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# A Contemporary Feminist Search Exploring the Representations of Girls and Women on Social Media Outlets

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## Abstract

The following article considers whether social media has become a site of power for girls and women (G&W). The internet has traditionally been dominated and controlled by wealthy middle-class cis men; therefore, it has been, and continues to be imperative to explore whether the online social media sphere now incubates more of a gender power balance. Thematic analysis identified patterns in the data, with female participants (aged 18-20) understanding that G&W experience liberation on social media as well as restrictions. The participants reported positive nurturing experiences online, as well as receiving negative comments based on body image, race, and class. Results support an intersectional approach to G&W experiences of using online social media platforms. Findings indicate further research into intersecting (in)equalities within social media representations of G&W is required, including further research into the social media representations of class, the LGBTQIA+ and BAME communities. For the purposes of this article new media is defined as a two-way interactive digital platform. Additionally, social media is defined as online digital spaces where anyone can express themselves via online communities. Traditional media is described as traditional one-way singular communication media outlets (Meraz, 2011).

**Keywords:** beauty ideals, body image, intersectionality, male gaze, white privilege, social media

## **Introduction**

There is a gap in existing research in sociological exploration into G&W's heterogeneity on social media. This paper addresses this gap through its presentation of findings from a sociological study which explored G&W's views about the representations of G&W on social media through an intersectional lens. Such research avoids the heavily used content analysis of social media platforms whilst employing an intersectional understanding. Content analysis cannot make conclusive comments on cause and effect (Mitchell 2020). Content analysis also fails to acknowledge the numerous ways language is used as sarcastic and as a parody to convey irony or rhetorical and content analysis fails to acknowledge that which is laden with political, bureaucratic, and historical charge (Downing & Husband 2005).

The representation of G&W on social media is a source of much debate, with the constant evolution of social media there is a requirement to continuously study G&W's perspectives. The following paper analyses eight participants written reflections on how G&W are represented on social media. The participants discussed a multitude of problems online; intersectionality is used as a prism through which to explore these problems.

Intersectionality is a term which was coined in the 1980's by Black American Civil Rights advocate Kimberle Williams Crenshaw; it is a term which has transformed race and gender studies (Shields 2008). The concept denotes the overlapping and multifaceted inequalities individuals can face at the intersections of identity signifiers. Crenshaw references intersectionality as a 'provisional concept' (Crenshaw 1991, 2011). Crenshaw's metaphor of a traffic intersection, employed in a legal context, demonstrates the meaning of intersectionality. The analogy views a four-way traffic intersection flowing in many directions, attributing the same logic to a person's identity signifiers. In this case, the intersections refer to the discrimination faced by Black women who can be harmed in a

multitude of ways, including race discrimination and sex discrimination (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw demonstrated that single axis frameworks are inadequate, distorting and removing the experiences of Black women (McCann & Monaghan 2020). When discussing intersecting (in)equalities such as racism and sexism, and elements of power, it is imperative to distinguish the difference between (the often synonymised) gender and sex. Sex is the biological variations attributed to male and female and gender is socially constructed as masculinity and femininity under the guise of natural fact (Carter & Steiner 2004). It is fundamental to recognise the repetitive performativity of seemingly gendered acts. Gender is socially constructed repeatedly, and a heterosexual matrix reinforces heterosexuality as the norm creating a dichotomy of feminine and masculine that are understood to be fettered to female and male respectively (Butler 2006). With such a dichotomy the power lies with white heterosexual cis men. It is therefore important to consider social medias ability to challenge or support performativity of accepted expressions of gender and sexuality and the impact this had on marginalised groups. As, with gender as a relational identity, social media has become a site of power.

Mulvey (1975) and Tuchman (1978 ,2013) explored traditional media, which has been foundational to recent research considering G&W's perceptions of body image in relation to mass media (Burnette et al. 2017; Izydorczyk 2020; Sen 2020) and 'frexting' (friend sexting) in the UK (Setty 2021). A large proportion of this research originates from Psychology, Sports, and Psychiatry, focusing on body image conditions such as bulimia and anorexia (Brinkman et al. 2015; Burnette et al. 2017; Choukas-Bradley et al. 2019; Fardouly et al. 2015; Houge & Mills 2019; Izydorczyk et al. 2020; Mills et al. 2018; Santarossa et al. 2019; Saunders & Eaton 2018; Sen 2020). The media is a powerful force in relation to female conceptualisation of the self and reality, actively creating gendered ideas of feminine and masculine constructed realities (Gill 2007). Such (gendered) power can be traced back to the

internet's humble beginnings via a project bankrolled by the US military and later extended via universities and businesses which were historically all white (heterosexual) male dominated institutions (Hunsinger & Senft 2014). Men still dominate the media market, therefore despite increased individualism and autonomy it remains to be seen whether social media create spaces for G&W to play, subvert, create, and renegotiate identities (Thornham 2007). Women's physical selves have become re-sexualised in the media, paradoxically presenting women as free agents but also as sex objects (Ross 2009). Such juxtaposing views of women as objects of the male gaze and autonomous agents demonstrate there is still a struggle between the sexist objectification of women and an idea of a post-feminist era where women are in control. Bailey et al. (2013) found participants believed they may gain higher social status by posting risqué images and Kapidzic and Herring (2011) discovered that girls are likely to share seductive and provocative images online (Armstrong 2013). Promoting a raunch culture popularises a pornified blueprint of female sexuality that advises women to make 'sex objects' of themselves to feel empowered (Hill 2020). With the rise of social media comes a rushing sea of unedited content whereby sex and sexuality continue to sell. Women continue to experience a double-edged sword, grappling with an attempt to gain agency through new media (Armstrong 2013), seeking to resist an internalised male gaze. However, many are unable to create their own identity due to patriarchal ideas persisting in these mediums, therefore reinforcing the male gaze. Pornography and cyber-porn, mainly produced for the pleasure of men, allow the patriarchal male gaze to thrive online.

Ownership and control of the media promote a toxic masculinity and the fulfilment of heterosexual cis gender male gratification. Within this terrain there are a lack of female journalists and a saturation of white, male, middle class, elite gatekeepers (Carter et al. 2013; Everbach 2013; Geertsema-Sligh 2019). This unequal balance of power has persisted for decades; for example, in the 1980's men continued to occupy the dominant

position using their power to disseminate values of patriarchal order (Thornham 2007). Thus, the nature of femininity is constructed in an unequal power dynamic with the male gazer objectifying the viewed women. Such a 'nature' also subjects Black women and women of Colour (BW&WOC) to the 'white gaze' (Griffin 2014; Sobande 2019, 2021). This projects a dangerously unrealistic standard of white feminine beauty (Sarkar 2014). The work of academics including Wolf (1991), Ross (2009) and Sarkar (2014) questions the magnitude of progress that is being made with regards to positive representation of G&W in media.

G&W frequently compare themselves to others via media, particularly 'more attractive' G&W (Fardouly et al. 2015). Such 'self-objectification' is linked with depression (Peat & Muehlenkamp 2011), body dissatisfaction (Burnette et al. 2017; Fitzsimmons-Craft et al. 2012, Strelan & Hargreaves 2005) and disordered eating (Fardouly et al. 2015; Saunderson & Eaton 2018). The phenomenon of the selfie has caused harmful effects to those taking them, including unhealthy levels of 'body surveillance' even when doctoring or retouch the images, causing adversarial psychological effects for G&W (Dove 2021; Mills et al. 2018). Social media encouraged a selfie culture, focusing on physical appearance and photos, leading to weight dissatisfaction (Cohen et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2018). Such a culture encourages G&W to present sexualised selves. However, female surveillance of other G&W's social media imagery which was revealing or risqué does not lead to commentary on the empowerment of sexualised photos (Daniels & Zurbriggen 2016). Thus, 'slut' shaming and sexual double standards prevail, reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting G&W's online expression (Daniels & Zurbriggen 2016). Further research is required in this area, considering intersecting elements such as sexual orientation and social class (Daniels & Zurbriggen 2016).

Young G&W today are digital natives, who have grown up in a media saturated Western culture. Questioning media representations of G&W is particularly poignant in 2023 with

ever-growing social media choices. In the last five decades feminist analyses of media have been propelled forward by a passion to understand how media perpetuates patterns of oppression, domination, and inequality (Gill 2007). We are allegedly entrenched in a post-feminine epoch (Hill 2020); an era encompassing the intersections of postmodernism, feminism and (supposedly) post-colonialism colliding (Hill 2020; Thornham 2007). Such suggests that there is no longer a need for feminism or anti-colonial action, presuming that women and BIPOC have been granted equality (Carilli & Campbell 2012). However, existing literature disputes claims that assume intersecting inequalities faced by G&W, such as those based on gender, race, class, and sexuality are redundant due to the existence of a post-feminist egalitarian epoch (Hill 2020; Setty 2021). Claims to move towards or past postfeminism are premature (Gill 2016). Women continue to be objectified, fetishized, and eroticized in the film industry, viewed through the male gaze, whereby heterosexual male audiences objectify and sexualise women for their viewing pleasures (Mulvey 1975). Social media allows the male gaze to breed online creating fetishistic, voyeuristic, and possessive fantasies (Oliver 2017). G&W post photos on social media that pose for the male gaze (Oliver 2017). Simultaneously, celebrity culture and pornography are all too present online and this (un)holy union online via mainstream patriarchal white hetero-cis-gender culture affects (girls) youth culture (Oliver 2017). Mulvey's work regarding the male gaze still shows applicability today (Oliver 2017; Sassatelli 2011). Thus, the relevance of said work prevails as any perceived positive step towards empowering women (for example in advertising) is a step back; as male consumers of sexualised images benefit (Halliwell et al. 2011). Therefore, there is a need to further research the 'effects on girls and women of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of exposure to these (feminine) ideals' as the effects are still unclear (Halliwell et al. 2011: 43). Employing the use of more diverse samples in research, considering (gender) power and accounting for (the lack of) intersectionality must be

accounted for when challenging the existing status quo within the media. This research addresses this through its focus on the views of G&W on their representation in social media, providing a novel look at a diverse sample, considering underrepresented voices of G&W including those in the LGBTQIA+ and BAME community within the understudied area of the Northeast of England.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Opportunity sampling was employed, with eight participants agreeing to partake. Participants were provided with pseudonyms to hide their identities when the findings were analysed via NVivo data analysis software. The participants were recruited through my previous employer, a College in the Northeast of England. Students were identified through A level enrolments to recruit those A level students who identified as female and were age 18+. Students were approached via Microsoft Teams (due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2021) to invite them to participate in the research. Table 1 highlights the age, ethnicity, (and where shared) the sexuality of participants.

Table 1

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity/Nationality</b>	<b>Sexuality (if shared)</b>
Fern	18	White British	
Fleur	18	Libyan	
Ivy	18	English	Bisexual
Jasmine	18	White British	Heterosexual
Poppy	18	White British	Queer
Primrose	18	White British	Straight
Rose	18	British	



Violet	20	Asian (mixed Iraqi and Iranian)	Lesbian
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### *Methodology*

The aim of this research was to explore the views of G&W on the representation of G&W on social media through a methodology that gives a snapshot of experience. The research question was ‘Do young women believe the media portrays a fair depiction of females in new media?’ The objectives were: 1) To research the opinions of G&W on the representation of themselves and other women on social media; 2) To consider the freedoms social media platforms offer or the restrictions placed on a person by such platforms; 3) To look at the real-life experiences of G&W using social media.

The research was conducted considering my positionality as a 29-year-old, white, middle-class, heterosexual, feminist cis gender woman. There was a need to reflect on my privileged position within society comparative to the intersecting inequalities faced by women of colour and women of other socio-cultural standing. In relation to G&W’s experiences with media depictions from different ethnicities my own experiences may be very different due to experiencing white privilege (Okolosie 2014). For the purposes of this article white privilege is defined as white women benefitting from societal privilege over other ethnic groups.

People, such as I, experience certain benefits simply because they are white, causing gatekeeping to occur (Gause 2021). There was a need to recognise that it may be difficult, as a white cis-gender middle class researcher, for me to fully understand the biases and sense of symbolic annihilation that BW&WOC may face within media portrayals. Thus, from a methodological standpoint it is imperative to consider standpoint theory, to recognise marginalised ways of thinking, opposed to traditional objective philosophies.

The research used a qualitative approach from an inductive position, whereby behaviour is described as context specific and from the actor's point of view. Additionally, the epistemological approach employed was interpretivism; with a heavy emphasis on collating in-depth written text opposed to numerical data sets. An interpretivist approach allowed for Weber's 'verstehen understanding' (Crotty 1998: 67), which was invaluable to creating an in-depth insight into participants interpretations. The qualitative approach used was viewed as suitable for studying G&W's interpretations of social media depictions of G&W as participants were able to explore their views in detail. Participants were able to explore sexuality, body image, male dominance, class, and race/ethnicity amongst other elements, depending on what they perceived to be important in social media representations. Qualitative research is effective as it allows women to be heard, allows for reduced exploitation, and for the possibility of 'women not to be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedures' (Bryman 2008: 396). Thus, from a feminist positionality, employing a qualitative methodology I aimed to allow for G&W's authentic voices to be heard regarding their interpretations of social media depictions of G&W. Therefore, the method of reflective writing was used to analyse 'human feelings...and their inter-play in society' (Walliman 2017: 151).

### *Method*

The influence of the choice of method was Brinkman et al.'s. (2015) study which offered inspiration for the use of reflective written pieces within this research. Brinkman et al. (2015) noted that many approaches to women's representation in the media focus on content analysis whilst limited studies have employed a qualitative approach to understand young women's media experiences (Brinkman et al., 2015). Brinkman et al.'s. (2015) research (which utilised

reflective written pieces) highlighted 12 themes, encompassing positive and negative themes. However, the students taking part were enrolled on a short course focusing on Douglas' (2010) book 'Enlightened Sexism.' The views of participants echoed Douglas's material, suggesting a bias to the findings. Brinkman et al. (2015: 14) reflected on this, stating, the participants possessed a 'predisposition to enrol in a women's studies course' and the feminist empowerment perspective explored in the short course likely influenced their responses. Despite the limitations of Brinkman et al.'s (2015) own work, Brinkman et al. offer insight into G&W's views on media's depictions of women, moving away from the somewhat over used method of a content analysis of traditional media (for example magazines). Analysing media on G&W can never be 'about the media alone' (Press 2011: 108). The views and lived experiences of G&W must also be considered.

### *Procedure*

To include media users lived experiences, research participants were asked to complete a reflective piece of writing that was at least one A4 page long, with a recommendation of spending 30 to 40 minutes on their reflection. Participants were able to use a reflective writing template sent to them; including the question (below), space for their age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to be shared and space for their reflective writing. Participants were asked to share their ethnicity, age and (if comfortable to do so) their sexuality. Participants responded to the following question 'What are your views on the way in which girls and women are represented on social media?' Only one open-ended question was selected for participants to consider, allowing participants to direct the findings in a way which I, as the researcher, may not have considered relevant prior to the data collation.

### *Qualitative analysis*

An inductive qualitative thematic approach was employed, whereby 'the subjectivity of the research is seen as integral to the process of analysis' (Terry et al. 2017: 20). The emerging themes were treated as something developed with the data (not pre-existing the process); the outcome of an analytic process; and approached with the assumption 'that through immersion in, or repeated engagement with, the data' the analysis gets better (Terry et al. 2017: 20).

A Big Q approach to thematic analysis was employed. This consists of an inductive, flexible, and qualitative 'organic process of coding and theme development' (Terry et al. 2017: 20).

Within this process analysis is creative and the researchers' skills, experience, conceptual and personal standpoint are considered (Terry et al. 2017). It is important to note, that thematic analysis is not a 'singular homogenous approach' but has diversity within it (Terry et al. 2017:20). Therefore, these findings are not 'right' or 'wrong' in any objective sense but provide a novel in-depth insight into the perceptions of G&W on their representation on social media in the Northeast of England.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used (NVivo12). This software was used to support the coding of the reflective writing and retrieval of themes. The use of CAQDAS is beneficial as it allows the retrieval and coding processes to be quicker and more proficient (Bryman 2008). Pseudonyms were provided for participant's reflective written entries. Each entry was carefully scrutinised, several times, to thoroughly create clear relevant nodes. Within the initial reading and coding process 13 nodes were identified which were later refined. Eventually passages of text were highlighted and categorised across eight entries.

### *Ethical considerations*

Participants were provided with an overview of the research aims via Microsoft Teams, accompanied with a consent form and detailed information sheet. There was a requirement to

consider COVID-19 restrictions in relation to recruiting participants. Participants were required to read and understand the information sheet and to complete the online consent form prior to partaking in the research. Participants were also made aware that they had a right to withdraw and should not take part in the study if their participation would have an adverse effect on their (mental) health, as there may have been a possible degree of harm to some participants if they reflected on the beauty ideal or perfect bodies, particularly if they had historically experienced or were currently vulnerable due to health issue such as bulimia. Steps must always be taken to protect 'the dignity and safety of the research participants' (Marvasti 2018: 135). Participants were also made aware that regardless of whether they wished to partake or if they did not wish to partake in the research their overall A level results would not be affected. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic students were internally assessed and their grades were calculated in centre, rather than via external examinations. Highlighting this to students was imperative, as I taught some of the students who participated in the research.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Qualitative results*

The reflective written entries from participants were analysed, addressing the question 'What are your views on the way in which girls and women are represented on social media?' Five themes were identified within the refinement of the coding process. Theme one, *Negative stereotyping*, emerged from the data, capturing the negative perpetuating labels G&W face on social media platforms. Within *Negative Stereotyping* participants spoke of the objectification of women and the male gaze. Theme two has been entitled *Body Image* which explored the notions of flawless skin and cookie cutter moulds. Theme three was that of *Liberated Autonomous Agents (LAA)* in which participants spoke about levels of acceptance of

difference and the notion of inclusivity. Within LAA participants spoke of how G&W were policed online or how they were able to present their authentic self. Theme four emerged as *Celebrities*, with several participants drawing on The Kardashian family as an example. Theme five encompassed those parts of the reflective entries that – with clarity- demonstrated participants recognition of intersecting inequalities faced by G&W on social media. Theme five has therefore been named *Intersectionality*.

For this article, themes three and five- those entitled *Liberated Autonomous Agents (LAA)* and *Intersectionality* - will be the focus of the following discussion. This is due to a saturation of articles currently available which address G&W's body image, negative stereotypes, and celebrity (culture) online. Some indicative extracts from the data are drawn upon to illustrate the themes.

#### *Liberated Autonomous Agents (LAA)*

The theme of LAA refers to participants views on the freedoms available for G&W on social media to present themselves in empowering and authentic ways. This theme includes positive elements and negative perceptions of how autonomous women can be on social media according to participants. Jasmine states that there are positive accounts available on social media platforms that provide G&W with the opportunity to use the platform in ways that are valuable and authentic. They refer to the Twitter account 'Women posting their W's'. It is worth noting at this point that Jasmine is a white British heterosexual female, thus experiencing white privilege and changes advanced by white feminism. Thus, it could be argued white women are simply joining white men at the helm (of social media) whilst disadvantaging BW&WOC (Hamad 2020).

Such positive comments from Jasmine correspond with the writings of Strangelove (2010) who states new media platforms 'lack the institutional structures and male gatekeepers that defined the media systems of the twentieth century' (Strangelove 2010: 84). This suggests that platforms such as YouTube can offer 'an incredible outlet for self-representation' (Strangelove 2010: 85). However, as Primrose notes below, there are those who still shame authentic representations of G&W for breaking the normative beauty standards. Primrose wrote:

'As for myself, I tend to represent myself in a completely real (...) way (...) mainly on Instagram as on Snapchat I will tend to use filters. My Instagram posts are usually 100% real and I have before posted pictures displaying my armpit hair as I am a huge believer in feminism and women being able to grow hair on their bodies without people judging (which people definitely did in reaction to my post, one person going so far as to post themselves reporting my post even though it did not break any rules or guidelines).'

This demonstrates how there are still restrictions around G&W's level of autonomy on social media. Strangelove (2010) notes that despite G&W attempting to create a counter-discourse on platforms such as YouTube women face men who are 'hostile towards feminism' (Strangelove 2010:85). Additionally, Sills et al. (2016) note social media may be described as innovative, creating 'social progress, however, traditional gendered power relations that shape 'offline' spaces are replicated online' (Sills et al. 2016: 936). Despite outlining the practice of gender discrimination online, such an observation only offers a one-dimensional view of inequalities faced by women. Presenting the notion of 'all women' symbolically annihilates the experiences of BW&WOC and the LGBTQIA+ community. For the article symbolic annihilation is defined as the elision, underrepresentation, and trivialising of a group (Gutsche et al. 2022).

Foucault states that 'power manifests itself in the form of daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline' known as biopower (Pylypa 1998: 21). There is a belief that G&W are partaking in habitual bodily practices and policing one another. The participants in this current study did not appear to delve further into the realm of who is doing the representing of G&W on social media, but further research into this area would be very beneficial. Further research is needed into the policing of (trans)BW&WOC's bodies against a blueprint of the 'ideals of white respectable female sexuality' (Sylwander & Gottzen 2020: 981).

### *Intersectionality*

The theme 'intersectionality' encompasses participants comments on intersecting inequalities when talking about G&W's representation on social media. This includes participants' views on how social media impacts on, and reinforces, existing inequalities and stereotypes in relation to sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class. Poppy, who identifies as queer, stated:

'For queer girls and women, they are partnered with a common stereotype of being 'butch'-or having stereotypically masculine personality traits, appearances, behaviours, etc. People on social media claim to have a widened mind and preach acceptance but send hatred (...) whenever a minority view is threatening to become mainstream. Also, queer women and girls have been portrayed as troublesome on social media- that due to our struggle with our sexuality, we 'act out'. This is not true.'

Poppy highlights the negative consequences faced by queer people online, which aligns with the earlier work of Byerly and Ross (2006), however their work is referencing program-makers opposed to social media. Byerly and Ross (2006) note how women's desires are not



focused on, as they should 'not' challenge heterosexual males as the driving force of female relationships (Byerly & Ross 2006). Violet, who identifies as a lesbian, also demonstrates how patriarchal practices can be damaging to women, particularly Sapphic women, for this article Sapphic refers to those identified as women who love women.

Additionally, with regards to race Violet, as an Asian mixed Iraqi and Iranian woman, stated:

'Another issue with regards to how girls and women are represented on social media is the increased fetishization of features that pertain to women of colour. white women are praised for the same features that women of colour are ridiculed for (...) black women (...) have been shamed for having big butts throughout history. On the contrary, having big butts has become fashionable since white men began to find them attractive on white women. Nowadays, women of colour are continuously shamed on social media for trying to look like 'Instagram girls' when they just naturally display those fetishized physical characteristics. For example, being criticized for trying to look like Kylie Jenner because a girl has big lips naturally.'

Violet highlights, as does Davis (2018) that social media platforms reproduce 'whiteness and discredit non-white experiences' (Davis 2018: 3). There are issues with traditional media outlets in relation to diversity and acceptance that have also bled over into 'newer media technologies like social media' (Davis 2018: 3). Thus, stereotypes of BW&WOC continue to exist, with BW&WOC viewed as objects of male fetish's and as overly fertile reproducers (Heizmann & Liu 2022). Further research is needed to explore the negative stereotypes of (trans) BW&WOC which include digital blackface which are practices including white people using black emojis and voiceovers which can support stereotypes of Black people (Bailey 2021).

Poppy discussed the intersecting prejudicial and stereotypical depictions of social class on social media, which have detrimental effects on G&W. Particularly those G&W from working class backgrounds. Poppy stated:

‘Social media has also negatively represented working-class women and girls. [...] working-class women and girls are portrayed as “scruffy”, emotionally distant, violent aggressive. Although I find it hard to comprehend, it has made me doubt my own worth in the past, as my peers (who were middle-class) were treated better [...] and I didn’t understand why, but I realised that this is because utilitarian success is taken advantage of within social media.’

Poppy notes there is still a class divide in relation to media representation of working-class and middle-class G&W, referencing utilitarian success. Such echoes the earlier workings of Byerly and Ross (2006) who note that class and nation have become intertwined, with middle class referring to ‘Western-style consumerism’ (Byerly & Ross 2006:23). This Western style can also be detrimental when considering different ethnic groups. Byerly and Ross reference Parameswaran (2002) who highlights how women’s representation ‘has been influenced by culture, class, colonial, and national processes’ (Byerly & Ross 2006:31). A great deal of existing works on digital media and class have focused predominantly on digital inequality as that which should be understood and measured through access and skills (Yates & Lockley 2018) and frequency of use of social media, with these approaches paying minimal attention to the motivations that users bring to their social media engagement (Quinn 2016). Moreover, Yates and Lockley note that many existing research projects fail to sufficiently evidence whether ‘social media use drives the creation of new social capital or, rather, provides an additional, digital layer to existing social capital’ (2018:1296). There needs to be further research conducted into the ways in which digital technologies can transform and challenge the existing cultural and socioeconomic systems of inequality (Yates & Lockley 2018).

The reflective written entries completed by participants and subsequent coding process highlight that the issues with the representations of G&W in traditional media regarding diversity and acceptance have bled over into 'newer media technologies like social media' (Davis 2018:3). However, participants entries also pointed to positive experiences for G&W on social media platforms, suggesting a nuanced and heterogeneous experience of (gender) power and intersecting (in)equalities for G&W on social media.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research is an important first step to understanding how social media representations impact G&Ws sense of power, their gender identity, and perceived levels of autonomy. Reflective writing is a particularly useful tool for exploring research, engendering honest responses. However, current research was hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This had a two-fold effect, limiting the number of participants due to the lack of face-to-face contact to build rapport and a lack of those willing to participate due to students sitting an extensive number of internal assessments for their A level grades to be deciphered internally within the college. A sample size of eight did still allow for data saturation, however, it is important to be cautious when generalising from this study. Future research would benefit from a larger sample and a consideration of the multifaceted inequalities participants of differing socio-economic backgrounds may face, across a wider age range.

In addition to casting a wider net, further research would benefit from a longitudinal study (Brinkman et al. 2015). A longitudinal and intersectional approach could uncover whether there are any persistent themes in relation to the perceptions of G&W on the representations of G&W on social media, or if there are significant changes on social media over time, as social media (as a cultural form) changes via political and historical shifts.

Another concern is the subjective nature of analysing qualitative data. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to be aware of potential biases and consider their positionality. Accordingly, these results may not generalise to other colleges.

Participant's responses in relation to *LAA* suggested the negative and sexist media depictions still exist, even online. However, several participants recognised a level of autonomy and empowerment provided to G&W online. Thus, some participants, such as Fleur and Jasmine recognised the positive representations of G&W with Jasmine referencing the Twitter account 'Women posting their W's'. However, Primrose recognised limits to G&Ws autonomy as they themselves experienced negative comments due to posting an image of her underarm hair. The research findings reaffirmed earlier observations of Daniels and Zurbriggen (2016) on sexiness and disputes over empowerment versus derogatory views of G&W, interlinking with Armstrong's (2013) earlier comments on women facing a double-edged sword and Mulvey's notions of the double-bind and male gaze and touches on Hills' (2020) observations of a raunch culture. The findings also resonate with Sarkar's (2014) work on unrealistic standards presented for G&W still standing on social media. However, participants did recognise, as did Davis (2018), that new media can serve as a powerful platform for G&W, resisting stereotypical or unfair depictions of G&W. Such ideas bled over into the theme of *LAA*, where participants recognised positive representations of G&W on social media, as did the earlier work of Strangelove (2010) who recognised that new media bypasses the need for male gatekeepers (who were a common denominator in the creation of traditional media).

Participants (such as Primrose) recognised that further progress in relation to the representation of G&W on social media needs to be made. Thus, there are several broader implications of this research, for instance there is a need to further educate young people

about social media, particularly regarding ownership, hyper-reality, and simulacra. As simulacra can tamper with efforts to try and establish what is real (Morris 2021). It was also recognised by participants that G&W do consider and experience intersecting inequalities on social media platforms; due to G&W's sexuality, G&W's race/ethnicity, and G&W's class. Participants acknowledged negative impacts on themselves and others on social media, based on, for instance, being working class, being queer or being Black. It is imperative that these intersecting inequalities are researched further.

## **Conclusion**

It is recommended that future research explore, much more specifically, the theme of intersectionality. Areas for further research include (1) studying the prejudice and discrimination that BW&WOC face on social media (2) researching the class divide that is being reaffirmed on social media and (3) further research into the hate and prejudice that is aimed at the LGBTQIA+ community on social media platforms. Such areas make for important research endeavours in a contemporary world where all people are sold a version of social media whereby all users (equally) hold power and control.

Therefore, further research should focus on centring LGBTQIA+ individuals and the BIPOC/BAME community, along with identity nodes such as (dis)ability, class, and age in research to gain further insight into the heterogenous authentic lived experience of G&W on social media. It is also recommended that all social media platforms offer online (yearly refresher) training for all users to understand the benefits and potential harms online.

Conclusively, participants recognised the need to further challenge discrimination on social media. There is a need to contest the reproduction of whiteness online, as stated by the participant Violet and by Davis (2018). There is also a need to consider the impact females

actions can have to please the male gaze on the Sapphic community (Mulvey 1975). Finally, there is a need to challenge the normative middle-class Western white cultural imperialism and neoliberalism's drive for perfection (Sobande 2019), that dominates on social media. Conclusively, there is still a great deal of research to be carried out into the ever-changing digital terrain of social media with regards to the views of G&W concerning their representation online, to act as a catalyst for positive change.

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### **Authors Contributions**

Ms Chloe Ellise Morgan made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work and the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work.

Dr Sarah Lonbay oversaw the research project from its conception until the end of the research and contributed to revising the article critically for important intellectual content.

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