“An Immaculate Keeper of My Social Media Feed”: Social Media Usage in Body Justice Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amanda K. Greene1, Elana Maloul2, Devin A. Kelly3, Hannah N. Norling3, and Lisa M. Brownstone3

Abstract
This article examines how individuals proximate to online body justice communities utilized and experienced social media during COVID-19. The majority of research during the pandemic has been quantitative and survey-based; it has also tended to center (dis)information spread or mental health concerns. Our qualitative interviews with 44 individuals offer nuanced insights into what social media meant to people during quarantine, how they used it, and how they reflected on their experience of it. Five major themes emerged through reflexive, thematic analysis of the interview data: changed temporal rhythms, influx of toxic content, resource building, additive and subtractive actions, and algorithmic awareness. Some participants described social media as an increasingly harmful influence in their lives during the pandemic due to compulsive usage and exposure to “toxic content” like misinformation, weight stigma, and homophobia. At the same time, participants noted how social media positively enabled social connection, education, and activation around social justice. Across both of these extremes, many elaborated on the intensive, self-reflective labor of cultivating their accounts so that they mirrored their identities and the kinds of experiences they wanted to have online while preventing the infiltration of unwanted content. In addition to offering new insights into social media usage in body justice communities during COVID-19, our data suggest alternative ways of understanding how individuals manage their experience of social media, curate their social media feeds through additive and subtractive actions, and frequently reflect on how their choices interact with platform algorithms.

Keywords
COVID-19, media usage, Instagram, curation, body justice

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States created profound shifts in many individuals’ engagement with online platforms and content. As social distancing measures were instituted and many companies transitioned to remote work, much of the US population began spending more time involved in virtual communication than they had previously (e.g., Anderson & Vogels, 2020; Newall & Chen, 2020). While the ubiquity of video-conferencing was perhaps the most dramatic change, social media platforms also gained a new centrality in many individuals’ lives. In an early survey study by Nguyen et al. (2020), for example, 35% of respondents noted their social media usage had increased. As the pandemic has unfolded, research and public discourse around its interaction with social media have quickly expanded. Colloquially, the pandemic has been viewed as paired with an equally fierce “infodemic” that has endangered public health by shaping how information reaches and is received by the population (Islam et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2020). Concurrent with the beginning of social distancing measures, the United States experienced a rise in social justice movements battling endemic racism. On March 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer, sparking nationwide protests against police killings of Black people (BBC, 2021). COVID-19’s unequal negative impact on Black and brown communities also sparked anti-Asian violence and increased protests against the US’
pandemic response, percolating through social justice spaces on social media (Jackson, 2021; Purkayastha, 2020; Tai et al., 2021).

Given the uptick in social media use during the pandemic and the heightened utilization of social media for justice movements, this study concentrates on how individuals proximate to one specific community utilized social media consciously and strategically during the pandemic (Etter & Albu, 2021). Specifically, prevalent online body justice spaces, including groups like Healthy At Every Size (R) and The Body Is Not An Apology, use social media as a place for advocacy, recovery, and a sharing of identity formation. This community offers valuable insight into usage habits during the COVID health crisis because, as an online health community, their discourse and social media practices engage with content through the lens of health practices. It also offers windows into intersectional usage practices: body justice engages Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and queer communities who critique not just anti-fatness but all heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, and ableist power structures that circumscribe understandings of beautiful and healthy bodies. For example, The Body is Not An Apology, started by Sonya Renee Taylor in 2011, shares its mission statement as the following:

The Body Is Not An Apology is an international movement committed to cultivating global radical self-love and bodily empowerment. We believe that discrimination, social inequality, and injustice are manifestations of our inability to make peace with the body, our own and others. Through information dissemination, personal and social transformation projects, and community building, The Body Is Not An Apology fosters global, radical, unapologetic self-love, which translates to radical human love and action in service toward a more just, equitable, and compassionate world.

While the visual emphasis of Instagram, in particular, has led many researchers to note social media’s negative impact on body satisfaction, promotion of the thin ideal, and prevalence of pro-eating disorder content, such reports do not account for how members of these communities use online content to more nuanced ends (e.g., Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Greene & Brownstone, 2021; McCombie et al., 2020). In addition to expressing a wide range of affects resulting from their social media use, participants in this study engaged with social media during COVID-19 lockdown as an opportunity to reflect on their usage habits, increasing or adopting minute curatorial practices in their daily engagement with social media. The present article turns to this personal, quotidian dimension to offer new insights into how the usage practices of participants proximate to body justice social media spaces changed during the pandemic, illuminating how participants attended to these practices and considering their impact on participants’ coping methods.

**Background**

A substantial body of research associates social media usage and time spent online with mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness (Keles et al., 2020; Lee-Won et al., 2015; Ndasauka et al., 2016; Twenge et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016). Social media has also been identified as an avenue for perpetuating body difficulties, as studies have shown the prevalence of fitspiration and pro-eating disorder content on social media and remarked on the potential harm it causes those with disordered eating and other forms of body distress (Pearl, 2020). During COVID lockdown, overall engagement with social media increased, offering further opportunities for individuals to encounter harmful digital content. Indeed, many studies conducted since the pandemic lockdowns have shown associations between increased exposure to social media related to the infodemic and weight stigma and increased anxiety and depression (Liu & Liu, 2020; Ni et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, studies have also shown how marginalized communities use social media as a locus for more complex interactions, and impacts. It is well documented that social media offers social movements certain key affordances including instant communication, organizational processes, and education (De Choudhury et al., 2016; Etter & Albu, 2021; Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Mundt et al., 2018). We approach individuals with eating disorders or in recovery as members of marginalized communities due to stigma and negative stereotypes historically directed toward their specific mental illness (Feuston et al., 2020). Socially engaged health communities exist across platforms including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Tumblr, deploying a variety of platform-specific techniques for managing content and community practices (Branley & Covey, 2017; Herrick et al., 2021; Santarossa, Coyne, et al., 2019; Santarossa, Lacasse, et al., 2019; Teufel et al., 2013). During COVID, many of these online communities have shifted or refocused rhetoric and content toward general mental health and treatment for eating disorders during the lockdown, emphasized seeking and finding information, and found solidarity in the unique features of their pandemic experiences (Elran-Barak, 2021; Feldhege et al., 2021; Nutley et al., 2021).

The relationship between individuals and their social media world is not static but remains in flux as users continuously alter, process, and redefine how they interact with content. As Hocken-Boyers et al. (2021) elucidates, research on the digital must take into account “both the capacity for individuals to subjectively design their own personal online ‘worlds’ and the structural make-up of social media platforms.” To this discussion, Bucher’s (2017) framing of “algorithmic imaginaries” as “the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what these imaginations make possible” adds an articulation of how users react to their feeds, regardless of their ignorance of the algorithms themselves. Eslami et al. (2015) identify the role...
of algorithm “folk theories” as heuristic narratives social media users hold for how the algorithms altering their feeds actually work. These folk theories are formed through “a process of interactions between a user’s prior assumption about a platform’s status or motive and their experience of seams” (seams being visible system infrastructures) and inflect how users respond to and interpret their social media experiences. Such minute practices and imaginaries accumulate over time to shape marginalized individuals’ experiences while engaged with social media, manifesting as modes for “impression management” (Hogan, 2010). Through in-depth interviews with LGBTQI+ individuals, Hanckel et al. (2019) found participants engaged in practices like de-identifying posts, obscuring connections, and blocking as a means of mitigating the risks of encountering marginalizing content and creating safer online spaces. Interviews by Hocken-Boyers et al (2021) with weight-lifting women in recovery also suggested that social media practices were in tune with and essential to participants’ recovery processes. In this way, users operated through personal accountability for what content they consumed and engaged in what Hocken-Boyers et al termed “digital pruning”: disconnecting from digital elements that produced unwanted affects.

One of the few projects to address how this relational negotiation between user habits and platforms may have been shaped by COVID-19 is Nabyte-Grover et al. (2020). This study suggests individuals have become more aware of personal disclosures on social media about their own health and behavior, and more aware of “how their views about health and protective behaviors are perceived by others.” Their analysis attends to individuals’ self-monitoring and regulatory social media habits during the pandemic and highlights how changes in daily life extended to their social media usage.

The present article turns to individuals proximate to body justice spaces on social media during COVID lockdown to discern what practices emerged in this changed daily landscape. By reporting narratives of practices, this study amplifies participants as reflective users, navigating the negative emotions and stigma present in their daily life through social media literacies. These literacies include responding to their social media feed as it changes to reflect what its algorithms believe users wish to see or engage. Given how survey studies and quantitative methods have thus far dominated research on COVID-19 and social media, the present study offers an alternative vantage by examining qualitative data about individuals’ experiences and reflexive understandings of social media during the pandemic. It therefore offers a window into how individuals made sense of their own social media use and choices during COVID-19. We add to a general understanding of COVID-19’s impact on usage practices as well as adding to the nascent body of research that navigates the complications of user agency through methods embedded in user practice. To date, there are no investigations about these activities in the body justice community, although this is a prime site to glimpse layered identity intersections and consider the intersectional nature of curational usage habits.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

We recruited 44 adult, English-speaking participants via snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) by circulating an announcement describing the study’s focus, format, compensation, and inclusion criteria to eating disorder and body justice organizations for distribution through their social media and email networks. Eating disorder and body justice networks provide a window into our study’s focus: social media uses and curation practices. The results reported here are part of a larger study on the body, eating, and emotions during COVID-19; however, the interview segments analyzed for this study were analyzed separately and only reported on in this article. The demographics of the final sample included 31 cisgender (23 women) and 13 transgender/gender nonbinary (TGNB) participants. All but two self-reported diagnosed or undiagnosed history of disordered eating. Participant age ranged from 19–59 years old, with an average age of 32 years. In all, 22 identified as straight, 19 identified as White, 8 as Latinx, 4 as Black, 2 as Middle Eastern, 2 as Asian/Asian American, and 9 as Mixed Race. See Table 1 for more detailed demographics about each participant with their pseudonym.

Participants were interviewed via Zoom audio after providing their consent for participation and the recording of the interview. The first approximately 30 min of the interviews focused on participants’ experiences of their bodies, eating, identities, and emotions during COVID-19 before turning to their experience of social media during the pandemic. The prompts for this part of the interview were

Have you noticed changes in your social media use since COVID-19 social distancing started? How so? What changes have you noticed in what and how others are posting on social media? What sort of social media content have you found particularly impactful?

Participants who had an Instagram account were then asked to look at and describe impressions of their “Explore” page—a content feed recommended to the user by Instagram’s algorithm. We prompted participants, while looking at this page, to describe what they saw, if what they saw reflected the kind of content they typically consumed, and if there were particular posts of trends that “surprised” them. This method, inspired by photo-elicitation studies, was meant to prompt participants to offer more specific details as they reflected on their habitual experience of Instagram and its intersection with their identities (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011). We also used this approach to better understand participants’ experience of the algorithm, as the “Explore” page is a product of the algorithm offering its
understanding of what the participant might like. Post-
interview, participants completed a short online survey
(approximately 5 min) beginning with questions about
multicultural identities (race/ethnic identity, gender identity,
sexual orientation, body size, and any other identities that they
viewed as “important”). Participants also reported the amount

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Race/Ethnicity     | Sexuality | Self-Described Body Size | Time Alone | Time Posting | Time Viewing |
|-----------|-----|--------|-------------------|-----------|--------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Afra      | 30  | cis woman | Middle Eastern American | straight | large | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Anne      | 30  | cis woman | White | straight | medium | −1 | 0 | 0 |
| Beatriz   | 25  | cis woman | Latinx | queer | medium | −1 | 0 | 1 |
| Bella     | 20  | cis woman | Latinx, White | straight | large | −1 | −1 | −1 |
| Benito    | 45  | cis man | Latinx | straight | large | −1 | 1 | 0 |
| Beth      | 25  | cis woman | AAPI | straight | small | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Bette     | 25  | GNB | White, Black | queer | medium | 1 | −1 | 1 |
| Blue      | 30  | GNB, trans man | White | pan | large | −1 | 1 | 1 |
| Cameron   | 30  | GNB | White | queer | large | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Celestina | 25  | cis woman | Latinx | asexual | small | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Chelsea   | 45  | cis woman | White | straight | large | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Diana     | 35  | cis woman | White, AAPI | straight | large | 1 | −1 | 1 |
| Eva       | 30  | cis woman | White | straight | small | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Fadil     | 35  | cis woman | Middle Eastern American | straight | medium | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Fionia    | 25  | cis woman | White | straight | medium | 1 | −1 | 1 |
| Fir       | 20  | GNB | American Indian, White | gay, lesbian | small | 1 | −1 | 0 |
| Gale      | 25  | cis woman | AAPI, Black, Latinx | “bicurious” | medium | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Geraldo   | 50  | cis woman | Latinx, White | straight | large | −1 | 1 | 1 |
| Grant     | 55  | cis man | White | gay | large | 0 | −1 | −1 |
| Hannah    | 30  | cis woman | White | straight | medium | 1 | −1 | 1 |
| Hollis    | 20  | GNB | AAPI | queer | small | −1 | −1 | 1 |
| Ivy       | 25  | GNB | AAPI, Black, Latinx | asexual, queer | large | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Izzy      | 50  | cis woman | White | straight | large | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Janice    | 30  | cis woman | Black | pan | large | −1 | 0 | 1 |
| Juan      | 25  | gender questioning, cis man | Latinx | gay, queer | large | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Julio     | 25  | cis man | Latinx, White | straight | small | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| June      | 50  | GNB | White | bisexual | medium | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Maria     | 25  | cis woman | Latinx | bisexual | large | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Mark      | 20  | cis man | White | straight | small | −1 | 0 | 0 |
| Marta     | 25  | cis woman | Black, Latinx | bisexual | large | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Yazz      | 20  | cis woman | Black | lesbian | large | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Matt      | 25  | cis man | White | queer | small | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Nora      | 55  | cis woman | White | lesbian | large | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Marg      | 55  | GNB | White | bisexual, pan, “human” | queer | −1 | −1 | −1 |
| Max       | 25  | GNB | White | queer | small | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Olinda    | 30  | cis woman | Latinx | straight | small | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Phoebe    | 40  | cis woman | White | straight | medium | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Roo       | 30  | GNB | White | queer | large | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Sally     | 60  | trans woman | White | bisexual, pan, | queer | large | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Scott     | 35  | cis man | White | straight | medium | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Sonya     | 35  | cis woman | Black | straight | large | 1 | −1 | −1 |
| Sunny     | 30  | GNB, trans | White | queer | medium | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Tommy     | 30  | cis man | AAPI | straight | large | 1 | −1 | 1 |
| Zoe       | 40  | cis woman | White | straight | Small | 1 | −1 | 0 |

Note. Cis = Cisgender. Trans = transgender. GNB = gender nonbinary umbrella (including gender nonbinary, gender fluid, gender queer). Pan = pansexual. AAPI = Asian American/Pacific Islander. Time = Amount of time spent during versus before pandemic (−1 = less; 0 = about the same; 1 = more). Body Size = Self-reported body size (large bodied, medium bodied, small bodied). Age is rounded to the nearest 5 years.
of time they had been engaging in the following domains during compared to before COVID-19 social distancing: being alone, posting on social media, and viewing others’ social media posts (Scale: -1 = less, 0 = the same, 1 = more).

**Data Analytic Plan**

We used an inductive, reflexive thematic analytic approach, drawing from phenomenological underpinnings given our goal to better understand individuals’ lived experiences of social media during the pandemic (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Sandelowski, 2000). Our approach was chosen to center the voices of participants while minimizing a priori hypotheses or theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Galletta and Cross (2013), we developed a semi-structured interview guide and series of coding memo templates designed to engage the interviewer and the coders in an organized, iterative series of reflexive moves. This included a post-interview memo directly following the interview and coding memos by the interviewer and two other team members after reviewing the transcript. After completing these initial steps, sections of the interview transcripts explicitly discussing social media were excerpted. The first two authors assembled a preliminary coding frame after closely reviewing the excerpts. This coding frame was piloted by the rest of the team through a trial coding of a small subset of data and then collectively revised for clarity. The team then proceeded to the main analysis by assigning two to three readers to individually code each interview. Team members then met to establish consensus on the presence of these codes in the interview as well as on which interview quotes were most appropriate and representative. Finally, the first two authors iteratively recategorized the codes into major themes in dialogue with the larger team, making sure to include all of the most frequently recorded codes.

Before and during data collection and analysis, the team engaged in repeated reflexive bracketing (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Primeau, 2003) to place their identities, assumptions, and experiences in the context of the study focus. All team members talked about a bias toward thinking social media is “bad” based upon media coverage and the 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020), which was popular during the period of data collection. The team also discussed assumptions that participants would discuss the family conflict on social media around politics and divulge “new found freedom” to unfollow things. One team member guessed that the theme of “toxic positivity” would emerge based upon her background in social media marketing.

**Results**

Five major themes emerged from our data analysis: changed temporal rhythms, influx of toxic content, resource building, additive and subtractive actions, and algorithmic awareness. We use participant pseudonyms when providing examples and quotes throughout our results. See Table 1 for further information about participant pseudonyms, demographics, and survey responses. Table 2 presents a consolidated list of the themes along with representative quotes.

**Changed Temporal Rhythms**

One key area where participants elaborated on how COVID-19 impacted their experience of social media was the temporal rhythms of their usage habits. Many participants attributed the increase in their social media usage since the beginning of the pandemic to lifestyle changes caused by social distancing measures, remote work, job loss, and other factors that created “more time” in their lives. Scott, who was experiencing significant distress due to unemployment, described: “because I have more time to kill . . . I’m just scrolling on everything that could present me with some content.” Even participants who did not suffer such dramatic shifts remarked having “more time” as a result of changes to their work environment. For example, Max explained that their social media usage increased during COVID-19 because “the amount of time that I’m available to compulsively check social media has increased, because I’m not like physically in meetings or at events as much.” Relatedly, a number of participants commented that they were spending more time on social media due to the general disruption of their routines. Juan elaborated that during COVID I don’t necessarily have like a set routine where like I limit myself like an hour or two. I just kind of will go on it when I feel like it and I please to and I think it’s been a pretty like a negative experience.

These narratives were also reflected in our survey data as 28 (64%) individuals indicated their viewing of social media had increased, while 10 (20%) indicated decreased viewing. By contrast, only 13 (30%) noted their posting on social media had increased and 17 (39%) participants indicated decreased posting. Notably, of the 28 participants whose media consumption had increased, 6 reported a decrease in their own posting.

Participants, like Max, often characterized their increased usage during COVID-19 as compulsive or obsessive, noting in particular their negative experiences of “hypnotic scrolling.” Chelsea, for example, reflected: “I doom scroll constantly. I need to stop.” Some identified their scrolling and clicking behaviors as responding to a seemingly endless stream of available content, like Sonya, who described a “rabbit hole” of ads: “the link is right there. So, it’s easy just to kind of click and click and click.” Compulsive media use was frequently driven by a desire to keep up with the news in the midst of the pandemic and other political events. Ivy, for example, felt the onslaught of information about current
Table 2. Themes and Representative Quotes.

| Theme                      | Representative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Changed Temporal Rhythms   | • Um, definitely use it way more. It definitely feels like it’s kind of replaced the socializing I would do in community. Like, not necessarily in function or content, but like, just in time chunk. (Tommy)  |
|                            | • there’s been an uptick just sort of in quantity and then the amount of time I’m on there. (Chelsea)                                                                                                                   |
|                            | • I don’t like that I’m always staring at a screen and that’s been I can tell that that’s a big part of my day. I wish I was doing other things that were fulfilling and enriching to my life (Beth) |
|                            | • I actually have an app on my phone now called Flipped where it can actually block and lock my whole phone. So now I have an app on my phone that locks it and you can set it for as little as a minute to five minutes to an hour and that’s helped me learn to read for 30 minutes, to just sit in silence for 30 minutes, to watch a movie with my husband without looking at it. I’ve taken steps to just go, “this is not healthy for me.” (Afra) |
| Influx of Toxic Content    | • it was very overwhelming to me because everybody was talking about, you know like what we should do or even like silly stuff like the quarantine 19 or like, making daily schedules for yourself. Even though my work life hadn’t changed or anything like that. It was just very overwhelming because it just felt like there was just this influx of people talking. (Zoe) |
|                            | • It’s been pretty like a negative experience, at least especially toward the beginning when there was like tons of like propaganda against- or for you know COVID and just how to handle it. It took a lot because it also revealed a lot of family and just family friends, or just friends or acquaintances’ like opinions and just this- in a sense, their beliefs. Their like core beliefs that I don’t agree with, in any sort of way that are also very problematic as well. And the next kind of just like even like stress in COVID times on top of like the Like BLM movement also like providing like a lot of like opinions via social media from people who are against it has been a very like prominent thing that has like at some points even deterred me from being on it because of just like the intense feelings that I was getting from that. (Juan) |
|                            | • it’s just depressing. So, you know, for example, 10,000 infections reported today, and you know we’ve surpassed 200,000–300,000 deaths. So, it’s kind of just like depressing to see that. So, I’d say it has made my mood a little bit- dampened my mood a little bit just reading. I feel like there’s like a lot of negative news out in the social media these days. (Tommy) |
|                            | • a couple friends that started posting like most of it was vague, but then some of it was blatant like transphobic stuff because that all was happening at the beginning of COVID like there was some stuff happening that in the news that they started commenting on and I was like, I didn’t know this about you (Cameron) |
| Resource Building Community | • I think I have always been like, a very digitally-connected person. And I think I’ve been actually able to maintain contact with people in a greater amount than even like, in some ways at school. And making context for meeting people like, online has been really cool. . . in a way that I feel not like I’m alone (Hollis) |
|                            | • It does make me feel more connected, it does make me feel just like more of a participant in society. Yeah, I’d say it kind of just makes me feel like I have something to say, and it feels good to have anything to say (Matt) |
|                            | • But I’ve been finding myself very drawn to learning more about the, the activism happening in my area, the community initiatives like that. And just kind of like, really making a point of, of, of connecting on social media, with all of those things and finding more of a sense of like, community connection through those initiatives and engaging with them, to some degree. That’s been, that’s been taking up more and more of my social media time I’m finding (Afra) |
| Education                  | • I think that, again, it’s just been sort of this involvement of wanting to educate myself more and explore more. Just to again have that education have that knowledge base. And from following different friends of mine who at first are posting you know much more about race and then it sort of shifted into a different post about gender identity and sexuality and then within different communities of color and sort of identification. (Hannah) |
|                            | • But I used Instagram for just fun things. I was looking at, you know, farms and flowers and pretty things. And now I’m using it more for educating myself. (Anne)  |
|                            | • It’s been phenomenal. It’s. . . it enriched my own learning and when I was able to when I kind of entered that world of people talking about weight inclusivity and dieting behaviors, a lot of light bulbs went off for me because I was I was already aware of, like, what eating disorders are, but I just thought they were very like either people meet the criteria or they don’t meet the criteria and so like social media was where I learned about the entire gray area of disordered eating behaviors diet culture. And it was amazing just learning all of that (Fadil)  |

(Continued)
events on social media was both important to follow and overwhelming: “over the summer I had trouble letting go of social media...it felt like there was just so much information and I was afraid to miss anything.”

Many participants shared usage management techniques they developed to reduce the amount of time they spent on social media—a response to self-reflection about how their changed rhythms of usage during the pandemic were negatively impacting them. Afra downloaded an app that’s helped me learn to read for 30 minutes, to just sit in silence for 30 minutes, to watch a movie with my husband without looking at it [social media]. I’ve taken steps to just go, “this is not healthy for me.”

| Theme                          | Subtheme                       | Representative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                | Subtractive & Additive         | - I have like very much moved to a trigger happy mute um, were like if someone’s posting about doing social things or anything, I just like, I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to think about it. It really makes me angry. And so I’ve just like muted those people from my from the stories and from the timeline, so I think that’s a positive because I used to feel bad about that kind of thing. Like I had curated my social media feeds so that I wasn’t following people just because they were pretty. So that was very important for me to stop doing that. Um, but I hadn’t done the same for like people I know in terms of, like, are they actually adding anything to my enjoyment of Instagram, like, no, they’re just making me feel bad. Um, So I hadn’t done that but I had only done that with like accounts of people I don’t know but COVID I think gave me like carte blanche to just be like, no, you’re adding nothing to my life and I’m mad at you for going out to bars so. (Maria)                                                                                       |
|                                |                                | - I’ve removed people who just have kind of made either like a joke of it or have like shared like hostile thoughts toward like protesters and aren’t really coming from a place of like understanding just kind of come from a place of like wanting to become part of the problem. That and just like a lot of like, I guess like meme pages and things like that that kind of—especially even like things that are like Latino heavy pages are very like anti-racist but very much like anti-black because that’s like a huge thing to deal with like within like the Latino culture is like the anti-blackness that there is and the prevalence of it has even shown in some of like these like meme pages that are like for Latinos or like for the Latino experience and I’ve removed myself from those a lot because there was a lot of like just dialogue that was going unchecked, but being also like fueled by these pages. (Ivy) |
|                                |                                | - getting rid of people who are you know always talking about diets and getting rid of the people who are you know 100% positive, no matter what. . . So definitely made like an effort to find like just find my friends, find my crew, find people that I identify with, people that I can you know identify with and finding those people who you know, are going to be positive, but real so it’s basically like a bunch of like body positive like nutritionists and some psychologists and stuff and like my friends and some athletes that I really like and respect (Sally) |
|                                |                                | - Awareness of Algorithm                                                                                                                  
|                                |                                | - I’ve definitely like worked my way into a very like accepting, like body positive and like, queer space on the internet that yeah like I feel very. . . I don’t know, just the people that I follow. (Marg)                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                |                                | - I have unfollowed or muted tons of old friends and uh people that I used to follow that had a lot of just my here’s my hot body sort of feed. Now it’s definitely very diverse. I see a lot of shapes, sizes, colors on my feed or I tried to at least I try to strive for that (Beth)                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                |                                | - Pretty much everything looks like there’s a reason why it’s popped up that it’s either something I’ve searched or liked or somebody I follow. (Hannah)                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                                |                                | - I think Instagram just tags it as like a health account and so people like I don’t know bodybuilders my like pop up every once in a while, or like how are you having this like smoothie, oh you should swap the sugar for this, like those things like diet swap things pop up every once in a while or maybe because I follow I just like, I’ve always wondered why this pops up because I have never searched for anything like this but for some reason, girls that are like maybe I think they’re like the weight loss industry like they’ll pop up and it’s like selfies of them, like in a sports bra and their showing off their ass. I’m just like, I don’t know why Instagram thinks this is relevant. (Julio) |

Table 2. (Continued)
Instead of using an app, Mark deliberately set his own rules to moderate the amount of time he spent on social media: “I kind of just don’t go on my phone anymore except like once a night.” A few individuals decided to withdraw from social media as a means of managing usage they deemed unhealthy, some even going so far as to delete their accounts. Most reported finding satisfaction in the results, such as Fadil who reflected, “I have not produced content on social media for about two months and it just feels good to take a break.” Fadil was one of only a few individuals in her Middle-Eastern community posting about body justice and felt particularly exhausted under the labor of continuing to produce nuanced and representative content. However, for Zoe, the decision to delete her social media accounts was more fraught and she teared up when recounting: “it was like a big decision on my part, but like I deleted Facebook, I deleted Instagram.” While social media was causing her emotional distress (including disordered eating and self-injury urges) by repeatedly reminding her of her lack of a strong support network, deleting these platforms nevertheless signaled an intensification of her isolation.

Influx of Toxic Content

An overwhelming majority of participants described negative emotions related to or caused by changes in the type of social media content they were exposed to during the pandemic. Sally potently articulated that social media had become a form of “digital self-harm” for her. In addition, many interviewees referred to social media as unhealthy or bad for the world, with several using the word “toxic.” Cameron, for example, stated “I was just voluntarily eating toxic waste” when describing their social media consumption during the pandemic.

Social media content that played a mediating role between participants and a dangerous outside world (especially due to COVID-19 and polarized politics) was particularly distressing. For Mark, the amount of conflict and anger around political divisions he saw on social media “made me feel like the world I live in wasn’t safe and made me feel like everyone hated each other.” Yaz noted that consuming news about the pandemic and other current events on social media amplified her negativity, making “the general unpleasantness of the world right now even worse.” A number of participants expressed feeling like there was “too much” content related to current events coming their way, such as Ivy who, as noted above, started compulsively checking social media to “keep up” with this onslaught of information. Similarly, Tommy found that keeping up with the data around COVID-19 deaths and infections was exhausting: “being blasted with negative news every day, kind of, kind of wears you out.” Additionally, some of the “toxic” content that characterized participants’ social media experience during the pandemic was connected to the increased circulation of mis/disinformation related to vaccine conspiracy theories or political protests. As Cameron articulated, “more than ever nobody is checking their sources and like the spread of misinformation is just wild to me.”

It was not just news about COVID-19 that was distressing to participants but also exposure to individuals online who were being less vigilant about social distancing measures than they were. On seeing these posts, Geraldo commented, “I see people doing shit without masks. . .and then I just, I’m like, I can’t deal with y’all” and Zoe reflected, “I don’t feel like it’s appropriate for your life to get back to normal, right now.” For some participants, race complicated their responses to seeing lax precautions on social media. Celestina saw content that displayed noncompliance with social distancing as “unnecessary” and elaborated “not going to be racist or being prejudiced at all but all these white people are being careless at a pool party” while looking at posts on her Explore page.

Participants also noted that the pandemic triggered an influx of toxic content related to weight stigma and diet culture. Although these issues preceded COVID-19, for many participants they intensified during it as “obesity” was repeatedly connected to viral vulnerability in popular media discourse. Tommy commented that, while he had often seen diet and weight loss content on his feed, during the pandemic “it feels particularly insidious because it’s just like extra predatory.” A number of participants noted, in tandem with COVID-19-related weight stigma, an uptick in exercise and diet content on their social media feeds. Quarantine triggered fears of weight gain, colloquially referred to as the “COVID-15,” and a new influx of content centered on at-home workouts. Fiona, for example, described how a typical post in this vein “looks like a picture of someone doing pure barre core power on their computer at home. That looks like it’s captioned something like self-care but then like has hashtag quarantine 15 or something.”

Resource Building

Participants also frequently described the benefits of social media as a mode of building resources for coping and resilience in the face of challenges brought about by the sociocultural contexts of the pandemic and concurrent racial justice movements. These were most commonly linked to forms of social engagement such as participation in online communities or investments in self-education and social justice. It is worth noting that participants who described social media as harmful also frequently discussed positive aspects of their usage; experiences of harm and benefits thus appeared to coexist as opposed to negating one another.

Community. Social media’s most frequently cited benefit was its ability to offer participants opportunities for social connection. Online platforms filled a new social vacuum for
some, given how the majority of participants (32) recorded spending more time alone during the pandemic than before it. Afra commented on how social media was a tool to mitigate discomfort and fear emerging from this new level of isolation: “I think when it first started I clung to it like a lifeline because I was like, ‘How am I going to see people? How am I going to talk to people?’” These digital spaces enabled participants to keep up with or maintain contact with friends and family. Some stressed that these virtual connections with close friends helped them cope with challenges during COVID-19 when they otherwise would have been isolated. Blue described a new “group chat of friends that are specifically set aside for, like, crisis” and expressed appreciation that other communities they belonged to before COVID-19 had made an effort to create “dedicated online spaces for connection.”

The connection was not limited to close relationships or pre-COVID-19, offline communities. Many participants noted “finding representation” online, like Ivy who shared they “did not have a, like, strong or large community of folks who exist in larger bodies prior to, prior to COVID-19” but found one on social media during the pandemic. Julio elaborated that finding representation online that he had never experienced “in person” powerfully influenced his eating disorder recovery process:

I would say like guys and eating disorders is pretty rare, so I actually in recovery I never really found any social media that was about guy in an eating disorder. But I did come across one maybe like last week or like a couple days ago and it’s been particularly impactful for me that someone is able to have enough confidence to share that journey and just so reinforces to me that you know, this does happen to you guys and you know, you don’t have a perfect body type.

Fir, who had made themselves safe, queer-spaces online during college (“the people that I follow, I feel like I really learn things from and see myself in”) shifted how they interacted with those spaces during COVID: “I never used to contact people very much over like Instagram DM’s or Facebook Messenger or anything. Um, but now I definitely do that more than I did before, COVID.” In addition, participants described how finding groups of like-minded individuals online, especially ones with synchronous activities, were good for their mental health. Roo explained how an eating disorder recovery group on Instagram where “every two hours they have someone around the world, eating snacks or eating their meal” supported her recovery during quarantine by reminding her to eat. Similarly, Phoebe noted that a Facebook group with live yoga classes helped her feel “part of a community doing classes at the same time each day.”

Education. Participants also noted benefiting from increased access to information and self-education opportunities related, above all, to social justice. Some explained that their social media usage had changed during the pandemic from entertainment to education. For example, Bella noticed herself “using social media as more of like a resource of learning, um, and less of, like, a time filler.” Juan similarly commented that social media had become a place to learn about racial injustice and address his internalized biases. Likewise, Anne reported a significant shift in her Instagram usage away from “fun things” since “now I’m using it more for educating myself.” She further elaborated how her choices about who to follow on social media were now shaped by a desire to learn from marginalized voices, including “following a lot of Black women leaders” and “trying to learn . . . as much as I can from- from Instagram.” Others found powerful educational resources in their closer network: “I think the hardest part is confronting the truth about what racism your friends face,” Afra noted, describing posts by her Black friends that expressed worry about their children’s safety.

Additive and Subtractive Actions

Despite remarks about compulsive usage, participants emphasized a litany of intentional additive and subtractive activities shaping their engagement with their social media accounts. They self-defined these practices in reflexive terms, with several elaborating on the amount of energy they invested to ensure their feed reflected their value systems and was free of potentially harmful elements. Blocking, hiding, following, unfollowing, muting, liking, clicking, and not clicking were all practices participants remarked on as ways of actively managing their experiences on social media and their social media feeds.

Participants utilized subtractive processes like muting, blocking, and divesting from accounts that did not meet their needs as a way of avoiding the potential harms of social media. Grant framed subtractive actions as a mode of self-care:

just for my sanity, like you know there’s different groups on Facebook that, you know, pop up in your feed and I’ve had to physically go in unlike them or unsubscribe to them, just to clean my feed up mentally.

Roo used similarly “hygienic” rhetoric to describe curation and proudly cited themself as “an immaculate keeper of my social media feed.” Several participants noted the immense time and energy spent in these practices. Phoebe, for example, explained the emotional labor she placed into not clicking or closing links on social media and news pages: “I’ll click on it automatically and then I’ll consciously stop and close that window or whatever. Just because I tell myself no, this is not what you need right now.” Participants also noted being disconcerted when content seemed to sneak past their efforts. For example, Marta recounted how her efforts to minimize her exposure to anxiety-producing content were not always successful:
You know, I am a black person but it’s like I was forced to think about it and think about what that means and think about what other people think that means non-stop for weeks and weeks and it was something that was so exhausting to me . . . I tried really hard, you know, on some social medias, you can mute words and I tried to filter out the things that I was coming across, but it still somehow managed to find its way to me.

Participants also created healthier feeds for themselves through deliberative additive actions like commenting, liking, and seeking out posts that they felt affiliations with in terms of race, sexuality, gender, and disability. As mentioned earlier, during COVID-19, this often meant consciously following more educational or social-justice-oriented accounts. Bette, who identifies as half Black half White, reported noting, overall, more Black users “vocal and present” in her social media feed during COVID-19. She reported this increased engagement enabled her to connect with more users and participate in positive identity formation around being mixed race, resulting in “knowing that, I can be both races that I am and also still be quote unquote Black enough.”

For some participants, like Bella, seeking out more educational content meant shifting the emphasis of their content consumption on Instagram toward text-based posts as opposed to photographs. Reducing her consumption of others’ selfies helped her “focus on making goals of substance that don’t just revolve around what I look like.” Several participants connected these additive practices with feeling control over their feed and pride in its contents. Maria described feeling joy because she had followed the right jewelers/artists to generate a “pretty feed” and June explained their social media choices as a form of healing in their daily life: “And I have noticed changes in my media use . . . It’s up but it’s up for the good. Just searching out positive ways to heal.”

Intentional additive and subtractive actions characterized posting habits in addition to feed management. The few participants who increased their posting during the pandemic connected this change to their engagement with current events such as racial justice and COVID-19. Matt had previously pulled away from social media in the midst of his eating disorder; however, his desire to contribute to social justice movements pushed him to be more active with his posting during the pandemic: “it’s been something that I feel like I should be talking about and something that I want to be talking about, so I’ve been posting more.” Likewise, social justice movements led Chelsea to post publicly instead of privately due to the increasingly political nature of this content and her belief that she was sharing helpful, powerful information. Max, on the other hand, found that “not posting” could be a political act. They explained their deliberation about whether or not to post selfies, reflecting on how their normative identities, especially thinness and whiteness, were already overrepresented on social media and could potentially contribute to a “toxic” culture: “I’m a skinny white person and my gender stuff is like not enough to sort of override the fact that we don’t need more images of people like me.”

Awareness of Algorithm

Another salient theme that emerged in participants’ experiences of social media during COVID-19 was their awareness of interactions with social media content filtering and algorithms. Participants described encounters with the algorithm as offering commentary on social expectations and norms for bodies, aesthetics, sociality, and identity politics. These experiences appeared across a number of participant interviews both without any interviewer prompting and when participants were explicitly asked about their impressions of their Instagram Explore page.

Participants who felt their suggested content reflected their hobbies noted feeling the algorithm “understood” them, “got them,” and was “paying attention” to what they followed and clicked. Some even expressed surprise over how well the algorithm appeared to understand their interests, like Bette who noted upon seeing Eating Disorder Awareness content on their Explore page: “that’s pretty cool that that’s what the algorithm thought would suit me.” Participants were likewise aware when the algorithm “didn’t get them” or misclassified them. For example, Geraldo remarked: “This is funny. My Instagram thinks I’m a plus size model who loves Metallica.” Similarly, Anne noted: “Instagram was pretty much convinced that I was a fat person and really wanted to be thin and so it would send me all of these like, ‘How to Lose 15 pounds,’” and described how following more body-positive accounts led to “ironic” encounters with diet posts. The irony Anne describes locates the algorithm as making assumptions about her demographic information and desires for specific social media content. Participants viewed the algorithm itself as perpetuating stigma or expressing biases through its categorization process. Beth noted the algorithm as “politically biased” and having to be careful to avoid undesired news content despite her efforts to only follow or click desirable content. Afra described her impression that Instagram actively censors her feed because she is usually shown small bodies at the beginning of her Explore page and large bodies later on: “I strongly believe that social media caters to certain body types.”

In addition, many participants experienced algorithms as biased toward the promotion of diet culture. Roo noted experiencing the algorithm as connecting seemingly unrelated content to promote diet posts:

every time I click on something makeup-related it instantly will start putting all the different diet related things and it’s always been something that I’m like so fascinated by because of how tailored my feed is like [. . .] but there’s always these random like, oh, here’s this person putting on makeup and then when you click it, you know how the algorithm will then you can keep scrolling and then all of a sudden I’ll start getting diet ads, skinny fit tees.
Many participants coming from the perspective of their eating disorder recovery expressed feelings like Matt’s: “I mean I can never get away from any kind of fitness post,” describing content the algorithm suggests despite their diligent efforts to avoid it. Max notes experiencing YouTube as promoting a “hierarchy of eating disorders,” yet the line between their own actions and the algorithm’s actions seemed blurred: “it seems like either most of the ones [videos] I’m getting recommended or most of the ones that I’m choosing to watch are like about anorexia.” Max thus experienced the YouTube algorithm as co-complicit in their behaviors as it seemed to promote content harmful to their recovery; this enabled him to find “ways to feed that like gross like thing [the eating disorder] with my social media consumption.” In this way, participant experiences of their personal usage habits were sometimes messily entangled with their expectations for algorithmic intervention.

Discussion

Social Media and COVID-19

Our findings illuminate the multifaceted ways participants proximate to online body justice communities experienced and used social media during COVID-19. In line with other studies, we found that, in general, individuals reported spending more time on social media during the pandemic than before it. However, our survey data and interviews indicate that this increased time engaging with social media was primarily in relation to consumption and not to posting, which nuances analyses of how that time was spent. Indeed, many participants reduced the amount of posting they were doing in the wake of the pandemic and the concurrent social justice movements even as they increased their time spent viewing others’ posts.

Most extant scholarship about social media and personal experiences of the pandemic has focused on the negative affects of increased usage triggered by the pandemic. Consistent with these studies, many of our participants reported guilt, frustration, and other negative affects in relation to their increased usage. Several elaborated on how social media in general is unhealthy such that their increased usage placed them at risk of more exposure to “toxic” and harmful content. Concurrently, participants detailed their strategies for mitigating these negative impacts and even making social media a positive space. Social media usage during the pandemic also took on a new level of importance as a mode for connecting to family, friends, affinity groups, and multicultural communities. Many participants expressed how, during this time of isolation, social media helped them feel part of society. Perhaps connected to this sense of belonging, several engaged with social justice with new intensity and shifted their social media use toward self-education.

The changes in social engagement that participants noted were not just due to the pandemic but also due to the highly publicized racism and social justice movements that unfolded during summer 2020. These events generated heightened attention to social media’s role in sociopolitical interactions among participants and an increased understanding of social media as an educational environment. Participants formulated political publics on social media centered around learning from posts and shares, considering posting as a way of taking up “space” and considering when and how to do so themselves. Using their platform in the political sense occupied many participants’ thoughts and awareness of social media to a larger extent than before. When it came to creating or sharing content, many White participants identified a change toward using their accounts to elevate BIPOC voices, rather than their own, such that not posting became a political act. Participants displayed less of their own lives and instead shared more content about racist violence and injustices. Their efforts offer insight into a version of political publics that grows out of education, stepping back, and elevating others’ voices, rather than emphasizing hashtags, performative activism, or even actual mobilization.

While not all of the responses are necessarily COVID-19 specific, it seems the extenuating circumstances of the pandemic and the social justice revolution brought many issues to a head regarding social media (both positive and negative) that prompted individuals to seriously consider, reflect on, or change their usage habits and content consumption. Although these findings are particularly pertinent to understanding the context of the pandemic, their relevance extends beyond it. COVID-19 and the associated months of social distancing restrictions may have fundamentally altered many individuals’ relationships with technology and created shifts in usage that will pervade them into post-pandemic life.

Conceptualizing Curation

One of the most important contributions this study makes beyond the specific context of COVID-19 is the considerable complexity it adds to the notion of social media “curation.” In the inaugural issue of Social Media + Society, Gray (2015) provocatively suggests that social media research should take a “curational approach,” although this short intervention bypasses a detailed elaboration (p. 2). Davis (2017) also asserts the importance of curation by naming it “a key mechanism of sociality in a digital era” and Thorson and Wells (2015) developed the notion of “curated flows” to capture the interaction of individual, social, and algorithmic content selection/circulation online. Despite this work, however, “digital curation remains undertheorized in its own right” and research most often takes a fairly narrow view of curation as a collection practice (Davis, 2017, p. 1). Scholarship in this area focuses almost exclusively on posting practices as a mode of self-presentation and branding or as the driving logic of particular platforms like Pinterest in which users create their own collections of posts and imagery (Hall & Zarro, 2012; Macek, 2013).
Our participants’ narratives made it abundantly clear that, for many individuals, curation is not just a way of compiling information within a given platform or even of performing their own identity through posts. The themes that emerged in this study all reflect users’ understanding of their own role in creating or co-creating their experience on social media. Curation can be understood as an intensive practice through which users manage their feed so that they can experience the benefits of social media and minimize impacts of “garbage” content as well as their own negative usage patterns. These actions are both creative expressions and acts of compulsory self-care, demonstrating a self-managing subject. The influx of toxic content during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many to intensify these curatorial practices or to more deliberately reflect on them. Participants also identified emotional needs and met those needs with social media by, for example, seeking joy in posts about cute animals or creative inspiration through hobby groups and would step back from content that did not meet those needs. The social media feed was experienced by many as an environment, like a home, that requires constant upkeep and cleaning to ensure it remains good for mental health and that too many toxic elements do not accumulate. As a result, some participants noted how they felt pride in how “immaculate” their feed was or in their ability to successfully cultivate a diverse feed. The work participants put into continuously pruning and planting content to shape their feeds, as well as their frequent recourse to hygienic rhetoric to describe these practices, demands further theorization.

Notably, in our study, curation was frequently defined as much by participants’ subtractive actions like muting and unfollowing or even just deciding to “not click,” as by more commonly measured, additive activities like following, liking, and clicking. This framing complicates understandings of lurking as passive or as a unitary category, an activity done primarily out of boredom or disengaged entertainment (Rossman et al., 2016; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). Such conventional conceptualizations also frequently see lurking as potentially detrimental to mental health in contrast to active usage connected to social support (Underwood & Ehrenreich, 2017). There have been a few attempts to address the nuances of lurking by positing the possibility of “engaged lurking” or to address it as a form of “active listening” that suggests a desire for information (Crawford, 2009; Ellison et al., 2020; Fernandes & Castro, 2020). However, these perspectives are still marginal in comparison to the focus on clicking and liking. Subtractive actions and deliberate decisions to not post may need an alternative moniker given the curational agency they suggest. They are often not mere avoidance of challenging topics or conversations, as Hampton et al. (2017) have framed it. Because of individuals’ engagement with their feed and understanding of the algorithm, they recognized subtractive actions as ways of tangibly changing their social media experience.

Daily curatorial practices informed how participants experienced themselves as members of online communities and developed feelings of belonging. These communities emerged through a network of accounts, posts, and #s that met participants’ affective needs and made them feel represented. Many participants also sought affiliatory representations by following accounts posting content that visually and/or textually acknowledged the role of identity in shaping experiences. Finding these representational groups enabled participants’ continued reflections on their own identity formation and intersectional identities more broadly. On the other hand, participant awareness of their group formations as they were reflected in their social media feeds meant they also perceived when their account was generalized into the incorrect group: for example, participants who sought and created body positive content were extremely aware of any posts they encountered as perpetuating diet culture.

There is an increasingly rich body of research on how users imagine the algorithm or understand themselves and their feeds in relation to it (Bucher, 2017; Rader & Gray, 2015). For example, Bucher’s “algorithmic imaginary” considers the co-constituting relationship between users’ awareness of algorithms and how that awareness shapes the algorithm itself. Yet, much of this work is focused on how content creators work in tandem with algorithms as gatekeepers for what content proliferates on the platform or attempt to “reverse engineer” or “game” the algorithm to enhance the visibility of their own content (Bishop, 2018; Bonini & Gandini, 2019). For example, Petre et al. (2019) note “Instagrammers ‘play the visibility game’ to challenge the algorithmically curated ordering of content (Cotter, 2019).”

Although these studies touch on how user choices and algorithmic ones are entangled, they do not capture the extent to which users see themselves and their identities in dialogue with the algorithm in their everyday (active and “passive”) media usage. By attending to how content affected their feelings toward themselves and others, participants crafted online experiences to meet their psychological, emotional, and communal needs. In our interviews, this dialogue was explicitly figured by some participants who personified the algorithm as a human interlocutor (i.e., Anne’s narration cited earlier: “Instagram was pretty convinced that . . . and then I started to convince them”). When participants noticed aspects of their feed outside of their preferences, they altered their online behaviors to shift their consumption toward content they felt helped them cope or moderate their presence in communities. Given the centrality of identity work to this process in our sample, further research is clearly needed to investigate how identities impact experiences of algorithmic biases and affiliations. The participants’ experiential knowledge of their interventions meant they also understood surprising and unexpected content to be overriding their preferences, that is, they experienced the platform as co-shaping their experience. For many of our participants, social
media algorithms seemed to have morphed into an entity that was always, uncannily, just one step ahead.

**Conclusion**

Our study methodology enabled us to center participant experiences of social media, rather than specific knowledge of social media platforms and their archaeologies. The interview questions regarding social media followed a longer discussion, allowing the interviewer and the participant to establish a rapport and delve deeper into potentially sensitive topics. In addition, our recruitment of a diverse participant sample, particularly in terms of body-size, queer, and ethnic/racial identity, is a strength of the study. The study team was also itself diverse, allowing the team’s analysis to better reflect the experiences of POC and TG/NB individuals from their many standpoints. Finally, the conditions of participants’ lives during COVID-19, including changed social, leisure, and labor relations, enabled this timely study on participant experiences with social media. Still, there are limitations to our findings worth noting. As a result of the broader study focus, most participants identified with having a history of or currently experiencing some form of disordered eating; thus, themes around eating disorder recovery communities and diet culture were likely more salient within our study participants than within a general population. In addition, because we recruited participants through social justice and body justice social media accounts, it is therefore possible that themes around social justice activation online may also be elevated. As such, conclusions should be hesitantly drawn for awareness of these themes in other samples. Given the confluence of impactful political events and COVID-19, this study does not disentangle participant’s experiences of the pandemic from other contexts.

Collectively, this study examined participant experiences of changes in their social media use during COVID-19. Participants reported more time spent with social media weighted toward content consumption as opposed to posting. Corroborating extant research, they reported overall negative affect connected to social media in tandem with overall negative affect in COVID-19 (Drouin et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Ni et al., 2020). Complicating these negative reports, the study participants also described the nuances of online community building and how digital connectivity served as a coping measure during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, many participants described new tendencies to use social media as an educational opportunity and resource-building tool, oftentimes by shaping the algorithm’s understanding of their preferences.

This article adds to scholarship on social media beyond COVID-19 through a robust description of participants’ curatorial practices. Our expanded definition of curation includes both additive (posting, clicking, liking) and subtractive (unfollowing, not-clicking, not-posting) practices, analyzing them as labor-intensive tools for managing affect, identity, and public belonging in a volatile social media ecosystem. Furthermore, our findings shed light on how individual users engage the obscure processes of algorithms to mold or co-produce their online experiences to suit their identities and to prophylactically guard against toxic content. The way in which self-reflective usage habits work in tandem with algorithmic agencies is a key feature of curation that demands further scholarly attention. The study’s emphasis on body justice groups also suggests curatorial practices are context-dependent and may be more prevalent for marginalized communities. This valence requires further scholarly research to investigate the intersectional nature of social media use. As data analytics infrastructure continues to anchor the basic functioning of platforms and as users become increasingly aware of how these processes act on them and their social media feeds, intricate curatorial practices and dynamic dialogues with algorithmic judgments may increasingly scaffold individuals’ experiences of their socially networked worlds.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**ORCID iDs**

Amanda K. Greene https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1035-5617
Devin A. Kelly https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6635-726X

**References**

Anderson, M., & Vogels, E. A. (2020, July 27). Americans turn to technology during COVID-19 outbreak, say an outage would be a problem. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/31/americans-turn-to-technology-during-covid-19-outbreak-say-an-outage-would-be-a-problem/

Aparicio-Martinez, P., Perea-Moreno, A. J., Martinez-Jimenez, M. P., Redel-Macias, M. D., Pagliari, C., & Vaquero-Abellan, M. (2019). Social media, thin-ideal, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes: An exploratory analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16*, Article 4177. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16214177

BBC. (2021, April 22). George Floyd: Timeline of black deaths and protests. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world/us-canada-52905408

Bishop, S. (2018). Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm. *Convergence, 24*, 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978

Bonini, T., & Gandini, A. (2019). “First week is editorial, second week is algorithmic”: Platform gatekeepers and the platformization of music curation. *Social Media + Society, 5*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880006
Branley, D. B., & Covey, J. (2017). Pro-ana versus pro-recovery: A content analytic comparison of social media users’ communication about eating disorders on Twitter and Tumblr. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, Article 1356. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01356

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflective) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780870.2020.1769238

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21, 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Crawford, K. (2009). Following you: Disciplines of listening in social media. *Continuum*, 23, 525–535. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903003270

Davis, J. L. (2017). Curation: A theoretical treatment. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 770–783. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1203972

De Choudhury, M., Kiciman, E., Dredze, M., Coppersmith, G., & Kumar, M. (2016). Discovering shifts to suicidal ideation from mental health content in social media. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. CHI Conference. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. (pp. 2098–2110). https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858207

Drouin, M., McDaniel, B. T., Pater, J., & Toscos, T. (2020). How parents and their children used social media and technology at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and associations with anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 23, 727–736. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0284

Ellison, N. B., Trigū, P., Schoenebeck, S., Brewer, R., & Israni, A. (2020). Why we don’t click: Interrogating the relationship between viewing and clicking in social media contexts by exploring the “Non-Click.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 25, 402–426. https://doi.org/10.1093jcme/zmaa013

Elsani, M., Rickman, A., & Vaccaro, K. (2015). ‘I always assumed that I wasn’t really that close to [her]’: Reasoning about invisible algorithms in news feeds. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. (pp. 153–162). https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702556

Etter, M., & Albu, O. B. (2021). Activists in the dark: Social media algorithms and collective action in two social movement organizations. *Organization*, 28, 68–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508420961532

Feldhege, J., Moessner, M., Wolf, M., & Bauer, S. (2021). Changes in language style and topics in an online eating disorder community at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Observational study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.2196/28346

Fernandes, T., & Castro, A. (2020). Understanding drivers and outcomes of lurking vs. posting engagement behaviours in social media-based brand communities. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36, 660–681. https://doi.org/10.1080/026757X.2020.1724179

Feuston, J., Taylor, A., & Piper, A. M. (2020). Conformity of eating disorders through content moderation. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1145/3392845

Galletta, A., & Cross, W. E. (2013). Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication. NYU Press.

Gao, J., Zheng, P., Jia, Y., Chen, H., Mao, Y., Chen, S., & Dai, J. (2020). Mental health problems and social media exposure during COVID-19 outbreak. *PLOS ONE*, 15, Article e0231924. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0231924

Goodman, L. A. (1961). Snowball Sampling. *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32, 148–170. https://doi.org/10.1214/aoms/1177051548

Gray, M. L. (2015). Putting Social Media in its place: A curatorial theory for media’s noisy social worlds. *Social Media 2015, 1*, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115578683

Greene, A. K., & Brownstone, L. M. (2021). “Just a place to keep track of myself”: eating disorders, social media, and the quantified self. *Feminist Media Studies, 1–18.

Hall, C., & Zarro, M. (2012). Social curation on the website Pinterest.com. *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 49, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1002/meet.14504901189

Hampton, K. N., Shin, I., & Lu, W. (2017). Social media and political discussion: When online presence silences offline conversation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 1090–1107. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1218526

Hanckel, B., Vivienne, S., Byron, P., Robards, B., & Churchill, B. (2019). “That’s not necessarily for them”: LGBTIQ+ young people, social media platform affordances and identity curation. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41, 1261–1278. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719846612

Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17, 13–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345

Herrick, S. S. C., Hallward, L., & Duncan, L. R. (2021). “This is just how I cope”: An inductive thematic analysis of eating disorder recovery content created and shared on TikTok using #EDrecovers. *The International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 54, 516–526. https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23463

Hocken-Buyers, H., Pope, S., & Jamie, K. (2021). Digital pruning: Agency and social media use as a personal political project among female weightlifters in recovery from eating disorders. *New Media & Society*, 23, 2345–2366. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820926503

Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30, 377–386. https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893
Islam, A. N., Laato, S., Talukder, S., & Sutinen, E. (2020). Misinformation sharing and social media fatigue during COVID-19: An affordance and cognitive load perspective. Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 159, Article 120201. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120201

Jackson, J. (2021, March 8). Asian Americans confront a new wave of racial violence. Chicago Sun-Times. https://chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2021/3/8/22320054/asian-american-hate-violence-racism-jesse-jackson

Keles, B., McCrae, N., & Grealish, A. (2020). A systematic review: The influence of social media on depression, anxiety and psychological distress in adolescents. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 25, 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851

Khamis, S. M., & Vaughn, K. (2011). Cyberactivism in the Egyptian revolution: How civic engagement and citizen journalism tilted the balance. Arab Media and Society, 14, 1–25.

Kim, S., & Kim, S. (2020). The Crisis of public health and infodemic: Analyzing belief structure of fake news about COVID-19 pandemic. Sustainability, 12, Article 9904. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12239904

Lapenta, F. (2011). Some theoretical and methodological views on photo-elicitation. In E. Margolis & L. Pauwels (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of visual research methods (pp. 201–213). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446268278.n11

Lee-Won, R. J., Herzog, L., & Park, G. S. (2015). Hooked on Facebook: The role of social anxiety and need for social assurance in problematic use of Facebook. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 18, 567–574. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0002

Liu, C., & Liu, Y. (2020). Media exposure and anxiety during COVID-19: The mediation effect of media vicarious traumatization. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17, Article 4720. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17134720

Macek, J. (2013). More than a desire for text: Online participation and the social curation of content. Convergence, 19, 295–302. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856513486530

McCombie, C., Lawrence, V., Schmidt, U., Dalton, B., & Austin, A. (2020). “Now it’s just old habits and misery”—Understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people with current or life-time eating disorders: A qualitative study. Frontiers in Psychiatry, 11, Article 589225. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.589225

Mundt, M., Ross, K., & Burnett, C. M. (2018). Scaling social movements through social media: The case of black lives matter. Social Media & Society, 4, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118807911

Nabity-Grover, T., Cheung, C. M., & Thatcher, J. B. (2020). Inside out and outside in: How the COVID-19 pandemic affects self-disclosure on social media. International Journal of Information Management, 55, Article 102188. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102188

Ndasauka, Y., Hou, J., Wang, Y., Yang, L., Yang, Z., Ye, Z., Hao, Y., Fallgatter, A. J., Kong, Y., & Zhang, X. (2016). Excessive use of Twitter among college students in the UK: Validation of the Microblog Excessive Use Scale and relationship to social interaction and loneliness. Computers in Human Behavior, 55, 963–971. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.10.020

Newall, M., & Chen, E. (2020, May 7). Coronavirus prompts increased use of video chat platforms for work, connection. Ipsos. https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/coronavirus-prompts-increased-use-of-video-chat

Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Fuchs, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2020). Changes in digital communication during the COVID-19 global pandemic: Implications for digital inequality and future research. Social Media + Society, 6, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255

Ni, M. Y., Yang, L., Leung, C. M., Li, N., Yao, X. I., Wang, Y., & Liao, Q. (2020). Mental health, risk factors, and social media use during the COVID-19 epidemic and coronal sanitaires among the community and health professionals in Wuhan, China: Cross-sectional survey. Journal of Medical Internet Research Mental Health, 7, Article e19009. https://doi.org/10.2196/19009

Nutley, S. K., Falise, A. M., Henderson, R., Apostolou, V., Mathews, C. A., & Striley, C. W. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disordered eating behavior: Qualitative analysis of social media posts. Journal of Medical Internet Research Mental Health, 8, Article e26011. https://doi.org/10.2196/26011

Orlowski, J. (2020). The Social Dilemma. https://www.netflix.com

Pearl, R. L. (2020). Weight stigma and the “Quarantine-15.” Obesity, 28, 1180–1181. https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.22850

Petre, C., Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2019). “Gaming the System”: Platform paternalism and the politics of algorithmic visibility. Social Media + Society, 5, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119879995

Primeau, L. A. (2003). Reflections on self in qualitative research: Stories of family. The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 57, 9–16. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.57.1.9

Purkayastha, B. (2020, April 15). Divided we stand—The pandemic in the US. openDemocracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openmovements/divided-we-stand-the-pandemic-in-the-us/

Rader, E., & Gray, R. (2015). Understanding user beliefs about algorithmic curation in the Facebook news feed. In Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 173–182). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? Research in Nursing & Health, 23, 334–340. https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240x(200008)23:4<334::aid-nur9>3.0.co;2-g

Santarossa, S., Coyne, P., Lisinski, C., & Woodruff, S. J. (2019). #fitspo on Instagram: A mixed-methods approach using Netlytic and photo analysis, uncovering the online discussion and author/image characteristics. Journal of Health Psychology, 24, 376–385. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316676334

Santarossa, S., Lacasse, J., Larocque, J., & Woodruff, S. J. (2019). #Orthorexia on Instagram: A descriptive study exploring the online conversation and community using the Netlytic software. Eating and Weight Disorders, 24, 283–290. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-018-0594-y

Sponcil, M., & Gitimu, P. (2013). Use of social media by college students: Relationship to communication and self-concept. Journal of Technology Research, 4, 1–13. https://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/121214.pdf

Tai, D. B. G., Shah, A., Doubeni, C. A., Sia, I. G., & Wieland, M. L. (2021). The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial
Author Biographies

Amanda K. Greene (PhD, University of Michigan) is an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Research Associate at Lehigh University’s Humanities Lab. Her research interests include visual culture, disability studies, media history, and feminist theory.

Elana Maloul (MA, University of Michigan) is a doctoral student of English Language & Literature at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include media theory, gender studies, and contemporary American literature.

Devin A. Kelly (MA, University of Denver) is a doctoral student of Counseling Psychology at the University of Denver. Her research interests include psychotherapy, mental health, weight stigma, diet culture, and relationships.

Hannah N. Norling is a master’s student of Counseling Psychology at the University of Denver. Her research interests include weight stigma, defining recovery from an eating disorder, and barriers to care in marginalized populations.

Lisa M. Brownstone, (PhD, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) is an assistant professor of the Practice at University of Denver’s Counseling Psychology Department whose scholarship, teaching, and clinical practice center on disordered eating, LGBTQ+ health, trauma, and anti-weight stigma.