interests, political values; boyd & Ellison, 2007). These sites must allow users to formulate a public profile in an online community, create a record of users with whom they have a connection (e.g., friends or followers list), and explore those relationships (and possibly the relationships of strangers) within the parameters of the specific site.

Psychosocial wellbeing: Social factors, individual thought, and personal behaviors and their relationship to one's state of happiness and health (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

The terms they/them/their/themselves will represent the culturally-sensitive pronouns used to describe persons throughout this study unless referring to an individual whose chosen pronouns are he/him/his or she/her/hers. For purposes of this paper, the term gender non-

conforming is used as an umbrella term to describe any persons who do not ascribe to the biological male/female gender norms. When differences between the groups arise, more specific terminology such as transgender will be utilized to differentiate between the population groups.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following sections represent a review of the literature. They contain information about the role of a literature review in grounded theory research designs, the background and significance of SNS use, a demographic overview of gender non-conforming persons in the United States, an overview of SNS statistics and related mental health outcomes, a summary of gender identity development, and a description of social comparison theory.

The Role of a Literature Review in Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (GT) research designs focus on the development of a theory that is rooted in data provided by the targeted demographic when little to no knowledge is known about it (Cresswell, 2007). Because research has failed to explore SNS use and mental health in gender non-conforming populations, a grounded theory research design was used to explore the issue with the purpose of theory development. A grounded theory research design seeks to reduce preconceived notions about the topic-of-interest by limiting or postponing a review(s) of the literature until data collection begins (Dunne, 2011). In grounded theory, premature literature reviews may taint a researcher's understanding and observations of the data, however postponing this stage could also result in problems related to defining a research question or identifying gaps in the research. An engagement with the literature on SNS use in the general population and SNS use in LGB populations was conducted to identify what had been studied and where gaps in research existed, and this was central to the development and justification of the study's focus and the corresponding research questions (Suddaby, 2006; McMenamin, 2006). Theories regarding gender identity development and social comparison were also examined. Following the

aforementioned reviews, all additional literature reviews ceased until the conclusion of the first interview which is consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory research design.

Background and Significance

The internet has changed the way modern society communicates. Approximately 72% of internet-using adults have a Facebook account with 70% interacting on the site daily (Pew Research Center, 2019). This seemingly affords the user the opportunity to maintain social ties, revive relationships, and to decrease social isolation (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2014). Currently, individual Facebook use is correlated to the need for self-presentation and a sense of belonging (Nadkami & Hofmann, 2013). SNS and continual access to the Internet (on computers or mobile phones, for instance) have changed the way many people interact by increasing the ease and immediacy in which information can be shared and substantially expanding the individuals and groups with which one can communicate (Jones & Fox, 2009). Now technological media creates "global villages," with the power to shape an interpersonal world that was previously geographically impossible (Steers et al., 2014, p. 702).

Online social interaction has influenced the mental health of persons identifying as LGB. Research has indicated social networking promotes community connectedness and safety for sexual minority youth (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015). Youths can form relationships with others that were previously unavailable due to factors such as geographic location or lack of anonymity. Stigma and bullying during adolescence is common among LGB persons, and SNS use that connects these individuals to similar peers can prevent or limit possible negative outcomes such as social isolation or depression (Craig et al., 2015; Craig & McInroy, 2014). Further, online communication can allow LGB users to access information about sex and sexual health that otherwise might not be provided to them (DeHaan, Kuper,

Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2012). As such, social networking sites can create a safe venue for LGB users to explore their sexual identity and receive acceptance and support from other LGB persons and advocates. These outcomes suggest that gender non-conforming persons may also positively benefit when using SNS, although more research is needed that further explores the scope of social networking sites' influence within this demographic.

Social comparison theory helps explain some mental health outcomes related to viewing other users' SNS profiles (Steers et al., 2014). This theory suggests that individuals compare their abilities and traits to others in order to make self-evaluations (Festinger, 1954). Research has shown that frequent SNS use might result in noxious, upward social comparisons that can result in negative mental health outcomes such as depression (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Brooks & Longstreet, 2015; Feinstein et al., 2013). Upward social comparisons occur when people compare themselves to others who are perceived to be better than they are (Festinger, 1954). The more time spent on Facebook, for example, is correlated with lower self-esteem and poorer self-evaluations after exposure to healthy, socially active peers' online profiles (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014; Chou et al. 2015). These negative psychological outcomes seem to worsen over time as frequency of use increases (Satici & Uysal, 2015; Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015).

The remainder of this literature review will elaborate on the aforementioned demographics and the relationships between SNS use and mental health in cisgender and LGB groups. It will also provide a more in-depth description of social comparison theory and gender identity development theory.

Demographic Information about Gender Non-Conforming Populations

Recent statistics suggest that gender non-conforming persons represent .6% of the United States population (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). The number of persons identifying as gender non-conforming has doubled since 2011, and now gender non-conforming persons are thought to represent over 1.4 million U.S. citizens (Flores et al., 2016). The same study estimates that in the state of California specifically, gender non-conforming persons represent approximately 300,200 of the state's population. It is important to note that the actual number of gender non-conforming persons in the United States is likely higher than the numbers presented above due to underrepresentation in population surveys or stigma and/or safety concerns often associated with public openness about one's gender identity (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017).

Research has indicated that gender non-conforming persons are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health outcomes. Studies suggest that they are more likely to experience severe discrimination in areas such as healthcare, employment, and housing and are more likely to participate in at-risk behaviors such as risky sexual behaviors or drug use (Clements-Nolle, Marx, Guzman, & Katz, 2001). Research regarding mental health in gender non-conforming persons has specified that approximately 60% had experienced symptoms of depression (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, & Coleman, 2013). Other research suggests gender non-conforming persons are more likely to experience anxiety, somatic complaints, self-harm and/or suicidal ideation (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016).

Social Networking Site Statistics and Purpose

Social networking permeates modern life. Facebook estimates it has over 1.4 billion members, and data approximate that 936 million users check their accounts a minimum of once per day (Facebook, 2015). Instagram, an online, photo-and-video sharing website, has over 300 million active users who upload around 70 million photos and press the "like" button 2.5 billion

times per day (Instagram, 2015). Duggan et al. (2015) estimate that 71% and 53% of internet-using adults over the age of 18 use Facebook and Instagram respectively. Statistics also suggest that 52% of internet-using adults use at least two SNS platforms, representing a 10% increase since 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2019). There has also been an increase in older adults using SNS, and 56% of internet-using adults over the age of 65 currently use Facebook. Approximately, 79% of women and 63% of men in the United States have a Facebook account according to Pew Research Center (2019). The research center also claims that 69 % of Hispanic and 70% of both White and Black individuals in the United States also have a Facebook account.

Social networking sites offer three opportunities for users: to create a public, personal profile with identifiable boundaries; to interact with other internet users who have a shared connection; and to explore the profiles of other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007). When engaging in some or all of the abovementioned actions, SNS seemingly increase the scope and influence of the social groups with which one chooses to engage (Lin & Lu, 2011). On these platforms, members can communicate with an ever-expanding group of "friends" or "followers" and manage their identities through profile creation, posts, photos, and emails/direct messages (Livingstone, 2008). These sites represent the fastest growing form of interpersonal networking, and thus are often used as an online extension of oneself.

Psychosocial Outcomes Regarding SNS Use in University Students and Young Adults

Similar to interpersonal communication, SNS have also had an impact on the mental health of users. Research examining social networking in cisgender participants has identified correlations between frequent SNS use and negative mental health outcomes (Chou & Edge, 2012; Satici & Uysal, 2015; Kalpidou et al., 2011; Milivojević & Ercegovac, 2014; Gilbert & Meyer, 2003). Many of the current social networking sites often make it difficult for a user to

avoid exposure to a near constant stream of information and images (Steers et al, 2014). Social networking also has facilitated an increase in public comments on appearance, performance, and/or other characteristics that may be present on one's profile (Subrahmanyan & Greenfield, 2008). These comments, paired with other online interactions and the ease of access, allow for a user to continually gather feedback about themselves and others, and this seems to directly result in social comparisons (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008).

Frequent use of SNS is associated with greater life dissatisfaction. Chou and Edge (2012) investigated the relationship between Facebook use and people's perceptions of others' lives. They found that individuals who used Facebook more frequently were more likely to engage in upward social comparisons that impacted their perceptions of others. Specifically, these participants perceived that other Facebook users were happier and more satisfied with their lives even when controlling for religiosity, gender, and relationship status. When viewing happy photos and other content, one is more likely to think that others have better lives, and the effects tend to have more noxious outcomes if one is viewing a stranger's content. Conversely, those with more offline friend interactions compared to online interactions were more likely to be satisfied with their lives.

The effects of SNS use can result in one making inferences about others with little evidence of the actual reality. Satici and Uysal (2015) conducted an examination of the relationship between time spent on Facebook and psychosocial wellbeing. They found that frequent and extensive Facebook use was associated with lower life satisfaction, lower subjective happiness, and lower subjective vitality. Other studies seem to mirror these results. Kross et al., (2013) examined Facebook use over a two-week period of time and found that the more time users spent on this platform, the more likely they were to feel dissatisfied with their lives.

Self-esteem and emotional adjustment may also be affected with frequent SNS use. Kalpidou et al. (2011) explored the relationship between Facebook use/attitudes, self-esteem, and college adjustment. Participants reported spending 60 to 120 minutes on Facebook daily. The researchers determined that for underclassmen (i.e., freshman and sophomores) the more time they spent on Facebook was correlated with decreased self-esteem. The researchers also found that the number of Facebook friends was associated with poor academic and emotional adjustment among underclassman. When examining upperclassman (i.e., juniors and seniors) the number of Facebook friends seems to correlate with positive social adjustment, and the researchers posit this is because Facebook is being used to actively connect to others. The research suggests that if SNS are used for specific purposes (i.e., for social interaction) the negative effects such as poor emotional adjustment might be mitigated.

Psychosocial Outcomes Regarding SNS Use in LGB Populations

Research findings focused on SNS use in LGB communities seem to contrast the negative outcomes prevalent in the general public. For instance, Fox and Warber (2015) found that because social networking is unconstrained by geographic limits, it affords LGB persons the ability to connect with a broader number of other LGB persons and advocates. These users can also create anonymous profiles, thereby building a safer space to explore their sexual identities. Additional research from Szulc and Dhoest (2013) indicated that LGB users access SNS to gain knowledge about the coming out process. Specifically, they found that LGB users can gain knowledge about others' coming out experiences anonymously, and this later helps them come out in offline settings. Social networking sites can provide physical and emotional distance from judgment and rejection for LGB persons (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The option to remain

anonymous when using SNS means that coming out online is relatively low-risk and can provide comfort and a sense of safety that might be unavailable offline.

Additional research seems to further highlight the potential benefits of SNS use for LGB persons. For example, Craig et al. (2015) explored how sexual minority youths and young adults use SNS by examining their online behaviors and investigating the importance they place on these sites. The researchers found that the safety and sense of community afforded by SNS facilitated self-expression and without these online communities, one's sexual orientation expression might otherwise go undeveloped. The research also suggests that SNS use among LGB persons fosters inclusion and acceptance.

Despite the positive effects of social networking, some research suggests that SNS can result in poor mental health outcomes for LGB persons. Rubin and McClelland (2015) analyzed the psychological strategies used by young lesbians when developing their SNS profiles. The researchers found that the women constantly self-monitored their SNS presence, ruminated over Facebook content, felt they were constantly being analyzed. The authors found the young woman developed fears specific to SNS use such as being socially excluded or unintentional outed, and that these fears correlated with feelings of shame, depression, and anxiety.

The impact of SNS use on mental health in LGB communities might be related to one's level of comfort in sharing their sexual orientation. In a study examining the identity management of LGB persons who use Facebook, Fox and Warber (2014) discovered that an individual's level of outness directly corresponded with their self-presentation and activity on Facebook. Closeted users felt forced to hide their relationship statuses and sexual preferences and were less likely to address homophobic comments or posts. Conversely, the researchers found that a user's openness about their sexual orientation on SNS allowed for authentic self-

presentation and self-advocacy. The data suggest that witnessing heteronormativity and/or homophobic content in the early stages of coming out could result in reinforcing stigma regarding one's sexual orientation, but after coming out SNS can be used as a platform for advocacy. This knowledge suggests that LGB users experience a wide range of outcomes regarding their SNS use, and that the positive or negative effects may relate to one's personal level of outness.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals are also more likely to be victims of cyberbullying or verbal abuse in their online lives (Berlan et al., 2010). Schrok and boyd (2011) posited that for LGB persons or people who are perceived as LGB persons are at a greater risk than their heterosexual peers to be victimized on SNS. These users may experience aggressive, unwelcome comments or offensive language directed toward them, also known as "flaming" or "trolling" (Moor, 2007). Additional research has found that flaming, trolling, and cyberbullying commonly occur on SNS sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010). The data suggest that gender non-conforming persons who use SNS and are open about their gender identity may also be more likely to experience cyberbullying in these online settings.

Social Networking and Transgender Persons

As mentioned previously, very limited research exists that explores social networking among persons identifying as transgender or gender non-conforming. A recent study by Cannon et al., (2017) completed interviews with persons identifying as transgender who use SNS. The researchers found that SNS were used for two primary reasons: as a resource and as a way to learn to accept oneself. Regarding the former, the researchers found that transgender persons utilized SNS to find supportive, understanding online communities and to gather information

such as beauty tips or the legal name changing process. Regarding authenticity, the researchers discovered the acceptance and validation received in these online spaces eventually led to participants becoming more self-accepting of themselves. According to the researchers, the most important aspect of SNS use related to having a space to be seen, heard, accepted, and validated by others with a similar lived experience. Validation occurs when one relays their private experiences and these are met with "understanding, legitimacy, and acceptance" of the experience by the person with whom the information was shared (Shenk & Fruzetti, 2011, pp. 165). The experience of validation facilitates an individual's own acceptance of the experience that was shared (Linehan, 1997). Further, validation is associated with improved psychological health and the development of emotional regulation to triggering situations. Conversely, invalidating responses occur when the sharing of private experiences is trivialized which can result in the sharer feeling as though their experience is socially unacceptable, and these are associated with emotional reactivity (Shenk & Fruzetti, 2011). As such, Cannon et al.'s (2017) research findings suggest the validation received on social networking platforms may ultimately lead to a transgender user's self-acceptance of their gender identity. It may also be associated with the development healthy emotional regulation in regard to issues related to their gender identity.

Social Networking Sites and their Relationship to Gender Identity Development

Despite the rapid growth of SNS use, research examining the role of SNS in gender identity development is still limited. The few studies that have been conducted suggest that SNS can play an important role in one's overall identity development. For instance, research has hypothesized that SNS can be used as an instrument to explore and solidify one's identity (Matsuba, 2006). Matsuba claimed that university students with less developed views-of-self

were more likely to spend more time on SNS, and that this represented a way to express themselves in different manners until an identity(ies) was discovered. Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert (2009) examined SNS use in young adults and determined that SNS are often used during emerging adulthood to help one explore not only their personal identity but also their religious, political, and occupational identities. These studies demonstrate that SNS may offer a setting with which one can also explore and develop their gender identity. Nevertheless, online interactions also have the potential to perpetuate stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity that may influence the identity development of persons identifying as gender non-conforming (Bockting et al. 2006; Bem, 1981). Consequently, gender schema theory and a model of gender non-conforming identity development informed the creation of the interview guide, follow up questions, and the researchers' engagement with the data.

Gender Schema Theory

Bem's (1981) gender schema theory posits that children internalize content-specific, gendered information and outlines how these gendered beliefs are strengthened and transferred to others. Bem postulated that gendered-information—often influenced by parenting, political climates, culture, and media—is processed by children in a manner that helps them categorize it. Children then integrate this information in how they understand masculinity and femininity. These gender-related beliefs influence how one thinks and acts, and also explain how gender-related stereotypes regarding appearance or behavior are transmitted throughout society (MacNish, 2015). For example, individuals are "sex-typed," based on the gender with which they identify (e.g., sex-typed; cross-sex typed; androgynous), and this influences the way they process and integrate gendered information (Bem, 1981). If an individual has a sex-typed gender schemata then they are more likely to assimilate information that supports gendered stereotypes,

in turn leading to behavioral regulation that conforms to cultural definitions masculinity and femininity. Conversely, if they are cross-sex-typed they are more likely to integrate gendered-information that is more consistent with the opposite sex, and androgynously-typed persons integrate information from both sexes.

Transgender Identity Development

Transgender and gender non-conforming persons are often combined with LGB persons for identity development purposes, despite important differences between gender identity development and sexual identity development. A newer model of gender identity development for transgender persons was developed by Wagner, Kunkel, and Compton (2016). The researchers suggested that transgender persons experience identity gaps that must be addressed in order to positively navigate their gender identity: personal-enacted, personal-relational, and enacted-relational. The personal-enacted gap reflects one's internal view-of-self compared to their actual self-presentation when they engage with others. Individuals in this stage might participate in closeted engagement (i.e., only behaving as their identified gender in private or designated spaces). The personal-relational gap relates to the tension created when one's view-of-self contrasts with how they are perceived by others, and persons in this stage may rely heavily on being perceived as their sex assigned at birth to avoid relational conflicts. Lastly, the enacted-relational gap concerns the inconsistencies between one's public gender identity/expression and the gendered expectations of their sex assigned at birth. Individuals in this stage are often coming to terms with their gender identity and might seek to label change (e.g., change name, pronouns).

For transgender and gender non-conforming persons, gender identity development is inextricably linked to one's self-presentation and their gendered expectations, and one must

traverse some of these experiences to develop a positive gender identity (Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016). Transgender and gender non-conforming persons with strong sex-typed gender schemata and those who are in the personal-enacted or personal-relational gaps might be more susceptible to making gendered social comparisons (Steers et al, 2014). Social networking sites may intensify the amount of comparisons due to high numbers of individuals with whom one can compare and the continual dissemination of gendered, social norms visible on these platforms. As such, traditional norms of masculinity and femininity might be reinforced through SNS use, although the influence on one's gender identity development is still unclear.

Even though approximately one-third of transgender-identifying persons also identify as gender non-binary (Matsuno & Budge, 2017), there are differences in identity development and stigma experienced in each gender identity. Johnson (2016) shared transgender persons like their cisgender peers are subject to gendered norms regarding appearance, language, or mannerisms among others. Transgender persons are evaluated by social institutions on how well they perform the gendered roles of their identified gender. While there is an overlap between norms for cis and transgender persons, trans individuals are also subject to transnormative standards that are enforced specifically by this community or by gatekeeping entities. This often concerns the social, medical, and legal circumstances experienced among transgender persons, and is often perceived by the *realness* of one's gender presentation. For example, if a transgender individual decides to not undergo a gender affirming surgery, they might be judged by their transgender contemporaries as not being real enough regarding their transgender identity or real enough to receive other medical treatments related to gender (e.g., hormone therapy).

Those identifying as gender non-conforming or gender non-binary will still feel pressure to meet transnormative standards. This group rejects the binary concept of gender which often

can result in rejection from both cis and transgender persons and groups (Johnson, 2016). For example, a gender non-conforming person's desire to not undergo medically affirming treatments can result in judgement as they do not adhere to transnormative standards. Conversely, it is possible that gender non-conforming/non-binary persons may experience less pressure to adhere to societal gender norms if their public presentation and behavior subscribes to societal gender standards.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory postulates an individual instinctively evaluates their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). The theory suggests that social comparison influences a person's evaluation of their actual capabilities and/or traits, which will then will impact their behaviors, actions, and attitudes. When objective means for assessing one's opinions or abilities are unavailable, the individual must evaluate their characteristics based on how they compare to others. Such comparisons are often selectively chosen to reflect perceived likeness—that is, individuals are more likely to compare themselves to similar peers rather than strangers when evaluating their traits or abilities. According to Festinger (1954), individuals who perceive something as valuable in a particular person or group will experience greater pressure to change in order to incorporate the valued characteristic. In the absence of social evaluations, individuals will perceive their abilities, traits, and/or opinions as unstable. Thus, one will continually seek to compare to others in order to mitigate the discomfort created by an unstable view of self.

Social Comparison Theory and SNS Use

In order to make a "correct" self-evaluation, Lin and Kulik (2002) suggested that an individual will compare more often to others with whom they are more similar. This occurs in

two forms of comparison: upward and downward (Festinger, 1954). Upward comparison refers to when an object is compared something better than itself, while downward comparison involves comparing to something considered to be worse. Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) found that when engaging in social comparison on virtual, online profiles, participants who viewed images of attractive individuals were more likely to endorse poor body image following exposure to the photos. This research suggests that upward comparisons facilitate the belief that the desired traits are realistic and that one should change to adhere to these culturally endorsed standards.

Steers et al. (2014) examined if spending more time on Facebook led users to compare themselves to others more often. The researchers found that those who spent more time on Facebook and/or viewed Facebook content more frequently (e.g., briefly used an SNS on their phones) were exposed to more opportunities to engage in spontaneous, upward social comparisons. Upward comparisons occurred most frequently when viewing friends', peers', or even strangers' online profiles. The increased frequency of upward social comparisons was also associated with increased rates of depressive symptoms. Other research indicates that upward social comparisons made when viewing photos and/or content on SNS profiles are associated with a drive for thinness and increased bulimic attitudes (Gilbert & Meyer, 2003). Continual access and exposure to others' online profiles creates an atmosphere where individuals can automatically engage in social comparisons, and it appears that this corresponds with a higher frequency of SNS use.

Festinger (1954) noted that when a similar individual or group is not available for comparison, individuals often resort to comparing with anyone, regardless of perceived likeness. The internet—particularly SNS—expands the pool of people with which one can compare even

if they are dissimilar from the user. For gender non-conforming individuals, exposure to a greater number of people might confirm gendered beliefs of masculinity and femininity (Bockting et al., 2006), and gender schema theory might help explain why this occurs (Bem, 1981). Gender non-conforming persons may process gendered information in a manner that confirms stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, and this may contribute to behaviors or attitudes that adhere to cultural definitions of gender. Consequently, SNS use can expose users to a greater number of people with whom comparisons can be made, and this can potentially reinforce gendered, cultural norms through upward social comparisons.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology that was utilized in this study. It consists of a description of the research design, use of human subjects, procedures of recruitment, feasibility considerations, data analysis plan, and a plan for the dissemination of the study's results. Due to the active role the researcher has in grounded theory studies, first person voice is utilized throughout the methodology, results, and findings chapters. This was suggested by Zhou and Hall (2018) who state that this style of writing offers a "subjective experience" that "makes the author's perspective and constructive role in creating meaning in a study more visible" (p. 345) and this best represents the role of the researcher in a grounded theory study.

Research Design

This study incorporated a grounded theory research design for data collection, coding, and analysis. The purpose of a grounded theory research design is to examine topics with substantial gaps in the literature with the aim of discovering a theory rooted in data by using comparative analyses (Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019); as such, a grounded theory approach was selected in order to determine a substantive theory regarding SNS use and mental health in gender non-confirming persons (Lingard et al., 2008). Corbin and Strauss' (1990) constructivist grounded theory approach was selected rather than a grounded theory objectivist approach as the former considers the substantive theory as the priority and recognizes the active role of the researcher in interpreting and creating meaning out of the data (Charmaz, 2001).

This study utilized a constant comparative approach which allows for data collection, coding, and analysis to occur simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Therefore, each stage of the study evolved as a direct result of the emerging data (Kolb, 2012). The incorporation of a

constant comparative approach in an iterative study design allows for both emerging and existing data to be included in the process of developing concepts and categories. The coding team and I engaged with the textual data after each interview was transcribed. Following, we identified concepts that were representative of the information discovered through reading and interacting with the data. The concepts were then analyzed, and categories were determined that guided a qualitative understanding of the central phenomenon and the development of the theoretical model. This approach was iterative and continually compared the emerging data to previously identified concepts in order to recognize similarities and differences in the concepts, and these findings were recorded in order to ensure the study's rigor.

The corpus of data for this study included a demographic questionnaire, an interview, researcher observations, and researcher memos. Participants were asked to complete a general form to gather demographic information (Appendix A). The interviews incorporated the use of an interview guide, which helped to provide structure and maintain validity (Appendix B). My thoughts, ideas, or feelings related to the emerging data were recorded in the form of memos that later influenced additional stages of data collection, coding, and analysis. Each of the abovementioned processes will be described in greater detail throughout the Methodology section.

Constant Comparative Method

A constant comparative method is defined as breaking data down into smaller concepts which then allows one to code and categorize the information (Mathison, 2005). A constant comparative approach consists of three steps: 1. Comparison of incidents to other incidents to identify consistency and to generate concepts; 2. Comparison of identified concepts to other incidents to elaborate, verify, and saturate the data; and 3. Comparison of concepts that will

eventually result in the development of a theory (Glaser, 2007). A constant comparative approach also allowed me to form categories, develop boundaries for the categories, assign concepts to categories, and find contradictory evidence for concepts and categories, and these later became the basis for the development of a theoretical model regarding SNS use and mental health in the gender non-conforming population (Boeije, 2002).

Researcher Reflexivity

The incorporation of researcher reflections and observations represented another source of data that was collected and analyzed during the study (Cresswell, 2007). Grounded theory research designs require an examination of researcher bias, so researcher reflexivity is incorporated throughout the study to limit assumptions (Kolb, 2012). Researcher reflexivity reflects on and examines the data in the form of documented and linear ideas, thoughts, and feelings (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). My reflections on the data as I encountered them were recorded and were considered throughout the iterative data review.

Bracketing was incorporated to facilitate researcher reflexivity. Bracketing is described as "the task of sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher's experience of the phenomenon" (Drew, 2004, p. 215). This allowed for me to attend to the data collection, coding, and analysis while acknowledging my own biases that potentially influenced data interpretation (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Grounded theory research designs require documentation of bracketing, so that I can later illustrate if and how my interpretations might have been impacted by my biases. For example, I identify as a cisgender, straight, White, female and my personal experiences could impact my interpretation of the data. Bracketing noted these occurrences in order to limit the possible impact of my biases on the results. These were documented in the Nvivo software used to organize this study's data. Aspects of my identity that may have

influenced my interpretation of the data are further discussed in the Research Considerations and Biases section in this chapter.

Memoing

Memoing represents a critical aspect of grounded theory research designs. Memoing—making textual or conceptual notes about data and concepts—represented one form of my researcher reflections (Glaser, 2007). Memoing allowed me to interact with the data by fostering the development of the research questions and study design, offering clarity in the development of concepts and categories, and allowing for the exploration and acknowledgment of my assumptions and subjectivity (Birks et al., 2008). Memoing can take any documented form and allowed me to keep track of my conscious and subconscious thoughts and feelings about conceptual ideas observed to be emerging in the data (Glaser, 2013). This procedure represents a fundamental step in the development of an emerging theory and is an essential piece of the rigorous documentation required when engaging with the data in a grounded theory research design.

Memoing reflected my "internal dialogue with the data at a point in time" (McCann & Clark, 2003, p. 15) and allowed me to record my thoughts about the emerging categories and concepts while interviewing and observing participants, reviewing the literature and data, and during the writing process. Memo writing can take two forms: textual (theoretical and methodological) memos and conceptual (integrative) memos. Textual memos are represented by my thoughts, feelings, and ideas as I read through the corpus of data (Groenewald, 2008). They consisted of theoretical memoing, which attempts to give meaning to the data, and methodological memoing, which contained reminders and criticisms about the data as it evolved. Conceptual (integrative) memos were represented by my theories about the relationships

between concepts, categories, and themes. Whenever possible, my memos were recorded using Nvivo software however there were a few instances when Nvivo was not accessible (e.g., during the interviews). If this occurred, memos were manually recorded on paper and later added to the Nvivo software.

Human Subjects

Human subjects were required in order to conduct this study. I completed the required materials for the University of San Francisco's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the study was approved (Appendix C). The organizations that were utilized for recruitment purposes did not require separate IRB support; as such this researcher only applied to the University of San Francisco's IRB. The University of San Francisco provided a pre-filled informed consent form that was provided, discussed, and signed by each participant before the interview began (Appendix D). Following completion of the interview, all participants received a $35 Amazon gift card.

Procedures of Recruitment

Corbin and Strauss (1998) define sampling in grounded theory as "where to go to obtain the data" (p. 201). Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbon (2015) describe that in qualitative research designs, sampling methods are meant to gather information that will demonstrate the "complexity, depth, variation, and context," (p. 1782) of the question being examined. I used a purposeful sampling method to select participants for the study, as it allowed for participants to be selected due to their knowledge of the central issue as it relates to their membership in a specific group or culture (Patton, 2015). I utilized criterion sampling (a subset of purposeful sampling) which is defined as selecting participants that meet predetermined criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). This enabled me to select participants who met the specifications needed to provide

information-rich data regarding SNS use in gender non-conforming persons (e.g., average daily SNS use is 30 minutes or more). In a grounded theory research design, each stage of data collection, coding, and analysis influences the following stages until saturation – when no new concepts or categories are identified – is reached (Lingard et al., 2008). This occurred when I was no longer gathering information that had not already been documented (Kolb, 2012); as such, ongoing purposeful sampling and data collection continued until saturation occurred.

Setting

This study recruited participants from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) friendly community settings in the San Francisco Bay Area and through emails and announcements within professional and LGBT-friendly networks. Fliers about the study were also posted in LGBT friendly agencies by this researcher. A Google phone number and a Gmail account were set up in order for interested parties to contact me to determine eligibility.

The Participants

A total of 13 people expressed interest in participating in the study. Of those thirteen, five were not included in the final study due to inability to communicate, difficulty scheduling, or they did not meet all eligibility criteria. I conducted interviews with a total of eight individuals. The names of all interview participants have been changed to ensure anonymity. Of the individuals who participated in the study, two identified as transgender females, one identified as a transgender male, three identified as gender non-conforming/binary, and two identified as gender fluid. Transgender and gender non-conforming/non-binary/fluid persons are different in that the former often (but not always) accepts the gender binary and attempts to adhere to it with regard to their identified gender and the latter does not conform to gendered stereotypes at all (Vijlbrief, Saharso, & Ghorashi, 2020). For this study, participants who did not conform to the

exclusive, biological gender binary were included due to the similarities in experiencing stigma, institutional discrimination, and marginalization (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Age ranges varied slightly although most participants were in their twenties. Five were age 20 to 25, two were 26 to 30, and one was 40 to 45. All participants spoke English fluently. In regard to sexual orientation, one identified as a lesbian, three identified as pansexual, and four identified as bisexual. One individual indicated they were ethnically Hispanic, two stated they were Latinx, and five were White/European. All participants had graduated from high school and four had received bachelor's degrees or higher; the remaining four had attended college for a few years or were still in the process of working on their bachelor's degrees. Of the eight participants, seven indicated that they had been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives. This number is somewhat higher than the national average for the gender non-conforming population, as current research suggests that up to 50% to 67% of gender non-conforming persons have been diagnosed with a mood disorder (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, n.d.). All stated that they had accessed mental health services at some point in their lives. A generalized question about the approximate amount time spent on SNS daily was asked; two spent 30 to 45 minutes, three spent 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, two spent 1.5 to 2.25 hours, and one spent 2.25+ hours per day on SNS. Most participants specified that these numbers reflected an average daily amount spent, but that the numbers might be lower or higher depending on specific circumstances. The demographic characteristics of the participants can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	# of Participants
Gender Identity	
Transgender Female	2
Transgender Male	1
Gender non-conforming/non-binary	3
Gender fluid	2
Age	
20 – 25	5
26 – 30	2
40 – 45	1
Sexual Orientation	
Lesbian	1
Pansexual	3
Bisexual	5
Race	
White/European	5
Hispanic	1
Latino/a/x	2
Educational Background	
Some college (no degree obtained)	4
Bachelor's degree	4
Religion	
None	4
Catholic	1
Catholic (non-practicing)	1
Unitarian	1
Buddist	1
Average Daily Time Spent on SNS	
30 – 45 minutes	2
45 mins – 1.5 hours	3
1.5 – 2.25 hours	2
2.25+ hours	1
Diagnosed with a Mental Health Disorder	
Yes	7
No	1

Interview Process

All the interviews were conducted in person and were video/audio recorded to ensure the content was audible and clear during the transcription process. Video recorded interviews were used to revisit the meetings to observe any non-verbal information provided by participants (e.g., body language; gestures). Interviews lasted approximately 24 to 47 minutes, with the majority lasting 30-35 minutes.

When scheduling the interviews, I inquired if the participants had preferences regarding where the interview should take place, stipulating that the location could be in a public area. If they did not, I confirmed that they would be willing to complete the interview in a reserved room on the University of San Francisco (USF) campus. In my opinion, this step was particularly important as the University of San Francisco identifies as a Jesuit institution, a religion that has historically not been accepting toward individuals who are gender non-conforming. Most did not indicate concerns with the interviews occurring on the Jesuit campus. Some participants requested that the interviews occur closer to their homes due to transportation, monetary, and/or convenience issues. If this was the case, we determined a location that was easy, comfortable, and convenient for them. The interviews took place in the following locations: USF in reserved rooms, local cafés, and a local library.

Guided by Strauss and Corbin (2008), I took a collaborative and flexible approach to the interview. I used a standard set of questions that I asked each participant and depending on their responses, my follow-up questions differed to allow for a deeper exploration of their experiences. It was my hope that this strategy would allow for the interviews to be collaborative which is a key factor in grounded theory analysis (Cresswell, 2007).

Researcher Considerations and Biases

My interest in the mental health of gender non-conforming persons stemmed from my clinical experiences with this population. Early in my doctoral schooling, I was placed at a clinical site that primarily served the LGBT community. Largely, the individuals that I provided therapeutic services to identified as transgender or gender non-conforming. Throughout my year there, I developed an understanding of the stigma and discrimination experienced by this population based on the personal experiences shared with me by my clients. This understanding felt deeper and more personal relative to what I had learned about gender non-conforming individuals in my doctoral courses. It resulted in my desire to seek out additional clinical experiences and increase my knowledge of gender non-conforming persons. As such, I was drawn toward making my dissertation topic one that would expand the clinical knowledge and awareness of this often-marginalized group.

Aspects of my identity (i.e., cisgender, female, White, straight) represented a possible barrier to participant recruitment, data collection, and/or data interpretation. My identity as cisgender had the potential to influence how safe or comfortable participants felt when sharing their experiences. It also may have impacted what information participants decided to share and what experiences they felt necessary to keep private. Further, my cisgender identity could have potentially impacted how the gender-related data was interpreted. My experience of gender is vastly different than the experiences of the participants and I noticed on multiple occasions that I initially ascribed how I experience gender on SNS to their experiences. As a female, my feminist views on equality and oppression influence how I view the world and had the potential to affect how I engaged with the data. The feminist movement has a history of leaving out groups that are not White; as such it is possible that the feminist lens I use to make sense of society overlooked the unique experiences shared by the participants. My views were also not necessarily shared by

the participants and could have influenced participant responses when I explained the different concepts with a feminist outlook (e.g., gendered social comparisons). My White racial identity meant that I had to continually reflect on my interactions with participants of color to reduce the possible impact of my racial biases on the data interpretation. It required that I pay close attention as I gave meaning to the data so as not to favor the experience of the White participants with whom I might have a more similar lived experience. In regard to my sexual orientation, I identify as straight. The fact that I hold multiple privileged identities, specifically that I am cisgender and straight, may have influenced participants' thoughts of me and my objectivity. Sexual orientation among gender non-conforming persons can be complicated and is often misunderstood by cisgender persons, and that may have impacted what participants felt they could safely share with me. If topics regarding sexual orientation came up during the interviews, participants may have left this out due to fears I would not understand. Lastly, it is important to note that gender non-conforming persons experience substantial discrimination in healthcare settings that often result in avoidance of medical care (Mizock & Lundquist, 2016). Given that I had to explain my relationship to healthcare as it related to the purpose of the study (i.e., to complete my degree in clinical psychology to later practice therapy), it is possible that my association to the medical profession impacted data collection. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I used bracketing and memoing to keep track of when my identities may have influenced the data interpretation in order to limit the impact of my biases on the study's results. Some areas that required reflexivity will be further described throughout the results chapter and limitations sections of this paper.

Data Analysis Plan

Due to the paucity of information that explores SNS use and mental health outcomes in the gender non-conforming population, a theory or theories about it have yet to be developed. This study sought to explore the use of social networking sites and mental health among the gender non-conforming population. My hope was that exploring SNS use in general and then examining participants' experiences of mental health while using SNS would eventually lead to a theory about why gender non-conforming individuals use SNS and the mental health outcomes that may develop because of that use. I incorporated four standard questions in each interview that are listed below. The sub-questions can be viewed in Appendix B.

1. What are gender non-conforming individual's experiences using SNS?
2. What are their experiences of mental health and SNS use?
3. What are their experiences of social comparisons while using SNS?
4. What are their experiences of gendered social comparisons on SNS?

The first question was meant to explore common situations that gender non-conforming individuals experience while using SNS. Depending on the participants' responses, follow-up questions were asked in order to gain more information on their specific experiences and to share both positive and negative experiences (if applicable). While this question was initially intended to gain insight into general experiences on SNS, most participants answered this question with a response that also outlined the reasons why they use SNS.

The second question was intended to examine if participants had experienced overlap between their mental health and SNS use. A brief description of mental health was provided to orient each participant on how I defined mental health for the purpose of this study. Oxford University Press (2019) defined mental health as "a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional wellbeing" ("Mental Health," para. 1), and I informed participants

of this during the interview. Following this, questions were asked regarding participants' emotional reactions during and after SNS use (e.g., tell me how you feel after using SNS for an extended period of time?). The current contentious political atmosphere and how this was expressed on SNS was brought up unprompted in the first three interviews. As a result, I began to inquire about if participants experienced political interactions/observations when using SNS and if so, how this made them think and feel.

The third question sought to explore instances when participants compared themselves to other users on SNS platforms. I briefly described social comparisons before asking this question and then followed-up with questions regarding the comparisons they made, if they viewed these comparisons as positive or negative, and their thoughts and feelings if/when they observe that they are comparing themselves to others.

Lastly, the fourth question was intended to identify gendered social comparisons that were experienced while using SNS. Gendered social comparisons occur when one compares oneself to members of a specific sex in a manner that is consistent with current social stereotypes and norms (Guimond & Chatard, 2014). Follow-up questions about the frequency of encountering gendered comparisons and if participants felt pressure to conform to gendered societal standards as a result of their SNS use were asked. This question generated responses about suggestions for SNS platforms that could make these forums more inclusive to the gender non-conforming population which I had not expected. Sub-questions regarding positive and negative gendered comparisons and experiences of pressure to adhere to gendered norms were asked as follow-up questions to gather more detail on how these experiences manifested in the participants.

Grounded Theory Coding

The coding process utilized in this grounded theory study are described in detail in the subsequent sections. These demonstrate the steps taken during each stage of coding. A figure is included toward the end of this chapter (page 41) to provide an example that illustrates the coding process. Nvivo, a software design used for qualitative and mixed-methods studies, was used to organize, examine, and code the data.

Open Coding

Open coding, or "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61) represented the first step of analysis. During this phase, I asked questions such as, "What is the primary concern of the participant?" "What is occurring in the data?" and "What does the data indicate this is a study of?" (Glaser, 2007) in order to break up the data into incidents and concepts.

Initial Open Coding

Initial coding occurred throughout the entirety of the interview process for all interviewees. Constant comparative analysis began at the onset of the first interview that occurred with Amanda. At that specific point, the comparisons that occurred were limited to data provided by Amanda. Upon completing the second interview with Jordan, the constant comparative analysis began in full. I transcribed each interview and I intimately familiarized myself with the data through this process. I also watched each recorded interview twice to identify any non-verbal observations that I may have missed during the initial interview and while engaging with the transcribed data.

As previously mentioned, the current political atmosphere was discussed in the first three interviews however I had not incorporated into the interview questions. I attempted to be sensitive to this fact and began to ask follow-up questions regarding politics and SNS. If politics

did not come up organically in the conversation, I asked a generalized question about this topic (i.e., what are their experiences of politics regarding gender identity on SNS?).

Subsequent Open Coding

Following transcription, I analyzed each interview to break down the data into smaller bits of information, or incidents or concepts, by "examining, comparting, conceptualizing, and categorizing" the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Open coding required that the data be analyzed line by line to identify and describe the material that was provided by each participant (Borgatti, n.d.). I hired an undergraduate student at Case Western Reserve University (where I had been completing my doctoral internship) to assist with the open coding stage. The university offered Nvivo software for free to all staff and students so no additional cost was accrued. The undergraduate student took a Nvivo general training class to learn how to use the software for coding purposes. Following this, I personally trained the student on how to code line by line using the software. She was also provided with articles on the grounded theory coding process that she reviewed and we discussed before coding began. We each coded the interviews separately and met up following our initial coding to compare and contrast our concepts and categories in order to promote objectivity and limit the influence of personal biases. The open coding stage continued until the data was saturated.

Axial Coding

Axial coding – the process of identifying the main category and corresponding sub-categories – represented the next step in the data analysis process (Pandit, 1996). Breaking down the data into small bits allowed me to identify and organize categories that corresponded with the concepts (Creswell, 2007). Once the concepts and categories were labeled, the data was revisited allowing me to identify the categories that would help to determine, understand, and explain the

central phenomenon. The central phenomenon in a grounded theory research design is represented by the core category "around which all the other categories are integrated" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, pp. 116). My team used bracketing to reduce bias when identifying the central phenomenon, and memos were created to develop theories about the relationships between concepts, categories, and themes (Groenewald, 2008). Once the central phenomenon was identified, we reanalyzed the data and examined the "conditions, contexts, action/interaction, strategies, and consequences" (Vollsteadt & Rezat, 2019, pp.88) that corresponded with the central phenomenon.

Coding Paradigm

In grounded theory studies, the formation of a coding paradigm also occurs during the axial coding stage. A coding paradigm describes the relationship between the categories by analyzing the "causal and intervening conditions, contexts, action/interactions, strategies and consequences" (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p. 88) found within the data. The coding paradigm is represented by a visual diagram that presents this information using boxes and arrows to show the relationships between the data. In this study, a coding paradigm that presented a theory about SNS use and mental health in gender non-conforming persons was developed and is illustrated and described in the Results chapter.

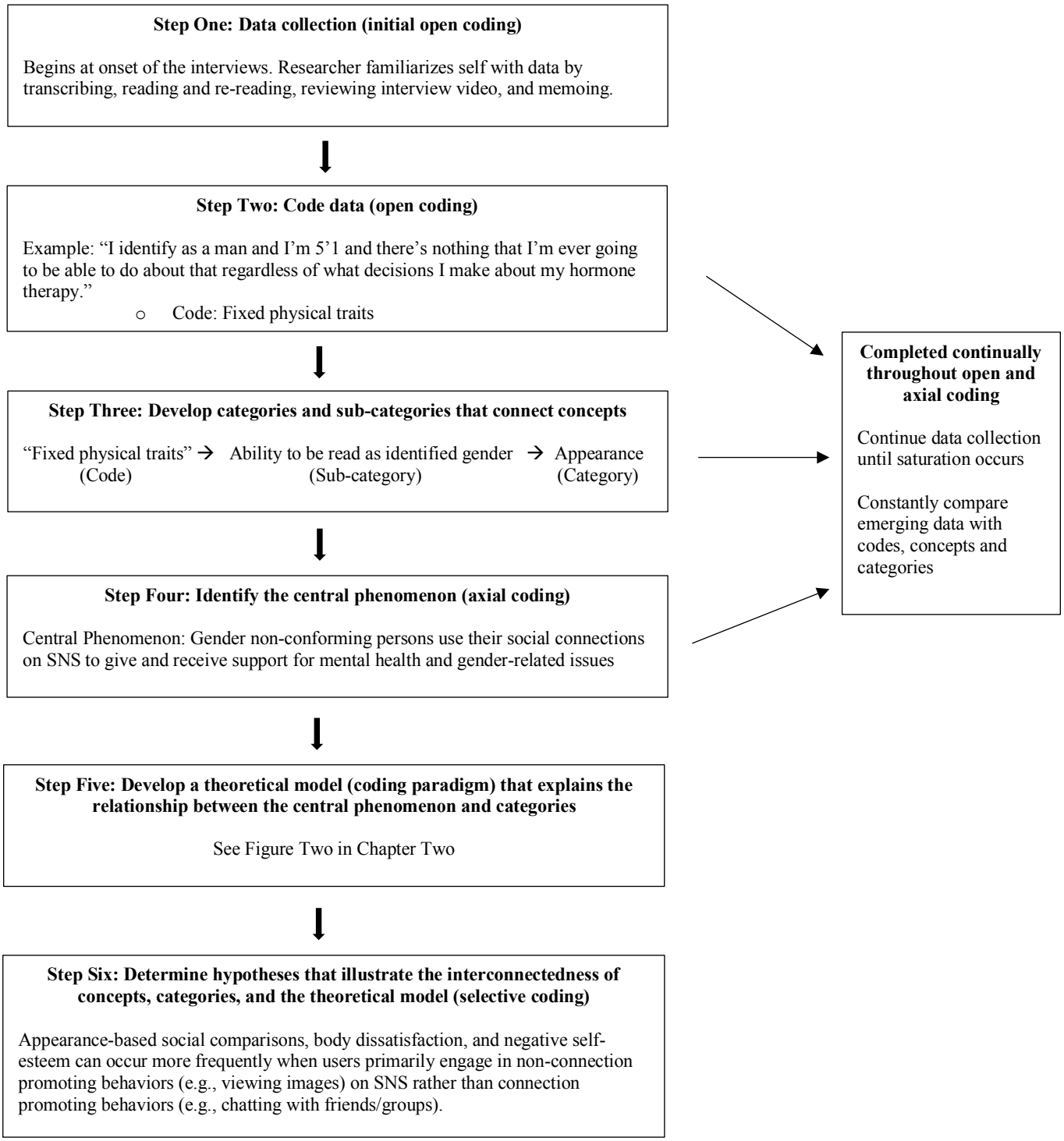
Selective Coding

The final step in a grounded theory research design is selective coding. Selective coding "integrates the different categories that have been developed, elaborated, and mutually related during axial coding into one cohesive theory" (Vollsteadt & Rezat, 2019, pp. 87). Selective coding illustrates the interconnectedness between the categories and integrates those categories into a central theory directly connected to the core category (Health & Cowley, 2004). Selective

coding required that the categories be detailed and fully developed in order to properly define a substantive theory. The results of this study present a theoretical model of SNS use and mental health in gender non-conforming persons developed by directly exploring the experiences of gender non-conforming persons who use social networking sites. An example of the coding process from the initial open coding stage to the selective coding stage is illustrated in Figure I.

Figure I

Diagram of Coding Steps Example



Dissemination Plan

The results will be disseminated at conferences in the form of poster and paper presentations. The implications identified can then be incorporated into others' clinical work, and possibly could influence further studies regarding this topic. To date, portions of this study have already been presented at the National Multicultural Conference and Summit. I will distribute the outcomes in one to three publications outlining the relevant findings with the hope it will inform future research and clinical best practices. Thirdly, I will make my final project available to participants so each will have the opportunity to view the results and ask related questions. Lastly, I will provide the clinicians and the professional organizations involved in the recruitment process with copies of the final study in order to make the findings available to gender non-conforming groups and advocates and to possibly inform treatment and services.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The following chapter seeks to identify and explain the primary categories, the central phenomenon, and the coding paradigm that resulted from different coding stages. The hypotheses regarding the consequences of the central phenomenon are also discussed. When participants' quotes were used to demonstrate the different categories and concepts, extraneous terms such as "um" and repetitive words (ex: "the the") were removed when these did not have an impact on the meaning of the quotation. The purpose of the removal was for clarity and understandability. The grammar used by participants was not changed.

The Development of Concepts and Categories

During the open coding stage, concepts and categories were identified. A concept in grounded theory methodology is described as, "a labeled section of data that the researcher identifies as significant to some facts that the data represent" (Khandkar, n.d., para. 6). A concept becomes relevant when it repeatedly shows up in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and these are discarded if they are not prominent. Categories represent similar concepts that "appear to resemble the same phenomena" (Stauss & Corbin, 1990 p. 7) and are grouped and re-labeled together based on common properties (Khankar, n.d.). If needed, sub-categories can also be developed to better describe the range of the category. Toward the end of the open coding stage, I developed seven initial categories. These categories are as follows:

- Specifics regarding Social Networking Use,
- Reasons for SNS Use,
- Negative Experiences,
- Politics,
- Social Acceptance,
- Emotional Reactions Regarding SNS Use, and

- Mental Health.

Each category along with its components will be outlined and described in the following pages.

Specifics Regarding Social Networking Use

As my study sought to explore mental health and SNS use, there was an obvious discussion of the different types of social networking sites that were accessed by participants. Participants also elaborated on the frequency of their SNS use. The latter was asked in the demographic questionnaire in order for me to determine a baseline level of use for eligibility purposes; that said, participants provided more information regarding the time they spent using SNS during the interview. While this category does not provide evidence for a substantive theory, it is important to describe where and how often participants access SNS in order to provide a more detailed depiction of their use (e.g., platforms most frequently used; individual patterns of daily use).

Participants described using a variety of different social networking platforms. Each stated that they had a Facebook and Instagram profile that they accessed on a daily basis. All but one participant informed me that they had an active Snapchat account. Two-thirds of the group indicated that they had a Twitter account and three participants shared that they had Tumblr profiles. Dallas stated that they use a platform called Discord, which they described as, “an online chat site that is used by people who are playing online video games” where conversations with other players can be had before, during, or after game-play. Amanda and Emerson indicated that they consider chat rooms to be social networking platforms. Lastly, Jordan informed me that she feels that blogs should also be considered SNS, although she specified that it depends on the blog. I feel that it is important to note that I did not directly ask about what specific sites participants accessed, rather this information came up organically during the interview. Once mentioned, I asked follow-up questions to gather more data about specific sites if necessary.

Throughout the course of the interviews, each participant elaborated on the frequency of their use. To quote Jordan, "Everyone uses a lot of social media." Every participant had a social networking account that had been active for at least 8 years. As indicated above, I included a question on the demographic questionnaire about how much time each participant spent per day on SNS. This was intended for eligibility purposes, as no one who spent less than 30 minutes per day on average was included. However, I felt it necessary to gather a more detailed picture of participants' daily use when interviewing them. For example, Henry described how the time spent on SNS differs for him:

> There will be some days where I'm chatting or talking to somebody for hours and hours and hours. There's probably no days where I'm never chatting with anybody at all, and some days when my interactions are cursory or brief, and then other days when it's overwhelmingly a lot.

For Henry, SNS was such an important piece of his daily social interactions that he could not recall a day where he did not access the sites for social purposes since he began using them. Amanda, however, recounted that her use had turned into a negative thing for her during a specific time in her life. She stated that "there have been points in my life where I've spent too much time on it [SNS]," further sharing that it took her some time to realize that, "in moderation it's a great thing, but there's a line where it stops becoming moderate and sort of takes over your life." All participants did note that they realized that too much time spent on SNS might have a negative impact on their wellbeing; that said, most did not indicate that they had set personal limits for their daily SNS use.

Reasons for SNS Use

My research questions centered around the social networking experiences that gender non-conforming individuals encounter; consequently, conversations regarding an individual's reasons for maintaining a SNS profile(s) seemed to naturally develop during the interview. The

initial codes suggested three subcategories that describe why and how gender non-conforming individuals spend their time on social networking platforms. These reasons are: social interaction, gender identity education, and gender identity expression.

Social Interaction

All participants in this study indicated that social interaction represented a substantial reason why they spent time on social networking platforms. The data seemed to indicate that SNS were accessed largely for social reasons, as its name would suggest. Sawyer, a gender non-binary participant, outlined their social use as follows:

> When I think of using them [SNS] it's more like I'm in conversation with somebody and less of sitting there constructing a post. That is a component of it. You know you take pictures of yourself or record videos or whatever it is. But the lion's share of the time that I spend on social networking sites is communicating with people.

Other participants described a similar phenomenon. All individuals would use their accounts to browse profiles, pictures, and videos of other users, however the passive act of browsing was not meaningful enough to represent a reason why they use SNS. Rather, SNS provided a space to fulfill their social needs through active communication with others.

Relationship maintenance represented another aspect of social interaction that was facilitated by SNS to some extent. This subset differed in the sense that platforms were accessed as a way to maintain relationships that were already formed offline. While all participants formed and then maintained relationships on specifically on SNS, the data clearly indicated that social networking platforms were also accessed in order to maintain close relationships that had been formed elsewhere. For example, Henry indicated that, "the primary method of communication," with his long-distance girlfriend was through social networking platforms, specifically video sharing. The participants identified romantic partners, family members, and

friends that did not reside in the same geographic location as those with whom SNS was used to maintain relationships.

Social interaction for general communication, relationship building, and relationship maintenance was expressed by each participant. However, it is important to note that the data did not indicate that gender non-conforming individuals access SNS specifically to connect with other gender non-conforming individuals. Emerson stated:

> I don't seek them [gender non-conforming individuals] out necessarily. But there are so many people in that community and I think that they often gravitate to or drawn towards other gender non-conforming individuals. It's sort of inescapable and I certainly don't steer away from it. I'm much more likely to connect with somebody who is a member of my community if I'm using social media than if I'm not.

This describes the experience of many of the participants. Initially, participants social use of SNS was not related to their gender identity; that said, relationships organically formed online with others who identified as gender non-conforming simply by being present and open on social networking platforms.

Gender Identity Education

The data was littered with instances where participants utilized SNS to educate themselves regarding gender identity related issues. This ranged from gaining a general understanding of their gender identity to gaining knowledge on transitioning from other SNS users who were at different stages of the transition process. Jordan stated that SNS use on Tumblr in their formative high school years "showed me that I didn't have to be a girl just because I was born one," and that the site was "a gateway into learning more about my gender identity." Jordan's experience was much less related to her interactions with other gender non-conforming individuals and more connected to the pictures, posts, and videos posted on profiles

they had browsed. This initial exposure was a catalyst to helping them understand that their gender identity could reflect something other than the societal binary system.

Some participants shared that SNS facilitated more than just an introduction to a non-binary gender structure. For instance, Henry explained that he will use SNS to explore the transition experiences of others in order to help inform his own future decisions. He shared that:

> It's [transitioning] a process that can be handled a lot of different ways and there's no playbook on it. You're always second guessing your decisions. I have not had gender reassignment surgery, but I have had hormone therapy and that's a choice that I've made and I've been able to view others during their transitions all across the board.

Similar to Jordan's story, Henry's educational experience was based more on the posts and stories shared by other gender non-conforming individuals in different stages of gender transitioning. Both Jordan and Henry's observations assisted them in making an informed choice about further developing their personal gender identity. For the participants in this study, gender identity education seemed to be geared toward more passive engagement with material – that is, information gathering from content posted by others – rather than active interactions with other SNS users.

Free Expression of Gender Identity

Social networking sites seem to allow one to express their gender identity freely with layers of protection. The ability to remain anonymous, or partially anonymous, on SNS is one such layer of protection. Participants indicated that in the early stages of transitioning, SNS afforded them a way to express their gender identity in a manner that was not otherwise available in real life (or "IRL" according to participants). This expression could come without any IRL consequences, as participants could register with different aliases and thus not out themselves. One participant, Amanda, had not yet come out to her family and friends about her gender identity, and used SNS primarily to "present in any way I like." She further elaborated that SNS

was a place where she could go to safely express her gender in a way where she would not be judged or harassed while she determined how she wanted to express herself IRL. Amanda also indicated that the real-life consequences of expressing her gender identity online were limited or non-existent.

Privacy settings and the ability to block users were also identified as a catalyst for gender exploration and expression. Some participants, like Bridget who is out to most but not all of their family, stated that they will block family members that might disapprove of their gender identity because it allows them to feel "more open," "happier," and "freer" while using SNS. This layer of protection (both the ability to remain anonymous to their chosen extent and to select the individuals who are allowed to view their profiles) afforded participants the ability to express their gender identity in whatever manner they chose which seemed to be particularly important in the beginning stages of defining their gender identity.

Negative Experiences

I asked all participants to recall their differing experiences regarding SNS use. Participants shared that they witnessed their gender non-conforming contemporaries being harassed, abused, or bullied on social networking platforms which I grouped into a category labeled Negative Experiences. Participants shared the negative impact that these experiences had on their wellbeing and described their methods for limiting the negative effect these encounters may have on their health.

At some point during all of the interviews, each participant described having been exposed to harassment or verbal abuse while using social networking platforms. These encounters were quite diverse, but all had one thing in common: each instance of harassment, abuse, or cyberbullying seemed to cause some extent of emotional distress for the participants

regardless of if they were the direct victim or an observer. “Really rude,” “hateful,” and, “horrible,” were used by Amanda, Dallas, and Jordan respectively to describe some of the harassment they encountered directed toward gender non-conforming persons while actively using SNS.

A concept discussed at length in the interviews was the ease at which SNS exposed users to discriminatory language and behavior. This was most often in the form of witnessing harassment or cyberbullying directed toward their gender non-conforming contemporaries. Lee, who identifies as gender non-binary and works in the fashion industry, talked frequently throughout their interview about witnessing verbal abuse directed toward their gender non-conforming colleagues. They described that much of their SNS use centers on displaying their designs on image-oriented platforms such as Instagram and that designers will often feature themselves wearing their creations in posted photos. Lee elaborated on how this can predispose their peers to being the direct victims of cyberbullying:

> I’ve certainly witnessed numerous instances of abuse usually towards [gender non-conforming] people who feature themselves in their professional photos. I suspect that one of the reasons that I’ve avoided abuse professionally is because I personally am never included in posts with my designs. Those [gender non-conforming] individuals who do [feature themselves in their designs] receive more persecution.

While Lee was able to avoid personal attacks directed toward them, the verbal abuse they observed on SNS was acrimonious enough they described it as “persecution.” Participants were able to identify specific social networking platforms where they might witness a higher frequency of verbal abuse, harassment, or cyberbullying. For example, Dallas pointed out the platforms that are more “news related, like Twitter” are more likely to have “hateful language come out about our community.” Interviewees went on to outline that they will often censor their SNS use to avoid possible exposure to negative comments that could have a negative impact on

their wellbeing. The censorship of their SNS activity was discussed in Sawyer, Jordan, Amanda, Dallas, and Emerson's interviews; the extent to which each individual censored their use differed, but each admitted that they have, at some point, monitored the profiles and pages on the SNS they browse to stave off a possible negative experience brought on by witnessing harassment, verbal abuse, or cyberbullying. It is important to note that while participants expressed witnessing cyberbullying and harassment directed toward their gender non-conforming peers, they did not indicate they had personally been victims.

Politics

In grounded theory, a constant comparative method is used to identify events, objects, incidents, and/or activities that relate to the topic of interest (Cresswell, 2007) and then compare them to other concepts to establish saturated categories. Consequently, initial data collection and analysis should inform data collection that subsequently occurs (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The politics category was a particularly obvious example of how my study was impacting by the incorporation of a constant comparative method. During the first interview with Amanda, she discussed how SNS seems to propagate the politically contentious atmosphere in America as it relates to gender-identity in the current leadership. She relayed every time she accesses SNS, "there's always something new about Trump, it's like the new horrible thing that he's done today" and that this wears on her so much so that she will often, "try not to look at it." My initial questions were not directly politically related, however because political, gender-related posts/conversations on SNS did seem as though it could be connected to the scope my study, I wrote a memo regarding gender-related, political interactions on SNS. During the second interview, Jordan brought up gender identity and politics once again without any prompting from

me. Following the second instance, I felt it important to address this topic in the subsequent interviews.

All participants noted that to some extent, viewing politically-oriented posts did impact them in some way. For example, Emerson stated that "if there's a bad day in the government and everything [on SNS] is about it, it does contribute to my mental illness and the wellbeing of the day." This experience was reiterated by other participants, although the extent to which it affected their wellbeing seemed to differ. Bridget, similar to Amanda, curbed her SNS use when they noticed issues directly related to their gender identity in the news stating that, "even just receiving the information in the headline is enough to have an impact on my day." That differs from Dallas, who expressed that when they view what they deem as "horrible" posts about news-related, gender identity issues they will seek support from their online friends. Per Dallas, most of them have "similar ideologies" and thus can offer support when Dallas is exposed to politically contentious material about gender-related issues. When Henry was asked to describe his experiences of gender-oriented political discussions on SNS, he spoke of his childhood dream to join the military. He explained that when the Trump administration banned transgender individuals from enlisting in the military, he was bombarded with posts about this on different platforms. Henry continued to describe that this unrelenting barrage of information made it harder to cope with the news that rendered his occupational goals impossible. These instances demonstrate that gender-related, political discussions do have an effect on gender non-conforming persons who view the material, although the extent to which they are affected and how they manage their emotional response differs.

Social Acceptance

Each participant described that aspects of their social networking use related to social acceptance. The data suggest two different sub-categories – one regarding appearance and the other regarding popularity – that I have combined into the overarching category of Social Acceptance. This category is filled with instances of both upward and downward social comparisons, as participants directly reflected on how exposure to image-oriented platforms made it hard to avoid physical comparisons and how follower and/or like-counts provided a visual statistic for their online popularity. Appearance was included in the Social Acceptance category because the data suggested that the comparisons and emotions regarding appearance were a result of wanting others to perceive participants in a socially desired way.

Appearance

Social networking sites, particularly the more image-oriented sites such as Instagram and Snapchat, continually expose users to photos of others. As noted by Steers et al. (2014), one who uses SNS more frequently is more likely to engage in spontaneous upward social comparisons (e.g., deeming other SNS users to be more attractive or socially desirable than oneself) due to the increased exposure to photos of others. The data suggested something similar in this study, as each participant described engaging in social comparisons about physical appearance while using SNS. To quote Bridget, "when you spend as much time on these sites as I do, you see an awful lot of people and in this capacity, you make an awful lot of comparisons." The impact of these comparisons differed between participants although they the majority were categorized as upward comparisons. Physical appearance and its relationship to self-esteem represented a way that individuals could feel accepted in social contexts. For the participants in this study, the sub-category of appearance regarded both their general physical appearance (e.g., weight) and their ability to be read as their identified gender.

Participants shared their experiences about viewing others' photos on SNS and how that influenced their thoughts about their general physical appearance. Amongst participants, this seemed to be related to weight and attractiveness. Largely, participants engaged in upward comparisons when comparing themselves in this manner. Emerson stated that when they engage in appearance-related comparisons on SNS they feel "like I don't stack up." Emerson went on to describe that they are overweight and that the constant access to others' photos makes them feel more negatively about their situation. Henry shared that when he compares himself to others on SNS, he often finds himself thinking, "I really wish I had a different body type or my face was a different shape."

Another concept displayed throughout the data related to comparisons about being read as one's identified gender. It is noteworthy that all participants referred to this as "passing" although this term is being phased out in the gender non-conforming population because of the implication that one is being perceived as a gender that they are not (University of Southern California, n.d.). The phrasing "being read as one's identified gender" refers to what participants called "passing" throughout this paper. The comparisons that occurred regarding being read as one's identified gender were either upward comparisons or comparisons used for educational/informational purposes.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory noted that people will engage in comparisons more frequently with those similar to themselves. This occurred in this study as participants noted that they were more likely to compare themselves to other gender non-conforming individuals rather than cisgender ones. Sawyer described that they rarely compare themselves to cisgender individuals; rather they "compare myself to people who are comparable, which is gender non-conforming individuals who are at least physically in the same ballpark as

me." When comparisons to other gender non-conforming individuals did occur, the data suggest that upward comparisons about being read as one's identified gender occurred most often. When asked to elaborate on comparisons to other gender non-conforming individuals, Sawyer stated they will feel "a very mild, slight melancholy" due to their inability to be read as their identified gender. In a similar vein, Jordan stated that when they observe gender non-conforming people on SNS with more masculine features, they feel "frustrated" because they "have a feminine face and curves so it's very hard for me to look masculine." Henry shared that he "identif[ies] as a man and I'm 5'1. There's nothing I can do about that regardless of what decisions I make about hormone therapy." He went on to state that these comparisons make him feel "jealous" of other transgender males who do not have to navigate this issue. Bridget stated that she feels like she has "a little bit of body dysmorphia" when she spends too much time engaging in comparisons with other gender non-conforming persons on SNS. The aforementioned data suggested that if participants are unsatisfied with their appearance, they are likely to engage in upward social comparisons when exposed to similar individuals who are perceived as succeeding at being read as their identified gender. This seems to be particularly salient when participants have identified a fault with themselves (e.g., curves; height) that are not observed in other gender non-conforming persons with whom they interact with on SNS.

While not a comparison identified by Festinger, it appears that comparisons for educational purposes were incorporated by participants. The data suggest that individuals who engaged in this sort of comparison were using pictures or posts of other gender non-conforming users to observe their transitions in order to use it to inform their own personal transition process. For example, participants indicated that they often use information gleaned from others' SNS

accounts to help them make choices about their own transition process (e.g., hormone therapy; gender reaffirming surgery). Amanda elaborated by stating the following:

> When I'm comparing myself, it has a lot to do with seeing other people in the trans community and seeing how they are handling their own physical transitions. You make a lot of comparisons like, "are these people's choices better?" or, "Is surgery something that I want?"

This sentiment was reiterated by other participants. Sawyer described that "you get to see people with the same or similar body types as you during their own transitions. It can be really great to see." The extent to which this type of comparison impacted one's emotional state seemed to differ based on what was occurring in the participants' lives at the time. For example, Dallas stated that when they view transitioning, gender non-conforming individuals on SNS, it can made them feel "a little hopeful" about where they are in the transitioning process at the time the pictures/posts were viewed.

Popularity

To some extent, each participant discussed the number of their account followers/friends and "likes" on posts or photos, and how those factors contributed to the way they perceived themselves. Participants largely indicated that the more followers they had or the more likes they received on posts/photos seemed to positively influence their self-esteem. This visual depiction of popularity also allowed participants to feel socially accepted as they could visually observe statistics about how well-liked they or their posts are. The visual evidence of others' approval appears to have a direct impact on social comparisons. For instance, Henry seemed to engage in downward social comparisons based on the number of followers he had on SNS, and this contributed positively to his self-image. He stated:

> I feel positive when I make a comparison with somebody about my social abilities. I do feel that I do really well socially, in particular on these social media sites. I mean it's reflected objectively in my followers and it's that kind of thing where you can see these

> really concrete facts. I have almost 12,000 Snapchat followers. And you see somebody else who has 2000, right? And that can make you feel better.

For Henry, the ability to visually see that he had more followers than many other users resulted increasing his confidence about his social aptitude. Another participant, Emerson, seconded this idea stating:

> Having a lot of followers makes you feel like you're succeeding and that other people want to have you present in their lives in some capacity. Having more followers is a pretty concrete quantification of that.

The tangibility of follower-counts or "likes" seems to afford users with evidence of their social success which in turn resulted in increased self-esteem and feelings of social acceptance. In these instances, many participants engaged in downward social comparisons using their profile statistics as evidence. Further, it appeared as though participants consciously and ongoingly paid attention to these numbers even when engaging in their offline lives. This suggests that the constant visual sign of approval does have a direct relationship to one's view of self, although the short and long-term effects of the impact this may have on one's mental health was not explored.

Less present in the data but still notable were the negative effects of having fewer followers or like-counts and how that makes a user think or feel about oneself. It would seem that if high numbers of followers or likes results in improved self-esteem that fewer followers or likes may result in a negative impact on self-esteem. Lee stated:

> I may be inclined to be self-critical about when I compare myself to someone else. And then you add to it the quantifiability, like a like-count or follower-count, and it has tendency [to be] a negative comparison. If you were going to make that negative comparison and then there are statistics to back it up, that probably makes it more likely to happen.

Lee described posting photos of themselves that receive fewer likes than other individuals they follow. As noted above, lower like-counts may result in the user being more self-critical

which then may impact how one thinks and feels about oneself. While this was not touched on during the interviews, it is important to note that there may be alternative reasons for lower follower and like-counts, such as keeping one's profile private which would result in lower follower/like counts due to the specific actions of the user. In that instance, the users may not place as much stock in what these counts mean about them or their social aptitude.

Emotional Reactions Regarding SNS Use

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked to recount their emotional reactions when using SNS. Depending on the specific situation, participants indicated they had experienced negative and positive emotional reactions based on their SNS use. The following paragraphs will describe each category of emotion and elaborate on the factors that contribute to those reactions.

Participant experiences were littered with negative emotional reactions resulting from either observing other's posts/photos or from interacting with others on SNS. The most commonly noted emotions were jealousy, fatigue/exhaustion, frustration, and invalidation. Jealous feelings were largely related to others' ability to be read as their identified gender and/or to the perception that other users are happier, more successful, or more attractive than the participants. Fatigue and exhaustion were most commonly experienced due to the emotional and social investment of extensive SNS use. For some, this resulted from observing posts that were unfriendly to the gender non-conforming community and then subsequently trying to avoid such posts. For others, the exhaustion stemmed from observing the back-and-forth "drama" of arguments between users in posts, chats, or discussion boards. Feelings of frustration were derived largely from the lack of acceptance from others. For one participant, Amanda, frustration developed as a result of "feeling stuck" in her gender identity transition. She explained that she

was only out to those she connected with on SNS, and when she used social media too frequently, frustration would settle in because she could only be her true self online and not IRL. Lastly, feelings of invalidation were experienced when participants encountered users who did not accept their identified gender or did not understand the concept of a gender spectrum (versus the socially-accepted, binary system).

While many negative emotional reactions were shared, myriad examples of positive experiences were also relayed. The most frequently discussed positive emotions were happiness, excitement, empowerment, and affirmation. Happiness stemmed from forming/maintaining relationships, connecting with similar gender non-conforming individuals, and joining gender non-conforming, online communities. Excitement was often experienced in the earlier stages of gender transitioning, as participants discovered that SNS provided an outlet to explore their gender and present freely with limited negative consequences. Empowerment was experienced when participants received positive feedback, advice, or support in online friendships that could translate into their daily lives. Finally, affirmation was most frequently felt when participants shared their experiences with others and received support and acceptance rather than prejudice or hate.

Mental Health

The connection between mental health and SNS use was explored during each interview. Along with sharing their own personal mental health experiences that were often unrelated to SNS use, participants indicated that the relationship between mental health and SNS largely centered around giving and receiving support for mental health and emotional issues. The demographic questionnaire indicated that all but one participant (Amanda) had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder in the past and some were still currently being treated for these

illnesses. While Amanda had not been diagnosed with a mental illness, she shared that she had received counseling for over a year to help work through gender-related issues that seemed to be negatively impacting her wellbeing. The following discusses participants' experience of receiving support from and providing support to their online peers when issues regarding mental health developed.

Similar to relationships that occur outside of social media, participants explained that their online friendships provided emotional support in regard to mental health issues. The data indicated that there are two general areas where help is most frequently sought out: management of one's mental health diagnoses and support for gender-related issues that cause distress. The data suggested individuals need to determine their social networking preferences in order to find an environment that best meets their emotional needs. For instance, Dallas indicated they were diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder that was originally misdiagnosed as Bipolar Disorder. While operating under the assumption they had Bipolar Disorder, Dallas shared they spent an ample amount of time of Instagram or Snapchat, both of which are image-oriented platforms. They relayed that they were prescribed the wrong medications which resulted in increased depressive symptoms. That, mixed with the excessive use of the aforementioned image-based platforms, resulted in "a perfect storm of negative body image issues." Dallas was later able to identify that the image-oriented platforms were negatively contributing to their wellbeing. This resulted in Dallas exploring other SNS options less dependent on images and more focused on relationship building; for them, this was represented by joining and becoming very active on the video-game based, social networking platform called Discord. Consequently, Dallas' social networking evolution resulted in reducing their exposure to images that could have negatively influenced their body image while simultaneously increasing their emotional support network.

Other participants shared similar experiences, although not as detailed as Dallas' account. Henry discussed a past history of suicidal ideation and hospitalizations where his mental state was exacerbated by perceiving the idyllic lifestyles of others depicted in their posts. While working through his mental health issues, he realized that he could chat or direct message his social media friends about his perceived ideas of others' lives and how that contributed to his thoughts of suicide. While this did not completely negate his perceptions of others, it afforded him the opportunity to learn that the envy which can accompany such observations is often disconnected from the realities of the lives of those on whom said envy is based. In a similar vein, Lee expressed that SNS use, particularly on the more mainstream, image-oriented sites, has the potential to increase their depressive symptoms and feelings of self-doubt. However, they noted this is offset to an extent when they are able to share their thoughts about self-doubt in their online relationships. Regardless of the negative outcomes that may result from SNS use, the data suggested that when participants identified their social networking preferences, avoided sites where they may be more prone to comparisons, and developed trusting, online friendships the positive aspects (e.g., support) seem to outweigh the negative impacts.

In keeping with the reciprocal nature of successful social relationships, those developed online involve both receipt of support, and a willingness to provide it. Participants shared they not only receive mental health support on social networking forums but provide support as well. Emerson explained that they feel a duty to offer support to their online friends who "are struggling with self-harm or are clearly unstable." While they feel it "is not necessarily a pleasant thing to do" they noted that "I feel that it's important and it's something I want to do, particularly when I've struggled with the same thing in the past." Jordan shared a similar idea, stating that they are "open about my mental health on social media because I really think it helps other

people be open." The data suggested providing emotional support for mental health issues is just as important to participants as receiving support in those relationships formed online.

Participants also noted the importance of using SNS to give and receive support for gender-related issues. The data indicated that the communities formed online acted as a buffer to issues that could impact one's wellbeing. Lee stated that they and their gender non-conforming friends access SNS daily to interact with the larger gender non-conforming community. Lee stated that when they have a particularly difficult time managing issues related to their gender, the "positivity of comments" that are shared within these social networking communities helps them effectively navigate their concerns. For Amanda, who is not yet out to her friends and family, gender non-conforming groups on SNS allowed her to relate to others who have similar experiences. She reported that it was "huge to be able to connect with similar people" particularly when she initially began questioning her gender, and this concept was reiterated by the other participants in different stages of coming out. As such, having a community readily available for support despite geographic distance afforded participants the ability to manage gender-related concerns by connecting with those in a similar situation.

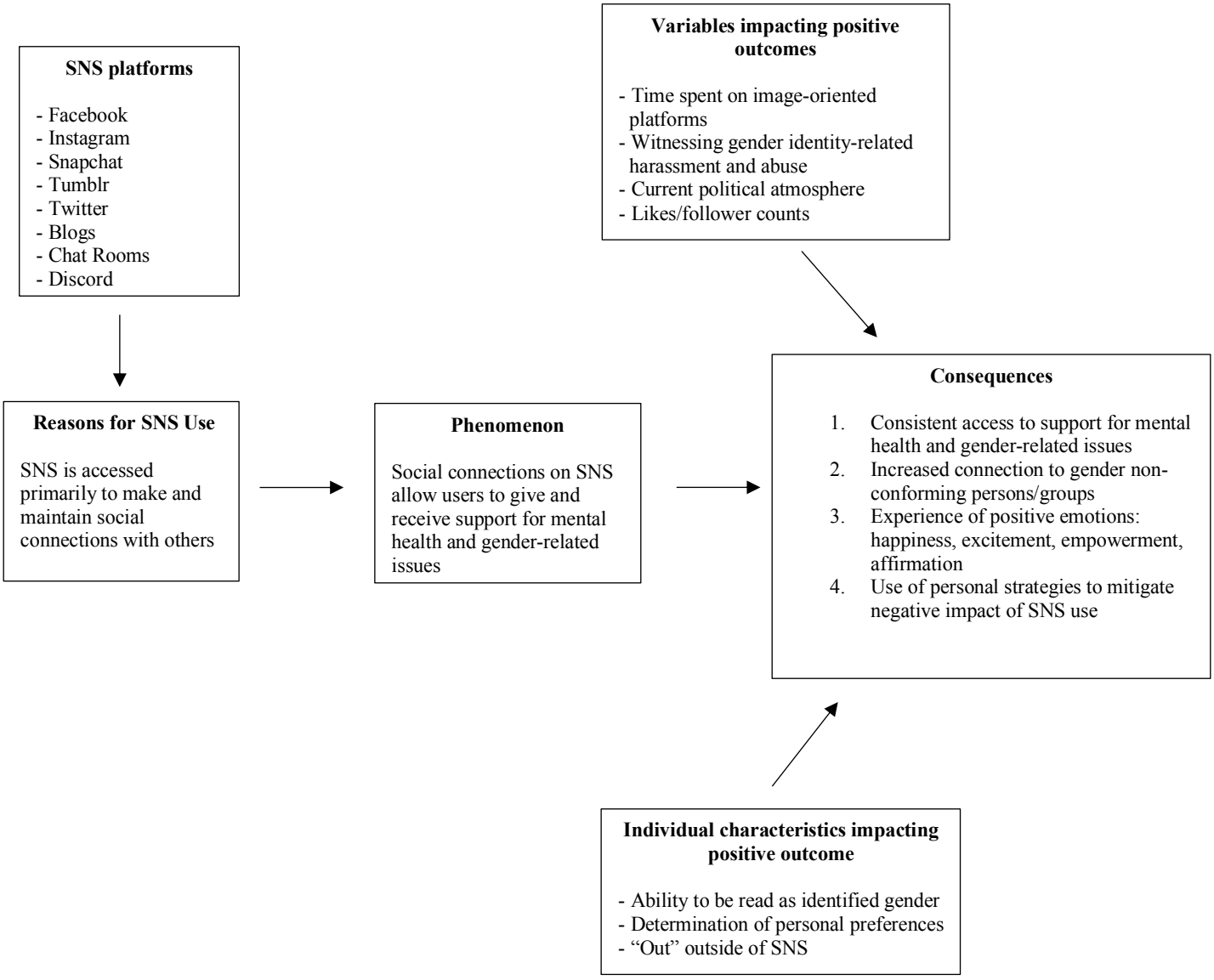
The Central Phenomenon and Coding Paradigm

During the axial coding stages, the central phenomenon was selected. The central phenomenon identified in this study is the following: Gender non-conforming individuals use the connections afforded by social networking sites to give and receive support regarding mental health and gender-related issues. Following the identification of the central phenomenon, the data were revisited to elaborate on and build connections to the central phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). A figure, called a coding paradigm, was then created to illustrate the causal conditions and consequences related to the central phenomenon. Using Corbin and Strauss' (1990)

framework, a coding paradigm for understanding SNS use among gender non-conforming persons as it relates to their mental health is depicted in Figure II.

Figure II

Coding Paradigm for Understanding SNS Use as it Relates to Mental Health amongst Gender Non-Conforming Persons



Grounded Theory Theoretical Model

The final stage of coding in grounded theory studies is the selective coding stage which results in the development of hypotheses that connect and explain the categories reflected in the coding paradigm (Cresswell, 2007). This study found that social networking is accessed primarily to make new social connections and maintain previously formed relationships with others. The support garnered from these relationships results in the central phenomenon; that is, for gender non-conforming persons the social connections created and/or maintained on SNS allow participants to give and receive support for mental health and gender-related issues. Their SNS use for mental health and gender-related issues seems to result in the following:

1. Social networking is easily accessible at almost any time in the United States and as a result, gender non-conforming individuals can consistently connect to others on SNS to help manage mental health or gender-related issues;
2. Social networking affords an increased opportunity to connect with other gender non-conforming individuals as it is not constrained by physical, geographical limitations;
3. The relationships built/maintained and the support given and received on SNS results in positive emotions such as happiness, excitement, empowerment, and affirmation;
4. Negative effects of SNS use are present and can negatively impact one's wellbeing; that said, the development of personal strategies seems to mitigate the negative outcomes that may occur with excessive use.

Factors exist that may limit or improve the extent to which gender non-conforming persons benefit from their online interactions. First, the more time spent on SNS dedicated to viewing content versus interacting with others seems to be related to increased upward social comparisons. When this occurs, participants were more likely to feel negatively about

themselves, particularly regarding their physical appearance. Second, SNS use can result in witnessing harassment, verbal abuse, or cyberbullying directed toward one's gender identity. There is also the possibility that individuals may be the victim of gender-related harassment, although this was not commonly experienced by the participants in my study. Third, the current political context in the United States was frequently discussed by participants; when a current news event occurs or a user expresses specific political beliefs that relate to gender-identity discrimination, the related conversations/posts on SNS can negatively impact one's emotional state. Fourth, one's popularity on SNS – that is the number of likes on posts/pictures or their follower-count –provides statistical information about their social aptitude that can positively or negatively influence their emotional state and self-esteem.

Personal characteristics also seem to shape the extent to which one benefits from the consequences of SNS use. The most salient of these identified in the data relates to the development of online preferences. If an individual has used SNS for an extended period of time (as all participants had), their former experiences allowed them to determine the sites and activities that seemed better for their wellbeing. They were able to identify the specific sites and instances that made them feel negatively, which ultimately resulted in more limited use of those sites in order to avoidance of potential triggers. For participants, this meant they largely used SNS in a way where they expected positive, personal outcomes. Another factor is one's ability to be read as their identified gender. It appears that upward comparisons occur quite frequently when observing another gender non-conforming individual who is perceived as being able to be read as their identified gender. If one perceives that their appearance does not reflect their identified gender and then frequently views the posts of others who are able to be read as their identified gender, negative thoughts about oneself are more likely to occur. Finally, one's

"outness," both online and in their daily lives, also seemed to impact the positive outcomes of use. While online social platforms allow for exploration that can help one solidify one's gender identity, coming out only online could eventually negatively influence one's mental health.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to use grounded theory methods to explore social networking use and mental health among gender non-conforming persons. A theory was developed that centered on gender non-conforming individuals accessing SNS to receive support for mental health and gender-related concerns, the variables that influence the effectiveness of the support received, and the differing outcomes that resulted from accessing support on social networking forums. Chapter five presents the interpretations of each category, the implications of the theoretical model, the limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Specifics Regarding Social Networking Use

Pew Research Center (2019) indicated that when they started monitoring SNS use in 2005, only 5% of Americans had an active profile; now 72% of the population has at least one active account. Further, trends suggest that in 2020, 2.95 billion people worldwide will have an account on at least one platform (Robinson et al., 2017). Although the sample size in this study was small, the data identified many of the common sites accessed daily by gender non-conforming persons. All participants in this study had an active Facebook and Instagram profile, although the amount of time spent on these two platforms differed. Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr were also commonly used. A few participants discussed other platforms that they considered to be social networking sites which included Discord (the video game communication site), chat rooms, and blogs. It is important to note that the most frequently used sites, Facebook and Instagram, have a large image-oriented aspect to them which was identified by participants to have potentially harmful effects on their wellbeing. This will be discussed further in a later section.

Reasons for SNS Use

Participants in this study largely accessed SNS for three primary reasons: for social interaction, for gender identity education purposes, and to develop aspects of their gender expression. Participants indicated that the most salient reason for accessing SNS was to socially interact with others. Social determination theory posits that a basic and universal psychological needs for all humans is to have close, intimate relationships with others, also referred to as relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Fulfilling one's relatedness needs is associated with positive wellbeing and vitality (Ferguson, Gutberg, Schattke, Paulin, & Jost, 2015), while disconnectedness is correlated with higher rates of depression and suicide (Werner-Seidker, Afzali, Chapman, Sunderland, & Slade, 2017). Research on relatedness and SNS indicated that users' psychological need to feel connected to others often motivates their social networking use (Karahanna, Xu, Xu, & Zhang, 2018). Participants shared how many of their friendships and romantic relationships started or were maintained by using social networking sites. Further, each one indicated they used SNS for a minimum of 30 minutes per day meaning that SNS plays a daily role in participants' social connectedness. Consequently, the data suggest that participants are actively using SNS to help fulfill their psychological need for relatedness although the extent to which this improves their wellbeing seems to differ depending on how they use these sites (e.g., interacting versus observing).

Participants also shared that they use SNS to gain information about their gender identity, ranging from early curiosity about the gender spectrum to gaining information about transitioning and other health issues specific to the gender non-conforming community such as the transitioning process. Gender non-conforming persons have become much more visible over the past few years; despite that, this group experiences myriad barriers to receiving competent

healthcare services (Neider & Richter, 2011; Eyssel, Koehler, Dekker, Sehner, & Nieder, 2017). Approximately one-fifth of gender non-conforming individuals in the United States have reported experiencing harassment and/or a denial of services at healthcare facilities (Grant et al., 2011). Further, healthcare providers often make assumptions about gender non-conforming persons' health needs (Nieder & Richter, 2011) and lack knowledge important for the treatment of this group (Roberts and Fantz, 2014). In behavioral health, research suggests that many counselors lack adequate training and the clinical experiences to effectively provide trans-affirmative, therapeutic services to gender non-conforming persons (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002; Cannon et al., 2017). Consequently, many gender non-conforming persons have developed a distrust of the healthcare system resulting in these individuals not receiving needed health services. Participants in this study indicated that discussing health concerns and the transition process with others on SNS assisted them in making health-related decisions for themselves such as hormonal treatments or gender-affirming surgeries. Further, participants could use their online connections to help identify gender-affirming resources and services in their communities that might otherwise be difficult to find (Cannon et al., 2017).

Lastly, participants shared that SNS use allowed them to express their gender identities in a safe, supportive manner. For an individual questioning their gender identity, social networking affords the opportunity to explore and express aspects of gender in an anonymous manner (Driver, 2007), and research has demonstrated that this is correlated with a more authentic sense of self if/when the person publicly comes out offline (Gray, 2009). Social networking sites also increase the visibility of gender non-conforming persons and may make an individual feel more comfortable exploring, identifying, or openly sharing their gender identity with others (Robards, 2018). Further, SNS afford one the ability to openly express their gender identity and then be

validated by the peers with whom they choose to share that expression. According to Linehan (1997), if validation is received consistently, an individual is less likely to feel their experience is socially unacceptable and will be more likely to learn to personally accept themselves and their gender identity. However, it is important to note that the popularity of SNS means that it is less likely for one to remain anonymous; as such, private groups might represent a safer option as it limits the possibility that an individual will be invalidated by other SNS users.

Negative Experiences

Negative experiences such as being the subject of cyberbullying, which is defined as bullying that occurs on SNS and the internet (Tokunaga, 2010), or witnessing verbal abuse or harassment on social networking platforms was shared by participants. Most noted that they have not been personally victimized, but rather they have frequently witnessed their gender non-conforming peers – particularly individuals that were more open or "flamboyant" about their gender identity – be subjected to harassment or cyberbullying on SNS. Witnessing abuse affects those that view it (Mustanoja et al., 2011), and many participants noted "discriminatory" and "persecutory" posts or discussions that negatively impacted their wellbeing. Cluver et al., (2010) found that witnessing abuse is directly correlated with negative social and emotional outcomes. Further, research suggests that witnessing bullying can have psychological repercussions similar to that of actually being bullied (Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking & Winefield, 2009; Vartia, 2001).

Bullying has a direct effect on one's mental health and wellbeing, and the gender non-conforming population experiences rampant bullying, abuse, and discrimination directed toward them (Dowd, 2018). For example, Haas, Rodgers, and Herman (2014) found that approximately half of gender non-conforming persons who had been bullied in school had reported at least one suicide attempt. Participation on a social networking site appears to up the likelihood that one

could witness or be a victim of cyberbullying. Statistics indicate that one in 10 youths in the United States have been subject to cyberbullying while using SNS (Kann et al., 2016). In the LGBT community, youths are three times more likely to be the victims of cyberbullying, are 27% more likely to feel unsafe in online spaces, and are 33% more likely to experience sexual harassment while using SNS (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewiski, 2016). Specific data on the occurrence of cyberbullying in the gender non-conforming population is currently limited; that said, studies have shown that gender non-conforming persons experience greater rates of bullying, harassment, and/or discrimination than their cisgender peers or LGB peers (Gillespie, Willis, & Amar, 2018; Dowd, 2018). Consequently, it seems as though gender non-conforming persons are likely to experience higher than average rates of cyberbullying or online harassment and thus might experience negative social and emotional effects on their wellbeing.

The data did not support that the participants in this study were the victims of cyberbullying or harassment on SNS, although I assumed that this would be the case. Rather, participants only expressed that they had witnessed cyberbullying and abuse directed toward their gender non-conforming peers. After being reflexive and recording my biases, I realized participants may have not experienced this issue or that this may represent an area where my privileged cisgender, straight, White identity may have influenced what participants felt they could or could not share with me.

Politics

The current political context and its relationship to social networking was shared by many participants. Largely, participants discussed that they were often unwillingly exposed to opinions or news events on SNS that had some relationship to their gender identity. Interviewees

shared that the negative posts they see directed toward gender non-conforming persons is often "horrible" and can negatively contribute to their wellbeing and mental stability. As an example, Henry had shared that his lifelong dream was to join the military, however he was informed that his dream was no longer attainable when President Trump used a social network platform – Twitter – to state that the United States will no longer allow transgender individuals to serve in the military. Further discriminatory practices have been implemented by the Trump administration and shared on social media platforms such as withdrawing bathroom bills in public schools (Wright, 2017). Flaskerund and Lesser (2018) posited that the anti-transgender laws that have recently been passed have seemingly given groups permission to propagate hateful language and ideas about gender non-conforming persons, and SNS appears to be an easy way to disseminate these. Social networking has the ability to further spread discriminatory opinions and, when viewed by gender non-conforming persons, can contribute to social stigma which in turn can lead to higher rates of emotional distress (Cannon et al., 2017). Participants in this study noted that they have developed ways to limit the negative impact of viewing prejudiced language on SNS. If a politically related issue occurs that centers on the gender non-conforming population, participants will often curb their SNS use or limit it to sites and/or groups that are known to be supportive. This helps to limit exposure to hateful posts that might influence one's mental stability. Research suggests that becoming a social media activist might also mitigate the negative impacts of discriminatory political posts as it can allow the user to organize and coordinate activism that may have real world effects (Brown, Ray, Summers, & Fraistat, 2017). In the current political atmosphere, it seems that gender non-conforming persons should direct their SNS use toward platforms or specific groups on these platforms that can offer

positive support rather than a barrage of opinions that may negatively impact their emotional wellbeing.

Social Acceptance

Two subcategories emerged in the social acceptance category: Appearance and popularity. Both seem to be directly related to social comparisons; that is, either upward or downward comparisons were made based on images that were viewed and/or like and follower counts. These comparisons appear to influence the mental wellbeing of participants in a number of positive and negative ways. Each concept will be elaborated on in the subsequent paragraphs.

Appearance

Participants frequently discussed how viewing others' content can have an effect on their thoughts about their appearance particularly when on image-oriented platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and to a large extent, Facebook. When viewing image-oriented posts that of people that participants perceived to be better than them, they would frequently engage in upward social comparisons which resulted in thoughts such as "I don't stack up" or "I wish I had a different body type." Research suggests that viewing primarily image-oriented posts online can lead to either internalizing social beauty norms (Thompson et al., 1999) and/or engaging in appearance related comparisons (van den Berg et al., 2002). Regarding the former, users will often perceive others' photos as reality despite the fact that pictures are often edited before being posted, and this results in internalized standards of beauty that are inaccurate and often unattainable (Gerbner et al. 2002). These internalized standards are associated with poor body image and self-objectification (Fardouly, Willburger, & Varanian, 2018). Because one can access SNS at any time and SNS appears to be more personal than traditional media, viewers are

more likely to believe that the material they see is reality which can further influence one's beauty internalizations (Mingoia, Hutchinson, Wilson, & Gleaves, 2017).

Appearance-related comparisons seem to occur more frequently when one uses SNS primarily to view others' photos. Clarke, Algoe, and Green (2018) refer to image-oriented platforms as non-connection promoting SNS where the primary action is passively viewing posts and photos with limited social interactions. They posit that the non-connection promoting behaviors have a tendency to lead to upward social comparisons which in turn can result in negative self-esteem or anxiety. Meier and Gray (2014) determined that time spent on Facebook engaging in non-connection promoting behaviors is correlated with greater appearance comparisons and self-objectification. Other studies have indicated that non-connection promoting activity is associated with body dissatisfaction (McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015) and thin-ideal internalizations (Fardouly, Willburger, & Varanian, 2018). Largely, data suggest that the more time spent on non-connection promoting sites has a tendency to lead to upward social comparisons that correspond to myriad negative mental health outcomes (Meier & Gray, 2014). For gender non-conforming persons, upward comparisons may happen more frequently. Participants in the study noted that they compare themselves to gendered, appearance-related norms, but more so to other gender non-conforming persons and their ability to be read as their identified gender. To date, there are no studies that investigate the relationship between SNS and comparisons about one's ability to be read as their identified gender. The data above suggests that it is likely that negative mental health outcomes such as body dissatisfaction and internalization of societal beauty standards might occur, but more research in this area is needed.

When I was engaging with the data, I identified that I believed the participants would engage in more upward social comparisons with cisgender persons than with their gender non-conforming peers. I had made assumptions that they would experience the same pressures to fit gendered norms that I do when I passively view hyper-femininity on SNS. This was not supported by the data and required that I attend to my biases to limit the influence of my personal social comparisons on how I interpreted the social comparisons experienced by the participants.

Popularity

Popularity in the form of like-counts and number of profile followers was discussed by participants. Henry shared that the number of likes he receives is a "clear quantification of success." One's popularity on SNS seems to directly relate to one's innate need for social acceptance and belonging; that is, the more likes or followers one has seems to signify social acceptance and support (Wohn et al., 2016). As Henry mentioned, research has shown that likes offer quantifiable evidence of social approval (Rosenthal-von der Putten et al. 2019). The researchers found that when users compared their total likes to others who received fewer likes, they felt more positively about themselves; when they compared to others with more likes, they felt worse. In line with Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, SNS users seem to have an innate desire to compare themselves to others' profiles, and the number of likes or followers provides statistical information that influences whether the comparison is upward or downward. Engaging in upward social comparisons based on likes is correlated with greater facial dissatisfaction (Tiggemann, Hayden, Brown, & Veldhuis, 2018), increased body surveillance (Butkowski, Dixon, & Weeks, 2019), and appearance dissatisfaction (Baker, Ferszt, & Breines, 2019). The negative effects of upward comparisons in regard to likes or follower counts appears to be mitigated if one has high self-esteem (Martinez-Pecino & Garcia-Gavilan, 2019).

Downward comparisons also can have a negative impact on SNS users as it is correlated with greater rates of narcissism and deceptive behaviors (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, & Giulietti, 2017).

Emotional Reactions Regarding SNS Use

While being active on SNS, participants shared they had experienced both negative and positive emotions during their use. The most common negative emotions incited feelings of jealousy, fatigue, frustration, and invalidation. Jealousy generally occurred when one engaged in upward comparisons about others' appearance or had the perception that others were more successful, attractive, or happier than they. Jealous feelings are most common when individuals engage in non-connection promoting SNS use and can result in lower subjective well-being (Wang, Gaskin, Rost, & Gentile, 2017). Jealousy also seems to stem from upward comparisons made about one's attractiveness, intelligence, or popularity (Holmgren & Coyne, 2017). Fatigue stemmed from the social and emotional investment related to extensive SNS use and managing online relationships. Luqman, Cao, Ali, Masood, and Yu (2017) found that the social and cognitive uses of social networking can lead to exhaustion so intense that it can lead users to lessen or cease using the platforms. Participants shared that they often felt frustrated when they or their peers were stigmatized by other SNS users due to their gender identity. Gender non-conforming persons experience discrimination and marginalization more than any other demographic in the United States (Grant et al., 2011) which correlates with higher levels of frustration and anxiety among many other negative outcomes (Cicero & Wesp, 2017). On SNS, microaggressions directed toward this group and can impact one's feelings of frustration (Galupo, Henise, & Davis, 2014). Further, the Trump administration policies such as bathroom bills or the military ban represent a step back from the more progressive Obama administration

legislation (Jones, 2017); discussions on SNS regarding legislative barriers that gender non-conforming persons face also might influence one's frustration. Invalidation occurred when participants were exposed to non-accepting opinions about gender non-conforming persons. Iantaffi and Bocking (2011) posit that to some extent gender non-conforming individuals' identity is based on how they believe they are perceived by others. If they are exposed to numerous discriminatory opinions based on their gender identity on SNS, this may result in feelings of invalidation that might impact their wellbeing both online and offline (Cipolletta, Votadoro, & Faccio, 2017).

While participants expressed many instances where their SNS use contributed to negative emotions, they also provided multiple instances where SNS use resulted in experiencing positive emotions. These included happiness, excitement, empowerment and affirmation. Happiness was associated with successful social interactions such as maintaining friendships or making connections with a broad range of people including gender non-conforming persons. In the gender non-conforming population, social support can mitigate poor health outcomes associated with victimization (Paceley, Hwu, & Arizpe, 2017). Hutcheson and Tieso (2014) found that supportive friendships for individuals in the LGBT population are a social coping strategy that result in feelings of happiness or life satisfaction. Participants experienced excitement most frequently when they utilized SNS to explore and express their gender identity freely and, if desired, anonymously. SNS offers gender non-conforming persons an outlet to explore gender transitioning and express their gender identity in ways that might not be accessible in their offline lives (Craig & McInroe, 2014), and this can incite excitement due to the social and experimental learning opportunities that can be encountered (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Lastly, feelings of empowerment and affirmation occurred when participants received positive support,

advice, acceptance, or feedback from their peers on SNS. Social networking has afforded gender non-conforming persons the ability to connect to accepting friends who can provide access to social support, resources, and gender non-conforming health information (Craig & McInroe, 2014) which results in feeling connected and validated (Miller, 2017). As noted above, one experiences validation from others, it enables them to eventually develop self-acceptance (Linehan, 1997). For gender non-conforming persons who often experience invalidation of their gender in their offline lives, receiving social support and affirmation in online spaces may allow for one to gradually learn to accept themselves IRL.

Mental Health

During the study, participants were asked to share their experiences about mental health and social networking. The responses centered around using SNS to give and receive support for mental health and gender-related concerns. Participants shared that within their trusted online communities, they felt comfortable talking about their current or past experiences with depression, thoughts of suicide, body dissatisfaction, and self-harm among others. The support received from others on SNS was apparent and abundant. For instance, Jordan stated that "I will post things like 'I'm feeling depressed' or 'I'm really struggling with body dysmorphia today' and I will have a lot of friends who will respond 'hey, I'm sorry. I feel the same way. Is there anything I can do to help?'" Research has found that SNS use can influence one's mental health through the sense of community that develops particularly among gender non-conforming persons (Craig et al. 2015). For example, Moreno et al., (2011) found that positive reinforcement from online peers correlates with a higher likelihood that an individual will share their experiences with depression when support is required. Other studies have shown that, when used to gain support, SNS can help decrease emotional distress (McConnell, Clifford, Korpak,

Phillips, & Birkett, 2017), decrease social isolation (Werner-Seidler, Afzali, Chapman, Sunderland, & Slade, 2017), decrease stress (Cohen, 2004), and improve overall mental health (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016) in the gender non-conforming population.

Participants shared that the gender non-conforming community on SNS provided a safe, supportive way to connect to others with similar experiences and that this had an impact on their mental wellbeing. For gender non-conforming persons, SNS can allow an individual to connect to others without geographic limitations (Fox & Warber, 2015). Further, Craig et al., (2015) found that gender non-conforming, online communities offer a safe space for self-expression and exploration that might otherwise be inaccessible. Participation on SNS by gender non-conforming persons can lead to greater visibility in the larger community and can influence real world advocacy (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

Participants noted the importance of determining their preferences in order to reduce possible negative mental health outcomes. Through personal experience and self-monitoring, most participants were able to identify when their SNS use negatively impacted their mental wellbeing and edited their use accordingly. Non-connection promoting, or image-oriented platforms, appeared to be the primary source of emotional distress leading to negative body image, poor self-esteem, and anxiety. Clarke, Algoe, and Green (2018) determined that non-connection promoting sites are associated with upward social comparisons, jealousy, and anxiety which is similar to what this study's participants shared. Consequently, it appears that gender non-conforming persons may be able to limit negative mental health outcomes if they monitor and/or reduce non-connection promoting SNS use.

Central Phenomenon, Theoretical Model, and Consequences

The central phenomenon of this study indicated that gender non-conforming persons will frequently use the connections formed and/or maintained on SNS to access support for mental health and gender-related concerns. The primary consequences of the central phenomenon have significant implications for the mental health and wellbeing of gender non-conforming persons. This section will discuss each consequence identified in the coding paradigm and the implications with which it corresponds.

Consistent Access to Support for Mental Health.

Data suggest that in 2020, over 2.95 billion people will have at least one active social networking account (Robinson et al., 2017). Participants in this study were no exception and forming/maintaining relationships appears to be the primary reason for use. These online relationships appear to be very similar to relationships formed offline; that is, participants use these friendships to give and receive support for mental health issues when needed. Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that feeling connected to others is a fundamental characteristic of humanity that is essential to wellbeing. Self-determination theory expands further on this, indicating that one of three basic psychological needs is human relatedness which is necessary for ongoing personal growth and mental health stability (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The need for relatedness and human connection suggests that at least some facets of social networking such as using the platforms for active communication rather than passive observation of posts/photos might help fulfill an individual's need for belonging (Clark, Algoe, & Green, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that friendships are correlated with lower rates of depression, stress, or social isolation (Werner-Seidler, Afzali, Chapman, Sunderland, & Slade, 2017; Cohen 2004; Meyer 2003). The data from this study suggest SNS is utilized to build friendships that might later help to manage emotional distress and mental health related concerns. Seven of the

eight people who participated in this study indicated that they had been diagnosed with a mental disorder in the past. Amanda, the only individual who indicated she had not been diagnosed with a mental illness, shared she had experienced periods of emotional instability that were so distressing that she sought out therapy. Each individual emphasized that they had sought social support on SNS when experiencing mental health related issues and/or when exposed to emotionally triggering situations. For example, Robinson et al., (2016) examined the relationship between SNS use and suicide and found that SNS afforded users a safe place to discuss depressive and/or suicidal thoughts and to receive support from others with similar experiences. Further, SNS is easily accessible on multiple devices such as computers, phones, gaming devices, televisions, and tablets which means that individuals can seek immediate and continuous online support from almost anywhere (Stankovic, 2014). Facilitated by SNS, participants accessed mental health support by sharing their experiences with specific individuals and/or groups which appeared to help stabilize emotional distress.

The need for social support and acceptance is pivotal for gender non-conforming persons. This group is more likely to experience mental instability, suicidal ideation, victimization, and substance abuse largely due to pervasive societal stigma and prejudice (Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1999). Other studies have indicated that gender non-conforming persons are more likely to experience clinical depression and/or anxiety than their cisgender counterparts (Dhejne, van Vlerken, Heylens, & Arcelus, 2016). The pervasiveness of mental health disorders within this population paired with the understanding that strong social connections can mitigate emotional distress suggests that accessing support for mental health issues on SNS might be an effective way to reduce or manage mental health disorders in the gender non-conforming population.

In this study, the social support received by participants resulted in feelings of acceptance. For some, their SNS profiles represented the only way they could present as their identified gender. As a result, participants felt as though they could express their gender identity openly which was validated by the users with whom they developed close relationships. When an individual experiences validation from others, it facilitates the development of self-acceptance and emotional regulation (Linehan, 1997). For this population, this may represent a crucial aspect of their gender identity development. If one's experiences of gender are consistently invalidated, one is more likely to believe that their trans or gender non-conforming identity is socially unacceptable. This can later result in emotional reactivity regarding gender-related issues and increased susceptibility to negative psychological outcomes (Shenk & Fruzetti, 2011). Consequently, SNS represents an avenue for one to receive validation from their peers regarding their gender identity which can foster the development of self-acceptance and emotion regulation. This may be particularly important for individuals who do not receive validation from friends or family IRL.

Despite increased visibility for gender non-conforming persons in media, healthcare providers still seem to lag behind in providing informed, competent services for this group (Cannon et al., 2017). Further, gender non-conforming persons experience significant barriers when accessing healthcare such as experiencing gate-keeping, being stigmatized or verbally abused by providers, or encountering non-affirming situations e.g., bathroom access (Dewey 2008; Cannon et al., 2017; Mizock & Lundquist, 2016). Studies have indicated that while many gender non-conforming persons access (or attempt to access) therapeutic services, counselors are often underprepared to address feelings of social disconnection when providing services to a gender non-conforming person (Burnes et al., 2010). Many are also unprepared to provide trans-

affirmative interventions (Chavez-Korell & Johnson, 2010). Data from this study suggest that participants access social networking to gain knowledge about their gender identity; as such, SNS may represent a way for gender-affirming healthcare providers to reach this often-neglected demographic.

Increased Connection to Gender Non-Conforming Persons

Social networking is unique in that it can enable users to establish or maintain friendships with a wider pool of people (Lenhart, 2015). These sites have the ability to facilitate linking people together and then assisting them in maintaining those relationships. Hampton (2016) found that social networking use can help users sustain relationships that may otherwise be latent due to external factors (e.g., moving; changing jobs). It also can result in forming relationships that previously would not have been plausible due to factors such as geographic distance between two individuals.

Participants in this study utilized social networking to form and maintain relationships with other gender non-conforming persons that they would have been unable to meet in a traditional (i.e., face to face) manner due to geographical restrictions or lack of a visible community. For example, Henry explained that social networking has afforded him the opportunity to establish relationships with other gender non-conforming persons because "the percent of people who are trans that I connect with on social media is certainly higher than the percent of trans people who exist in my community." Ghazali and Nor (2012) found that SNS can foster understanding that helps gender non-conforming persons develop a sense of clarity about their gender identity because of an increased connection to others with a similar lived experience. Because SNS increases the pool of gender non-conforming people with whom one

can engage, it may represent a useful tool to decrease feelings of isolation and to increase community building in this population.

As evident in this study, participants use SNS to connect to other gender non-conforming persons for gender identity education and expression purposes. Social networking affords individuals the opportunity to connect with those who have similar experiences in order to gain information that might not be accessible elsewhere (Cannon et al., 2017). Gender non-conforming persons can use SNS as a resource for gathering information regarding health, gender transitioning, beauty, or legal issues that would otherwise be difficult to access. This factor could be particularly important for people living in rural areas or in the southern United States as these regions tend to hold more conservative views that are correlated to increased prejudice and/or hostility toward gender non-conforming persons (Carter & Borch, 2005). These environments could influence individuals to be secretive about their gender identity and limit their opportunity to find other gender non-conforming individuals in their local community. Consequently, social networking can offer a workaround for individuals wanting or needing to connect to similar peers.

Social networking sites represent a useful tool for gender non-conforming persons to connect to other gender non-conforming persons. That said, the possibility that one may witness or be a victim of cyberbullying or victimization on these platforms is quite high (Miller, 2017; Tokunga, 2010), particularly if the individual is out about their gender or if they are a member of a trans-affirming group. On social networking platforms, gender non-conforming persons are three times more likely to be victims of cyberbullying (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewiski, 2016) which associated with negative mental health outcomes such as increased psychological distress (McConnell, Clifford, Korpak, Phillips, & Birkett, 2017). Consequently,

gender non-conforming persons should understand that SNS use may expose them to cyberbullying and that it may be useful to develop strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of exposure.

Positive Emotional Experiences

Throughout the interviews, individuals shared how their SNS experiences resulted in positive emotional outcomes such as feeling happy, accepted, affirmed, and encouraged based on the relationships formed and the subsequent support received. Research suggests that in the gender non-conforming population, social support represents a buffer from societal stigmatization that is associated with poor negative outcomes (Paceley, Hwu, & Arizpe, 2017). Further, strong social support networks signify a coping strategy that allows one to work through experiences of stigma or victimization which can mitigate the possible negative outcomes (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014). Social networking sites' ability to connect gender non-conforming persons to one another can improve emotional openness, which is defined as "the ability to analyze a negative event in a way that comes to terms with the nature of the events," (Hill & Gunderson, 2015, p. 238). Emotional openness is associated with greater emotional awareness and emotional self-management which generally results in improved emotional outcomes. Thus, the larger and stronger one's support network is (both offline and online) the greater the likelihood that one will experience improved mental health and decreased emotional distress.

Experiencing affirmation and encouragement is correlated with hope and optimism for the future (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). For gender non-conforming persons, the more frequently one experiences hope and optimism the more likely they are to cultivate coping strategies to manage stress, preserve positive outlooks on life, and develop resilience. Social networking use is also associated with the development of a positive outlook on and self-acceptance of one's

gender identity by receiving validation from other users (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The experience of validation is associated with fewer negative psychological outcomes and emotional regulation. Additional research suggests self-acceptance of one's gender identity instills positive emotions and self-esteem which correlates to improved psychological outcomes (Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, Finger-hut, & Basalm, 2014).

Social networking provides the unique ability to increase visibility of gender non-conforming persons and gender-affirming communities (Fox & Warber, 2016). When this occurs, it becomes more likely that one will be exposed to advocacy opportunities which otherwise would not be accessible (Compton & Bridges, 2016) and can prompt gender non-conforming persons to become self-advocates or seek out advocacy groups. Self-advocacy is associated with resiliency and an improved sense of self (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). As such, self-advocacy on SNS might further assist in improving emotional outcomes for gender non-conforming persons.

Personal Strategies to Limit Negative Outcomes

The manner in which one accesses SNS can directly influence how much they may benefit from their online interactions with others. At some point in their history of SNS use, participants seemed to identify specific behaviors they engaged in online that were detrimental to their mental health such as spending too much time viewing pictures posted by others. Clark, Algoe, and Green (2018) found that connection-promoting behaviors on SNS resulted in increased positive mental health outcomes in users when they analyzed the motivations behind SNS use. The authors define connection-promoting SNS use as use where different parties self-disclose personal information and "demonstrate responsiveness, acceptance, or care for [another's] needs" (p. 34). Non-connection promoting SNS use occurs when users passively

view posts or profiles and limit their communication with other users, and this commonly results in higher rates of depression, envy, and upward social comparisons (boyd & Ellison, 2007). While all participants in this study did indicate they spend some of their time passively viewing content on SNS, the majority of time was dedicated for communication and relationship building/maintenance purposes. This suggests that the negative effects of use might be mitigated if passive actions are limited. Many participants previous SNS experiences already seemed to lead them to this conclusion. For example, Dallas described that they had to rethink their use after noticing increased body image issues after spending time viewing content on image-oriented platforms and as a result adjusted their use to be more relationship-based. In Dallas' own words, connection promoting behaviors compared to non-connection promoting behaviors can be summed up as "the difference between having a conversation with a friend or watching an episode of TMZ." For gender non-conforming persons who largely access SNS for communicative purposes, it appears these activities should generally be encouraged as they correlate to increased feelings of acceptance, social support, and belonging (Clark, Algoe, & Green, 2018).

There exist other strategies to reduce possible negative outcomes such as changing privacy settings on one's personal account or joining private, gender-affirming groups on SNS which was briefly discussed in previous sections. On SNS, profile information might not offer the correct gender options. Some social networking sites such as Facebook offer the ability to customize one's gender; other sites such as Twitter do not include gender at all on profile information (Bivens & Haimson, 2016) and these sites might be better options for gender non-conforming persons to freely express their identities. Another possible outcome of SNS use is that one's followers may suggest their gender identity to other users they are not out to; that is,

public friend lists can show larger numbers of gender non-conforming persons which can lead to interpretations about one's gender identity (Thelwell, 2011). If one is not yet open about their gender identity and/or if safety concerns exist regarding being open about gender identity to all followers, inputting privacy settings that limit disclosure to specific followers might represent a useful way to navigate SNS use.

General Implications

There are general implications regarding SNS and its ability to connect gender non-conforming persons to one another. Firstly, social networking affords one the ability to connect to other users without geographic limitations (Fox & Warber, 2015). For individuals who have not yet come out or for those in regions that are more conservative, this may offer a particularly important way to connect with those with similar life experiences and receive support (Cannon et al., 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Carter & Borch, 2005). This can further result in building one's social support network by fulfilling their need for human relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Secondly, users should develop an understanding that SNS use may expose them to cyberbullying or stigmatizing opinions based on the sociocultural context. Research suggests managing privacy settings or joining private groups might represent useful ways to decrease exposure to cyberbulling (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Cannon et al, 2017). Gender non-conforming SNS users may opt to remain anonymous or explore different privacy settings and/or private groups that can insulate them from the negative effects of experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying. Lastly, gender non-conforming persons can examine how their SNS use makes them feel before, during, and after use. If individuals notice that they experience greater rates of negative emotions, such as jealousy or frustration, they may want to explore how to use SNS

differently such as using SNS in a manner that is active (e.g., communicating with others) rather than passive (e.g., observing one's photos; Clarke, Algoe & Green, 2018).

Clinical Implications

The findings point to a few noteworthy clinical implications. Mental health clinicians should actively develop an understanding of the role SNS play in the lives of gender non-conforming persons (Craig & McInroy, 2015). Counselors should examine the personal experiences of gender non-conforming persons and the contextual situations influencing their activities on SNS (Cannon et al., 2017). An exploration of how and why gender non-conforming clients use SNS to access resources and develop supportive networks can inform clinicians about the different cultural, political, and social contexts that might shape users online social behaviors (Singh & Burnes, 2009). This should also include gaining an awareness regarding how gender non-conforming persons are represented in social networking platforms that also have a media presence (McInroy & Craig, 2015).

Therapists should educate themselves on how gender non-conforming persons use SNS for connection purposes by reviewing professional literature and blogs, profiles, chat rooms, and support groups created by gender non-conforming persons that are present online. Many transgender and gender non-conforming youth use these platforms to work through gender confusion and to feel that they belong (Vijlibrief, Saharso, & Ghorashi, 2020). Social networking platforms can be used to freely express one's gender in environments that can control, to some extent, exposure to stigma and bias (Merolli, Gray, & Martin-Sanchez, 2013). In these safe, online spaces, ongoing validation of one's gender identity from those with whom one shares it can be received, and this can ultimately result in self-acceptance (Shenk & Fruzetti, 2011) and self-esteem (Metzler & Scheithauer, 2017). Therapists should familiarize themselves with the

different social networks used by gender non-conforming individuals and how those may be used as a path to self-acceptance.

Mental health clinicians should develop knowledge regarding different ways that SNS is used among gender non-conforming persons such as connection and non-connection promoting behaviors (Clarke, Algoe, & Green, 2017). Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, and Pettaway (2015) suggest that clinicians should consider SNS as a source of support for gender non-conforming youth, although they advise that therapists should ask detailed questions about SNS use when negative experiences arise. Without this information, therapists might find it difficult to determine if one's use is constructive, meaning it is accessed for educational and informational purposes (Craig et al., 2015), or connection-promoting (Clarke, Algoe, & Green, 2017) both of which are associated with more positive mental health outcomes.

Mental health clinicians should also develop awareness regarding transphobia and the pattern of exclusion that gender non-conforming persons experience within society (Bockting et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2011), and how this may be represented in online social spaces. Cannon et al., (2017) suggest gender non-conforming persons learn to self-censor when building interpersonal relationships with others due to fears they will be judged, excluded, or victimized in both offline and online spaces. While this can afford protection, it also may reduce the likelihood they will fulfill the basic human need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Gender non-conforming persons may also struggle with internalized transphobia; that is, they may develop shame and guilt for their inability to conform to societal gender standards (Bocking et al., 2013). Potentially, experiences of both societal and internalized transphobia could lead to non-connection promoting behaviors on SNS which have been linked to increased upward social comparisons (Clarke, Algoe, & Green, 2018). The participants in this study were primarily

White and had some college education. Further, the study did not examine how intersecting identities such as race or level of education impact self-censorship, authenticity, and internalized transphobia when one uses SNS. Consequently, future research is needed to develop a better understanding of how intersectionality such as race or education influences one's openness and authenticity about their gender identity on SNS.

It is important that clinicians consider the different gender identities included within the umbrella term gender non-conforming when examining the impact of transphobia and transnormativity that may be experienced on SNS. All individuals who identify as gender non-conforming are subject to stigma and discrimination (Lombardi, 2009) which can be propagated on SNS in the form of cyberbullying or harassment (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015). Transgender persons who are able to adhere to societal standards of their identified gender such as appearance are more likely to feel affirmed by cis and transgender communities (Johnson, 2016); those who experience more difficulty being read as their identified gender are more likely to experience discrimination and stigma (Grant et al., 2011). Gender non-conforming and gender non-binary identifying individuals or trans persons who do conform to a binary gender system are "reduc[ed] to an identity of the *other*" (Vijlibrief, Saharso, & Ghorashi, 2020, pp. 90) because they do not conform to binary gender conventions. This results in gender non-conforming persons feeling invisible and less legitimate (Matsuno & Budge, 2017), and this stigma is often directed at them by both cis and transgender communities (Johnson, 2016). This study interviewed participants who identified as transgender, gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, or gender fluid, and stigma may look different for each specific group. As such, counselors should develop awareness regarding the different forms of stigma experienced by each gender identity. They should also familiarize themselves with privacy

settings on SNS that may be used to reduce exposure to stigmatizing situations such as cyberbullying or harassment (Cannon et al., 2017).

Research has demonstrated that SNS can represent an ideal venue for health-related outreach and promotion (Levac & O'Sullivan, 2010). As such, therapists should consider using SNS platforms as a way to initiate and/or deliver mental health interventions to gender non-conforming persons and communities. Gender non-conforming individuals often experience significant barriers to accessing healthcare services (Mizock & Lundquist, 2016) which often result in health issues going untreated. Research suggests that SNS-based strategies focused on the gender non-conforming population result in higher rates of recruitment for healthcare services (Arayasirikul, Chen, Jin, & Wilson, 2016). Consequently, online platforms – particularly groups that affirm gender non-conforming persons – represent a possible avenue for clinicians to recruit gender non-conforming persons to health-related services.

Lastly, therapists should educate themselves on the advocacy opportunities present on SNS for gender non-conforming clients and in therapists' professional lives. When gender non-conforming persons participate in self-advocacy, it allows them increase their connections to gender-affirming persons and groups while simultaneously building resilience (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2012). It is imperative that counselors should also engage in advocacy for gender non-conforming persons using SNS as a medium. In the past, clinician advocacy has resulted social media campaigns that aim to raise awareness about stigma and discrimination experienced by gender non-conforming persons (Toporek et al., 2009). It is important to note that gender non-conforming persons should also actively be involved in advocacy alongside clinicians to further increase visibility and public awareness about social, economic, and other health-related issues experienced by this population (Ingram, Speedlin, Cannon, Prado, & Avera, 2017).

Research Implications

Multiple research implications resulted from this study. As mentioned previously throughout this paper, little research exists that explores gender non-conforming persons experiences on SNS. Gender non-conforming and transgender persons are often included in studies regarding SNS use in LGB groups. Despite some overlap, gender non-conforming individuals experience different stigma and barriers to services than their LGB peers; as such, future research should narrow eligibility criteria to attain results that directly examine SNS use in gender non-conforming persons. Given that this study sampled individuals who identified as transgender, gender non-conforming, and gender non-binary, future research can control for gender identity even further to determine if the outcomes differ between gender identities. This research provides information on aspects of SNS use that can be explored more deeply and specifically in future research; that is, each category and subcategory can be solely examined in order to gather more detailed information about how that category relates to gender non-conforming persons SNS use. Future research should also look to examine how one's geographic location influences their SNS use and the outcomes. As most of the participants were from metropolitan cities on the west coast of the United States, it is of interest to determine if the same positive outcomes can be expected in rural, midwestern, southern, or eastern regions in the United States. This research also provides data that can be utilized to develop quantitative studies that are more generalizable to gender non-conforming populations. Future research should broaden the diversity of participants; this study had a majority of White participants and did not include any Black participants. Black gender non-conforming persons, particularly those who identify as transgender women, are more likely to experience discrimination and marginalization than their White counterparts and this could influence their SNS use (Graham, 2014). Lastly, this

study only examined one identity of the participants; other aspects, such as race or religion were not taken into account. Future research can examine how one's intersecting identities can influence the way one uses and engages with social networking sites.

Limitations

To date, no studies have examined the relationship between mental health and SNS use in gender non-conforming persons. This study was able to identify hypotheses about the impacts of SNS use on gender non-conforming persons' mental health which can be used to further explore how SNS can influence gender non-conforming persons. However, there are several limitations that should be considered when reviewing results and developing future studies.

Unlike quantitative studies, which seek to quantify a research question using numerical scales amongst a large sample size ("Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research," 2019), qualitative studies examine meaning in order to identify themes present in the data using smaller sample sizes. This study consisted of eight participants which is a small sample size; thus, the outcomes might not be generalizable to the larger gender non-conforming community. Future research should seek to develop quantitative studies that use this study's conclusions as a baseline.

Participants were recruited largely from metropolitan cities on the west coast of the United States, Consequently, their responses and the corresponding consequences may not accurately represent the experiences of their counterparts in other regions, particularly rural or conservative areas. Personal experiences might drastically differ in regions with fewer opportunities to socially connect to others or with more conservative, religious societal standards. Future studies may consider examining how gender non-conforming persons in other geographic regions use SNS.

Participants in this study were also primarily White/European, Latino, or Hispanic and had received at least some college-level education. Gender non-conforming persons experience significant social and governmental barriers that are associated with higher rates of homelessness and poverty (Cicero & Wesp, 2017). They also experience increased rates of verbal, sexual and physical abuse that can make it difficult to attain goals such as getting a college degree. Research suggests that this is even more difficult for Black, gender non-conforming women (Jefferson, Neilands, & Sevelius, 2013). In order to ensure that the results reflect the larger gender non-conforming population, future studies should seek to include a more diverse group of participants to ensure the results are representative of gender non-conforming persons who are races other than White or Latino and who come from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

An additional limitation regards participants' personal experiences with mental health. Seven of the eight participants in this study either had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder in the past or were still currently being treatment for a mental illness. While the gender non-conforming population does experience higher rates of mental illness than their cisgender counterparts (Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Dhejne, van Vlerken, Heylens & Arcelus, 2016), the frequency displayed among this study's participants is higher than is experienced in the greater gender non-conforming population. This is likely due to the locations of the recruitment sites. Participants were largely recruited from community agencies that also provided mental health services or referred by providers who actively provide services to the gender non-conforming population, and this may be the primary reason why most participants had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. If this is the case, it is important to note that these participants might not currently experience the barriers to care that many other gender non-conforming persons experience as all participants had indicated they had accessed therapeutic services in the past.

Finally, I incorporated researcher reflexivity into my study and attempted to remain cognizant about when my experiences and biases were influencing data interpretation. While I identified many biases that I had throughout the process, it is also possible that I did not capture each bias that I had when engaging with the data. Further, the biases that I did acknowledge may still have influenced my interpretation of the data in ways that I did not realize. Future studies should attempt to use research designs that are less reliant on the researcher making meaning from the data to confirm the accuracy of the results.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore social networking use and mental health in the gender non-conforming population. The data suggest that gender non-conforming persons will access SNS to gain support for mental health concerns and gender-related issues. Social networking sites afford the opportunity for gender non-conforming individuals to connect with members of their population that may not have been possible otherwise due to factors such as geographic location. Further, it can offer privacy and anonymity when exploring one's gender identity or when gathering information that may be important for the gender non-conforming population's health and safety. For this group, it appears that if strategies such as using SNS in connection-promoting manners and developing individual preferences regarding the different platforms are utilized, that the positive outcomes of SNS use outweigh the negative outcomes. That said, it is important to note that factors such as non-connection promoting behaviors (e.g., primarily observing others' photos/posts) or being exposed to cyberbullying either as the victim or as a witness may negatively interfere with the positive outcomes of use. Future researchers may want to examine these results in a quantitative manner for generalizability purposes and may seek to broaden the demographic makeup of their participants.

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Appendix A

General Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. How do you define your gender identity?

3. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

4. What race do you identify as?

5. What ethnicity do you identify as?

6. What is the highest level of education you have received?

7. In terms of income, what economic class would you say you are in?

8. Do you affiliate with any religion? If so, which one(s)?

9. Do you have any disabilities?

10. What is your current occupation?

11. Approximately how much time per day do you spend on a social networking site, like Instagram or Facebook?

12. Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness?

13. Have you ever received mental health services?

14. How often do you uncomfortable or out of place because of your gender identity?
    - All of the time
    - Most of the time
    - Some of the time
    - Rarely
    - Never

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Exploring SNS and Mental Health in Gender Non-Conforming Populations

What are gender non-conforming persons experiences with SNS as related to their mental health?

"Hi XXX, thank you for participating in this study. I want to remind you that this interview is being recorded. No identifying information will be given out in the results in order to protect your confidentiality. We will be exploring social networking use and mental health. When the interview is complete, we will transcribe the data and code for concepts and categories in order to discover a substantive theory. Let me know if you have any questions moving forward. Does that sound alright?"

1. What are their experiences using SNS?

- If experiences seem positive and/or negative, follow up with: "Those seem like positive/negative experiences, do you have any other positive/negative experiences that have occurred?
- If participants answer with positive and/or negative comments, ask the opposite (i.e., "So you have discussed some positive benefits of SNS use, have you ever had a negative experience on SNS?"

2. What are their experiences of mental health and SNS use?

- Set up definition of mental health ("Mental health is related to how you feel")
- How do you generally feel while using SNS?
- How do you generally feel after using SNS?

3. What are their experiences of social comparisons while using SNS?

- Structure by describing comparisons e.g., some people find that they compare themselves to others online.
- Have you found that you compare yourselves to others on SNS?
- What are you thinking when you compare?
    - Upward? Downward?
- How do you feel after comparing yourself to others on SNS?

4. What are their experiences of gendered social comparisons on SNS?

- What sort of gendered messages have you encountered on SNS?
- Do you ever feel pressured to fit a gendered norm on SNS?
- How often do you experience gendered messages on SNS?

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Protocol ID 782
PI Jennifer Trimpey
PI Type Student
Advisor Brent Ferm 02/06/2018
Advisor Acceptance Status Accepted

Department Counseling Psychology

PI Institution Co-PI's Ja'Nina Garrett Walker 02/22/2017; David Martinez 02/22/2017

External PIs Reviewer Richard Greggory Johnson III / Completed / 03/24/2017 12:00 PM PDT

Review Type Expedited Review

Based On Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior

Submitted By Jennifer Trimpey
Date Received 02/22/2017
Date of Completion 3/10/2017

Date Approved 3/17/2017

Approval Expires 12/5/2019

Proposed Start 3/15/2017

Date End Date 05/31/2018

Date Closed 12/5/2019

PI Type Student-Doctoral

Funding Source

IRB Review Fee

Grant Number

Consent Waived Not requested

Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent Not requested

Other Subjects Type Number of Subjects No more than 15

Pre-Application Questionnaire 2/22/2017 Pre Protocol Questionnaire.pdf

Reviewer Notes 3/12/2017 Reviewer Review Notes.pdf
Institutional Permission 2/22/2017 IRB Application SNS use transgender.doc

Additional Documentation 2/27/2017 Demographic questionnaire / 2/27/2917 Semi-structured interview questions

Consent Form 2/22/2017 IRB Informed consent.doc

Notifications 2/22/2017 Protocol Tables – IRB ID:782.pdf /
3/10/2017 Protocol in Review – IRB ID: 782.pdf
3/13/2017Expedited Review Approved by Chair IRB ID: 782.pdf

Renewals

Terminated

782
Jennifer Trimpey Student
Brent Ferm 02/06/2018 Accepted
Counseling Psychology

Ja'nina Garrett-Walker 02/22/2017 David Martinez 02/22/2017

Richard Greggory Johnson III / Completed / 03/24/2017 12:00 PM PDT Expedited Review
Expedited Review Approved (Terminated)
(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior

Jennifer Trimpey 02/22/2017 03/10/2017 03/13/2017 12/05/2019 03/15/2017 05/31/2018 12/05/2019 Student - Doctoral

Not Requested Not Requested

Members of transgender communities 15

02/22/2017 Pre-Protocol Questionnaire.pdf 03/12/2017 Reviewer Review Notes.pdf
02/22/2017 IRB Application SNS use transgender .doc 02/27/2017 Demographic Questionnaire

02/27/2017 Semi-Structured Interview Questions 02/22/2017 IRB Informed Consent .doc

02/22/2017 Protocol Tabled - IRB ID: 782.pdf
03/10/2017 Protocol in Review - IRB ID: 782.pdf
03/13/2017 Expedited Review Approved by Chair - IRB ID: 782.p...

Year	Status	Due Date	Date Received	Date Approved	Submitted By
3	Approved	12/05/2019	12/05/2019	12/09/2019	Jennifer Trimpey

Approved

01/01/2019

01/03/2019

Jennifer Trimpey

Notifications

1

Notifications

Approved

01/03/2019 Renewal Approved Notification - IRB ID: 782.pdf

02/12/2018 02/01/2018 02/01/2018 Jennifer Trimpey

Total # Subjects Enrolled Since Last Renewal: Total # Subjects Enrolled in Study to Date: Total # Subjects Who Have Died: Total # Subjects Who Have Completed Study: Total # Subjects Still Active: Continuation Status: Unforeseen/Adverse Events: Describe Unforeseen/Adverse Events: Additional Comments:

Subject Enrollment is Complete but Continuing Follow-up None

The data collection for my study has been completed, however I am still following up. I expect the study will be completed and dissertation defended by July 2019.

Notifications

Notifications

Modifications Reviewer Comments

Additional Comments:
02/01/2018 Renewal Approved Notification - IRB ID: 782.pdf

Total # Subjects Enrolled Since Last Renewal: Total # Subjects Enrolled in Study to Date: Total # Subjects Who Have Died: Total # Subjects Who Have Completed Study: Total # Subjects Still Active: Continuation Status: Unforeseen/Adverse Events: Describe Unforeseen/Adverse Events:

Subject Enrollment Will Continue Yes - Explain Below

There was a change in dissertation chair from Konjit Page, PhD to Brent Ferm, PhD. No subject were recruited/interviewed following the removal of Dr. Page from the chair position in mid-October 2017. This change needs to be reflected on the renewal of the IRB.

Reviewer: Richard Greggory Johnson III, Review Completed, Due date 03/24/2017 12:00 PM PDT

Application Messages

02/27/2017 2:31 PM PST by Christine Lusareta

Hello Jennifer,
Thank you for uploading the interview/survey questions.
We are only waiting on your advisor to grant their approval of your protocol. Once they approve we can proceed with the review. Please follow up directly with your advisor to ask them to log into the IRB website to provide their approval.

Best,
Christy
IRB Coordinator

03/08/2017 12:12 PM PST by Konjit Page

Hello,

Please see J Trimpey's acceptance by her advisor. Additionally, please note that the department is the Department of Integrated Healthcare (PsyD Program) in the School of Nursing and Health Professions and not the Counseling Psychology Department.

Please feel free to email (kvpage@usfca.edu) or call (415-422-5795) if I can provide any additional information

Sincerely,

Konjit V. Page, PhD
Assistant Professor
Director of Clinical Training, PsyD Program Department of Integrated Healthcare School of Nursing and Health Professions
University of San Francisco http://www.usfca.edu/nursing/psyd

Appendix D

Informed Consent

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Trimpey a graduate student in the Department of Nursing and Health Professions at University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Brent Ferm, a professor in the Department of Nursing and Health Professions at University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to explore social networking use and mental health in the gender non-conforming population.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen: You will be screened for eligibility purposes after contacting the researcher regarding your interest in participation. If deemed eligible, you will be invited to an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete. You will be asked about your social networking use, your mental health, and your gender identity. You will be recorded via audio and video. At the conclusion of the interview, your participation will be complete unless the researcher has follow up questions regarding your responses.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve a one session interview that will last no longer than one hour. The study will take place at a location selected by you and the researcher. This location will be one that makes you most comfortable and can include private library rooms, cafes, private university conference rooms, or other venues that feel safe and comfortable to you.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are to enhance the knowledge regarding social networking use in the gender non-conforming populations. This will hopefully expand clinical knowledge, skills, and awareness for clinicians providing services to gender non-conforming individuals.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will change your names and any identifying information during the transcription stage. All recordings, transcriptions, and other identifying information will be kept in a password protected file. The password will be provided only to the researcher and research assistant.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

You will receive a $35 Amazon gift certificate for your participation in this study. If you choose to withdraw before completing the study, you will receive a $35 Amazon gift card.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Jennifer Trimpey at 212-321-0623 or SNSgenderstudy@gmail.com. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

_____

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE *DATE*