Objectification, Sexualization, and Misrepresentation: Social Media and the College Experience

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Abstract
Social media use can have major impacts on one’s construction of identity, sexuality, and gender. However, some social media sites exhibit problematic and prejudiced themes through their photo and video posts. This paper examines two Instagram sites specifically targeting traditionally college-aged individuals. These sites have tens of thousands of followers, post frequently, and solely focus on highlighting the college experience. Through a textual analysis of these two sites, problematic themes emerged, including objectification of female college students, submissiveness of female college students, and emphasis on a young white collegiate experience. These themes are detailed and explored, followed by a discussion on their potential impacts on broader societal structures and ideas for education on gendered prejudices in the media.

Keywords
social media, gender, sexuality, prejudice, college, pedagogy

With 800 million active monthly users, Instagram is the second most popular social networking site in the United States (Smith & Anderson, 2018). In fact, the image-sharing app has doubled its user base in the last 2 years with 71% of its users between the ages of 18 and 24 (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Given these demographics, it’s of no surprise that dozens of Instagram pages dedicated to the collegiate lifestyle have emerged with immense popularity.

Instagram pages like Four Year Party and College Nationwide boast tens of thousands of followers interested in getting an inside peek into the college lifestyle. Four Year Party has over 81,500 followers and emphasizes the tagline, “We are not here for the credits, just for the parties!” College Nationwide encourages its 57,600 followers to check out “Hot chicks and rad pics.” With such a broad reach of a very specific demographic, the influence of these two pages is something to consider. But what kind of influence do these pages have?

Four Year Party and College Nationwide share photos and short videos to tens of thousands of college-aged people on a daily basis. These posts receive thousands of likes, comments, and shares. However, the messages these pages are promoting are problematic in that they reinforce the racialized and gendered inequalities present in US culture. Through a textual analysis of the two Instagram pages, hegemonic themes emerge. These themes are as follows: objectification of female college students, submissiveness of female college students, and emphasis on a young, white collegiate experience. This article attempts to further explore these themes and discuss their implications on broader societal structures. Ideas for pedagogy to disrupt these prejudices are also discussed.

Social Media and Gendered Issues
Social media use greatly impacts self-identification and self-construction of gender, especially among female users (Blower, 2016). Online environments allow women to create their own image of self and construct their own idea of femininity. The role of sexuality in these online environments holds major influence in this self-construction. Sexuality discourses on social media are shaping women’s experience with technology, their perceptions of themselves, and ultimately, their educational and career choices and goals (Ashcraft, 2015). Young women can actively participate in this sexual conversation via sexting and sexual messaging through apps like Snapchat. These experiences can shape a
woman’s gender construction and self-expectations of sexuality as early as 12 years old (Garcia-Gómez, 2017).

While many of these choices are played out in an online or virtual environment, the consequences of these choices translate over into the real world prompting both psychological and physical effects. More frequent use of image-based social media platforms like Instagram is linked to greater self-objectification, especially when the user engages with celebrity culture (Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2017). However, this link to also present when the user engages with non-celebrities on social media as well. The use of social media to observe and monitor attractive peers, combined with exposure to increasingly sexualized mass media, stimulate self-objectification and critical self-surveillance over time (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). This self-objectification and self-surveillance can lead to a misunderstood or misrepresented idea of peer norms regarding sex. Van Oosten, Peter, and Vandenbosch (2017) suggest this misrepresentation can lead to greater promiscuity among teenage users and even a willingness to engage in casual sex offline based on online perceptions of peer norms. Social media can perpetuate rape culture offline via online celebration of male sexual conquests and sexualization of women (Sills et al., 2016).

Both male and female users report psychological impacts due to exposure to sexualized social media content. For example, greater Facebook involvement predicted greater body consciousness and thus greater chances of body shaming regardless of gender (Manago et al., 2014). However, this link was stronger for female users. This gender difference is worth noting and does appear as a prominent theme in research across this area of interest. The portrayal of each gender in a social media environment can be problematic, especially when this portrayal is occurring in the realm of sexuality. Sexualized body parts claim different responses based on gender. Male abs are viewed as sexualized, yet strong, dominant, and desirable. Female breasts, on the other hand, are viewed as sexualized, yet objectified and shameful (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Males are more likely to be shown on social media as dominant, active, and independent, while feminine traits include attractiveness and dependence (Rose et al., 2012). Even athletes, who regardless of gender are strong and active, fall victim to gendered roles on social media. Male athletes appear in active performance roles, while female athletes tend to be posed in non-active positions (Emmons & Mocarski, 2014).

The production of social media is also important to understand when analyzing gendered issues online. Social media creation is gendered free labor (Duffy, 2015). Many social media sites, including the two chosen for this analysis, Four Year Party and College Nationwide, survive solely on user-generated content mostly from female users. Women create their own photos or posts and send them into these sites with no financial reward. In return, they get “likes” and followers. They are providing unpaid labor to help bolster these male-dominated sites of production. Though these photos are typically generated by women, they fall victim to the male gaze via captioning, edits, and comments. This male gaze places women in objectified roles from the get go (Mulvey, 1999).

It is valuable to also consider a postfeminist approach when discussing social media and the construction of gender. While male captioning, edits, and comments do place women in objectified roles, original content created by women on social media can prove to be empowering. Social media platforms are distinct from traditional media in that they give the user power. Historically, women were solely consumers of media, but social media allow women to be creators. Young women should be taken seriously as cultural producers (Dobson, 2015). Women can use social media to create and distribute their own self-representations to the public. Pop celebrity Miley Cyrus serves as a highly visible example of the power of social media for self-construction of identity. Miley used her Twitter page to counteract her Disney-manufactured image of “the girl next door.” She used Twitter to publicly display hidden aspects of her identity and construct herself as a self-proclaimed “freak” in an effort to empower herself and other young women (Dubrofsky & Wood, 2014).

Postfeminist empowerment isn’t only reserved for young women on social media, as demonstrated by a case study on women over 40 using Instagram (Tiidenberg, 2018). These women used Instagram to reinstate their visibility and to push back against the notion that middle-aged women are no longer worthy of public display. They used Instagram to promote themselves in the realms of fashion, fitness, and traveling, and provided resistance to the cultural norm that women over 40 should only self-identify as non-sexual mothers and caretakers.

The postfeminist viewpoint on social media and self-construction of identity is, however, complicated and its nuances should be recognized. Ringrose (2011) described social media platforms as “gendered and sexualized risk and opportunity,” emphasizing the complexities that must be addressed. Social media platforms can serve as potential sites for resistance and independence, but can still reify the objectification and sexualization of women online. Van der Nagel (2013) explored this duality in a case study of reddit gonewild—a social media site encouraging amateur pornography through user-submitted photos. Women anonymously post photos of their naked bodies to this site. In return, they receive the pleasure of other users’ admiration and the comfort of anonymity. However, Van der Nagel (2013) found that the most popular section of the site was dominated by young, white, female bodies, thus serving as an exclusionary site to people who don’t fit those categories. This exclusionary theme was also found in the analysis of two Instagram sites for the current study, as the content was focused on the young, white college experience.

Gill (2007) articulated the complexities of a postfeminist reading of social media sites saying, “notions of autonomy,
choice, and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline, and the vilification of those who make the wrong choices” (p. 163). Women can use social media to become important creators of cultural content and self-construct their own gendered and sexual identities. In many ways, social media can serve as a unique site of resistance that is not available via traditional media platforms. However, these sites can also serve to exclude certain groups and allow for the objectification of women. Women may post sexually-explicit photos online for their own empowerment, but through male commenting, editing, and redistributing, this content can be transformed into degrading and objectifying material. Because social media platforms are open to the public and fairly easy to use, original content of women embracing their sexuality and femininity can be quickly and easily transformed into sites of hostile surveillance via the male gaze. It is important to realize this duality of freedom and oppression offered by social media.

**Media and Intersectionality**

In addition to understanding gendered issues on social media, it’s also important to analyze intersectionality, including issues of race and class. The relationship between these issues form a complex problem in today’s media environment. There has been a battle in traditional media outlets for greater diversity on and off screen. This battle is bleeding over into newer media technologies like social media and video game studies. Robinson, Callister, Clark, and Phillips (2008) suggested that characters in some video games fall subject to gendered and racial prejudices, emphasizing the intersectionality of the issue. More male than female characters where shown and female characters were shown in sexualized roles. In addition, most of these characters were white, with the Hispanic culture vastly underrepresented. Waddell, Ivory, Conde, Long, and McDonnell (2014) noted similar findings, suggesting white male characters were disproportionately represented against females and characters of color. The authors also argued that character portrayals in video games can influence users’ perceptions of social reality.

While on-screen representation continues to be a point of contention among scholars and practitioners, behind-the-scenes representation is becoming a battleground as well. While traditional media outlets like television shows are including more casts of diverse backgrounds, the production of these shows is still dominated by white males (Molina-Guzmán, 2016). The barrier to entry for production jobs is high for females and non-whites. Current media practices not only create barriers to inclusion for certain groups, but tend to normalize existing patterns of relegation on and off the screen (Tukachinsky, 2015). Social media is an interesting medium to explore because it combines user production and user consumption, thus perpetuating these intersectional problems.

Social media knocks down barriers to entry for many groups. No special skills are needed to create a social media post. While the inclusion is a positive, this can lead to issues as well. With no real monitoring system or set of ethics, as would be employed by traditional mediums, social media posts go largely unfiltered and unregulated. This can lead to a resurgence of racism online (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015). Social media platforms have also been accused of reproducing whiteness and discrediting non-white experiences (Nakayama, 2017). This is especially relevant for sites that promote the collegiate lifestyle like the ones being explored in this study.

Diversity is an important topic in college recruitment, especially in the media produced by colleges to recruit students of color. While there has been a push for college recruiting materials to show more diversity in its student body, some colleges are actually being criticized for overshowing or exploiting the topic (Pippert, Essenbury, & Matchett, 2013). Because some of these traditional college recruiting techniques have come under fire, many students are using social media to do their own research on perspective schools. Black students, especially, are using social media tools to scout for colleges that adhere to their values and needs (Matabane & Merritt, 2014). However, some students of color are dealing with racial issues during this process. There is a perception that “college student” means young, white person, and excludes people based on age and race (Hinton, 2016).

**Fraternity Culture and Hyper-Masculinity**

Almost 400,000 undergraduate men are members of collegiate fraternities in the United States (North American Intrafraternity Conference [NAIF], 2016). Their influence on college campuses has been a hot topic of debate among university administrators, and has gained the attention of the national media. In a 2016 interview with U.S. News & World Report, Harvard University president Drew Faust said, “They (fraternities) play an unmistakable and growing role in student life, in many cases enacting forms of privilege and exclusion at odds with our deepest values” (Mills, 2016). Given this potential for problematic social influence, it is important to understand hyper-masculine fraternity culture and its role in the marginalization of female students.

The structure of collegiate fraternities and sororities, commonly referred to as “Greek Life,” reinforces separate and gendered social spheres. Fraternity members live in all-male environments that are situated as hyper-masculine and sexualized spaces. Female sorority members, while also living in a single-gender environment, do not enjoy the same privileges of sexual control and (mis)conduct. These women must adhere to strict rules about male guests and are encouraged to socialize within the cultural codes of the fraternity house (Sweeney, 2014). Through these gendered double-standards,
Greek Life serves to facilitate male dominance and female submissiveness. The fraternity structure confirms male dominance and aggression as sexually appropriate behaviors for young men (Kalof & Cargill, 1991). This confirmation is visually reified through the Instagram posts of the two sites explored in this study, as the theme of male domination/female submissiveness emerged.

All-male groups, like collegiate fraternities and athletic teams, create an environment that fosters hyper-masculinity in its members. These hyper-masculine attitudes lead to an increase in viewpoints that justify rape and sexual aggression toward women (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Men involved in fraternities are more likely to be hostile against women who have rejected their sexual advances in an attempt to save face among their male peers. This emotional hostility leads to increased physical and sexual aggression toward women (Corprew & Mitchell, 2014). Fraternity membership is also linked to favorable group perceptions of high-risk alcohol use and approval of non-consensual sex (Kingree & Thompson, 2013).

In addition to sexual aggression toward women, the objectification of women is also linked to collegiate fraternity culture. Bleecker and Murnen (2005) found that men involved in fraternities had significantly more images of sexualized women displayed in their rooms than men not in fraternities. These images were significantly more degrading toward women, reinforcing women’s roles as sexual objects. Seabrook, Ward, and Giaccardi (2016) suggested that this objectification is related to increased sexual violence toward women. Their findings stated that young men in fraternities are more accepting of the objectification of women as a masculine social norm, and feel more pressure to uphold these norms given their all-male environment. This theme of objectification of women is also prominent in the Instagram posts of the two sites analyzed for this study. The cultural problems of the objectification of women and sexual aggression toward women are prominent among collegiate males, especially those involved in Greek Life. This study argues that these real-world injustices are being reinforced online via social media platforms, helping to perpetuate the cycle of gendered violence and inequality among college-aged individuals.

**Method**

A total of 600 Instagram posts from Four Year Party and College Nationwide were analyzed during this textual analysis. A total of 300 posts from each site were collected through screenshots. The number of likes and top comments were included in the screenshot. The two sites were chosen based on number of followers, frequency of posts, and dedication to showcasing the collegiate lifestyle. Four Year Party has over 81,500 followers and posts videos or photos several times a day. College Nationwide has 57,600 followers and posts daily. Using the previous research detailed above as a guide, a textual analysis was conducted to tease out common themes among the 600 posts. These themes are as follows: objectification of female college students, submissiveness of female college students, and emphasis on a young, white collegiate experience.

**Objectification of Female College Students**

The first theme discovered through this textual analysis is the objectification of female college students. Women are displayed frequently as sexual objects on both Four Year Party and College Nationwide. The most reoccurring type of post across both sites highlights the attractiveness of a single female college student or a group of female college students. These are usually posted daily and show female students from a variety of colleges. An example of this kind of post features two young women. It is nighttime and they are standing side-by-side in a swimming pool in knee-deep water. Their backs are to the camera, each topless, wearing only thong bikinis with a spotlight shining across their lower backs. The photo cuts off at the women’s necks, and their faces are not in the shot. Their bodies are tan and thin with their backs arched and their buttocks centered in the photo. The caption states, “Vols bitch,” referring to the University of Tennessee and their mascot the Volunteers. The women’s names are not revealed and the focus of the post is their sexualized body parts rather than their faces or smiles.

These frequent types of posts, usually occurring daily, attract the attention of thousands of followers with likes and comments on how sexually attractive these female college students are. The posts feature women from different colleges, but they are usually posed in similarly provocative ways with little or no clothing on. The women’s faces are rarely shown and many times the women’s backs are to the camera. By not naming the women, showing them without clothing, and focusing on their sexualized body parts rather than their faces, the women are viewed as objects of desire not as individuals. In fact, the viewer comments suggest no one really cares who they are as long as they can be viewed and sexually fetishized. The male gaze upon these women is dominant.

The view of women as objects rather than individuals reemphasizes the idea that men should be able to determine a woman’s worth by her use-value. Men use and gaze upon women as they see fit, disregarding any individuality. A photo on College Nationwide shows four young women holding hands on the beach with their backs to the camera. The women have on thong bikinis. The caption underneath reads, “Line ‘em up & rate ‘em,” encouraging male followers to rate the women’s bodies, specifically their buttocks. This photo gained over 1300 likes and almost 70 comments where male commenters ranked the women on a scale from 1 to 10.

In addition to objectifying female college students through the male gaze, their bodies are objectified through action. That is, female bodies are actually used as objects in many of
the posts. One such post shows a young tanned woman in a black bikini on a patio. Her back is to the camera with her face cut out of the photo. The center of the photo highlights her buttocks clenching a can of Budweiser. The caption reads, “The Booty Koozie.” In this case, her buttocks are actually being used as an object—a beer can koozie. There are several other posts showing women holding beer cans with either their buttocks or their breasts. Their bodies are viewed as simply a means to hold alcohol to be used to the benefit of men.

Female breasts and buttocks are also used as writing materials and message boards to display the mottos and slogans of the two Instagram sites. One video post shows a young college woman face down on a bed. She is topless with only a thong bottom on. The video shows her pulsating her buttocks as the words, “4 Year Party” are written across them. Again, her face is not shown and the video cuts off at her neck. The caption reads, “We Love Spring Break.” This post has almost 46,000 views. Sometimes, the message written has to do with the college experience itself. Another post centers on two naked breasts, covered only by the female’s hands. One breast says “Rush” and the other shows the Greek symbols for the fraternity Pi Kapp. Fraternities, typically all-male collegiate organizations, are using female body parts as objects upon which to write recruitment messages for other young men.

Women’s bodies are shown as gifts to be given, received, and exchanged by men. This kind of objectification was especially prominent on these sites during Christmas time. One post shows a young woman in a thong one-piece, again with her back to the camera, and her face covered by long blonde hair. She has a gold bow on one of her buttocks with the caption, “One present to open on Xmas eve.” A similar post features two young women in red and white bras and panties with Santa hats on. They are standing side by side in a giant box with a bow and ribbon on it, signifying them as gifts to be had.

One of the most common video posts show women’s breasts or buttocks being used as funnels. One example is a video of a group of college students on the beach for Spring Break. A young woman in sunglasses and a black bikini top is pressing her breasts together with her hands. Meanwhile a young man is kneeling before her with his mouth at her breasts. Another hand pours a bottle of vodka down the woman’s breasts while the man drinks it from between them. The caption reads, “Who need cups when you got boobs? NO ONE!” There are over 2700 Instagram posts with the hashtag #BoobLuge. Buttocks are also used as funnels for alcohol. One such video shows a young woman with a bikini cover-up on. A young man comes up behind her without her knowing and pulls up her cover-up, revealing only a black thong bikini bottom. Another man starts pouring beer down her lower back. The first young man starts drinking the beer from between her buttocks. The caption reads, “Sometimes you gotta work for it if you really want it.” This shows not only female objectification, but unwanted and unknown male advances.

The objectification of women’s bodies is visually prominent across these 600 posts. However, another layer of objectification is added through the captions and hashtags created by the sites’ designers. These textual elements add another dynamic to this problematic theme because the objectification is not subtle or unspoken, it is announced and celebrated. One post features a female college student with her breasts on display and the caption, “Load the cannons.” Here, female breasts are referred to and treated as weapons. A young woman in a similar pose was given the caption, “Tits out for Tigers,” relating to her school’s collegiate mascot. This post emphasizes female body parts as a way to celebrate a male sporting victory. Because these sites are focused on the college experience, sports is a common theme across many of the posts. Female collegiate athletes are typically sexualized. A photo of a collegiate volleyball team was posted with the caption, “Volleyball shorts though.” This post does not celebrate the athleticism or accomplishment of the team, but instead sexualizes the athletes and only focuses on their bodies. Another post shows a college woman with a shirt on that reads “Fucking is my Cardio,” insinuating that sex is the only acceptable athletic activity for a female.

These captions hold a lot of power on these social media sites. They can turn a fairly common and non-problematic photo into one that objectifies women with a few words. For example, there are many photos of college students on Spring Break. Yes, they are shown in bikinis, but given the beach setting, they are not overtly sexual or objectifying. However, by adding certain captions, a different effect is made. Captions like, “Shoreside cheeks,” “Cheeks out for Spring Break,” and “Cheeks out in January,” now turn the focus of the photo onto the women’s buttocks. A few simple words can make all the difference. Women are also usually referred to as “buffs, dimes, chicks, and babes.” Using these terms discounts the individual and groups all female college students into the category of nameless sexual objects.

**Women as Submissive to Men**

Another theme uncovered during this textual analysis is the idea that women are submissive to men, specifically, female college students are secondary and submissive to their male counterparts. This theme is perhaps the most disturbing because it shows and encourages the assault of women. In many posts, women are shown as victims of male aggression or violence, and this aggression is celebrated as part of male dominance and masculinity. There are several photos of young men biting young women’s breasts and slapping their buttocks with captions like, “This dude is doing Spring Break right,” and “After this he died a happy man.” A slow-motion video shows two women standing next to each other in bikini’s with their backs to the camera as two male hands smack both of them from behind. The caption reads, “Ask and ye
shall receive.” A similar slow-motion video shows a man slapping a woman’s buttocks with the caption, “Hit ‘em from the back.” Another photo shows a woman in a bra and panties lying face down on a bed with a red handprint on her buttck. The caption reads, “Always leave your mark.”

Male aggression and violence toward women is celebrated and rewarded in many of the photos and videos on these sites. This theme suggests women are submissive to men and justifies dominant male behavior and physical strength over them. In addition to physical violence against women, sexual aggression and violence is also highlighted and encouraged. Several videos show men taking sexual advantage of asleep or intoxicated women both in the public and the private spheres. One video shows a young man holding up a woman who is so drunk she can barely stand up on her own. They are at a crowded outdoor party, and he is kissing her forcefully with his hand between her legs. The couple falls over with the man landing on top of the woman as they hit the ground. The caption reads, “Pubic display of affection.” Another video shows an almost identical situation at a bar. A young man is holding up a highly intoxicated woman with his hands up her shirt. They eventually both fall over, again with the man falling on top of the woman. A photo displaying this theme shows a male college student sucking on an intoxicated woman’s breasts in public, while another post features a woman in a submissive position on her back while men drink alcohol off of her bare stomach.

Some of these posts take place in public, at parties or outdoor events, but other posts were created in the private sphere then shared with the public via the Instagram pages. One photo shows a woman face down on a bed naked in the dark. The caption reads, “She’s busy, text later.” A similar photo shows a young woman lying on her side on a bed naked, with an emoji to cover her genitals. Another explicit photo is taken from the viewpoint of a man receiving oral sex from a female with his hand pushing down her head. It is obvious that these photos were taken in the private sphere, and the women were unaware they were being taken and then subsequently shared online to tens of thousands of people.

The privacy of the bedroom is also made public with the hashtags #Shacker and #ShackerSunday. These hashtags refer to a female college student who stays over at a male student’s room on a Saturday night after having sex. There are thousands of posts under these hashtags that include both photos and videos. These posts show women as unwanted problems for men to get rid of after sex. It demeans women and rewards in many of the photos and videos on these sites. These texts place women in subordinate roles to men. “Saturdays are for the Boys” is a motto created by the Instagram site Bar Stool Sports, but many other sites, including Four Year Party and College Nationwide, have adopted this motto. It is geared toward collegiate communities and emphasizes the dominance of men and male bonding and the blatant disregard for women in general.

#SaturdaysArefortheBoys is connected to over 85,000 Instagram posts. Similar hashtags like #CocksOnTop reiterate the theme of male dominance and female submission.

The celebration of male bonding at the expense of females plays out in many posts. Several photos show groups of male college students drinking, partying, and laughing with captions like, “Reliving last weekend with the boys,” and “When you see your boy taking home a slam.” Another post shows a sad puppy sitting at a bar with a drink in front of him with the caption, “Don’t worry, no one even remembers you tossing hog in that fat chick last night.” This post compares women to hogs and celebrates men acting as “dogs,” a term typically used to describe a man who is only concerned with sex.

Sometimes, these words and texts are more than just captions on an Instagram site. One post shows a jersey associated with a Fraternity, as the Greek letters are printed on it. The front of the jersey reads, “Crushing Puss since ‘69.” This post refers to women as only their sex organs (and in a demeaning way) and highlights male violent sexuality by choosing the word “crushing” to imply sex. The caption reads, “Aggressive. Tag a Sig Nu,” encouraging these sexually aggressive males to tag one another in the post as a way to show their approval.

The theme of submissiveness of women is reified through many of the captions that accompany the social media posts. These texts place women in subordinate roles to men. “Saturdays are for the Boys” is a motto created by the Instagram site Bar Stool Sports, but many other sites, including Four Year Party and College Nationwide, have adopted this motto. It is geared toward collegiate communities and emphasizes the dominance of men and male bonding and the blatant disregard for women in general. #SaturdaysArefortheBoys is connected to over 85,000 Instagram posts. Similar hashtags like #CocksOnTop reiterate the theme of male dominance and female submission.

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**Emphasis on a Young and White College Experience**

The third and final theme uncovered is the emphasis on a young and white college experience. Diversity is rarely shown across all 600 posts, with most male and females being Caucasian and traditionally college-aged. Ageism is especially apparent and most of the posts that include older people tend to mock them. One video shows an older woman with wrinkles and gray hair drinking out of a flask and wearing green for St. Patrick’s Day. She is surrounded by young people at an outdoor party. The caption reads, “The fossil of a sorority girl celebrating St. Patrick’s Day.” A video along these lines features an older woman with wrinkles and gray hair at a bar with college-aged men. One of the young men is pouring beer down her shirt while the other is drinking it.
from her breasts. The captions reads, “Grandma’s boob luge, too.”

There is an idea across these age-related posts that older people were more valuable when they were younger and they yearn to reclaim those college years. One post shows a photo taken in the 1970s of a group of college-aged women on the beach in swimsuits. The caption states, “Your mom used to kill a bikini.” Older men are also subjected to this mockery. One video shows a man with a white beard dancing behind a young female. It is evident by her face that his attention is unwanted, and there is laughter in the background. The caption reads, “When alumni go back to undergrad bars,” implying this man is trying to relive his college experience, but he is being rejected. Another video shows an older man with white hair and wrinkles dancing behind a college girl. This video is also shown in mockery and the caption says, “Get it gramps.”

In addition to discrediting the non-traditionally aged college student experience, these posts discredit a non-white experience. Out of all 600 posts, only two showed a non-white college experience. These were the “girl of the day” posts mentioned earlier that feature an attractive college girl for males to gaze upon. Two of these posts featured non-white women, but they were still shown as sexual objects. Diversity among college students is completely ignored across both Four Year Party and College Nationwide.

One video post does address the issue of race, but in a mockery similar to the age-related posts. This video shows an older, overweight, black, female employee at a bar. Young white men are dancing and partying around her when one of the men pushes his face in between her breasts. Everyone starts laughing and cheering and the accompanying caption says, “Clueless to what he just experienced.” This sexual experience is not celebrated as they are with the posts that feature white men pushing their faces into the breasts of young white women. In fact, this post suggests unfamiliarity with non-whites and does so in a mocking manner. It is also of note to notice that one of the few black figures in these posts is a bar employee, also bringing to light power imbalances and class issues.

**Conclusion**

Social media use can have major impacts on young people’s construction of self, especially with regard to gender, sexuality, and identity (Garcia-Gómez, 2017). This essay argues that certain Instagram sites geared toward college students are perpetuating gendered injustices and inequalities through their photo and video posts. Through a textual analysis of Four Year Party and College Nationwide, themes indicating this problematic situation were uncovered. These themes are: objectification of female college students, submissiveness of female college students, and emphasis on a young, white collegiate experience.

On both Instagram sites, female college students are portrayed as objects to be gazed upon by their male counterparts. They are pictured as sexualized and nameless objects of desire with no identity or personality of their own. More concretely, their bodies are shown as physical objects to be used by men. Women’s breasts and buttocks are used as funnels and koozies for alcohol, message boards to write mottos and sayings, and decorated gifts to be given, received, and used by males.

Female college students are shown as submissive to male college students. They are photographed in submissive poses lying on their backs or their stomachs. They are also subjected to physical and sexual aggression and violence through slapping, groping, and forceful sexual advances. Female privacy is frequently violated on these sites as photos and videos are taken of naked and unconscious women and then posted online for all to view. Masculinity and male bonding are celebrated and encouraged, especially at the expense of women.

The final theme discusses the emphasis on a young and white college experience. All of the women deemed sexually attractive are Caucasian and traditionally college-aged. In fact, older people are frequently mocked when placed in traditionally collegiate situations like parties, beaches, or bars. People of color are rarely shown and when they are they are also mocked or looked at as “other.”

A postfeminist reading of these Instagram sites is valuable. Social media platforms can serve as sites of potential resistance for women and other marginalized groups, and give users power to create their own content. Social media platforms can allow women to construct their own gendered identities and provide sites for women to promote and celebrate their sexuality and femininity. Much of the content on Four Year Party and College Nationwide is submitted by female users, thus promoting a sense of postfeminist empowerment. However, the addition of male commenting, editing, and redistributing replaces this empowerment with the constraints and prejudices of the male gaze. The content submitted by male users without female consent are especially problematic and dangerous.

These Instagram sites are geared toward college students. These are the young men and women who will potentially be in successful, powerful, and even leadership roles in our society going forward. It is disheartening and frankly fear-inducing that these themes of gendered and racial prejudices are so evident on social media sites with tens of thousands of college student followers. Not only are these prejudices and injustices tolerated, but they are celebrated. These types of social media platforms should be more closely examined and analyzed to better understand the challenges facing women and people of color in the collegiate setting and to try to encourage young men to leave these practices behind.
Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers unique insight into the popular narrative of the collegiate lifestyle via social media, it is, of course, subject to limitations. The two Instagram sites chosen are dominated by white, heterosexual users, as reflected in the user-generated content, likes, and comments. A limitation of this study is its inability to understand how marginalized groups understand and interpret these social media sites. Conducting this analysis using a queer lens, for example, could provide valuable and perhaps contrasting conclusions that unfortunately are not present in the current research.

Future research on this topic would benefit from different qualitative methods. It would be interesting to conduct interviews or focus groups with college students of different ages, races, and genders to gauge their reaction to these pages. Is there resistance to these type of sites? If so, where is that resistance stemming from? Having alternative views and opinions to the ones expressed on these sites would prove beneficial in helping to shut down the gendered and racial stereotypes and prejudices these social media sites perpetuate and celebrate.

Further research on this topic would also be beneficial in creating and deploying pedagogical techniques to combat these gendered prejudices. Media educators should have open discussions about gendered issues in their classrooms to promote constructive discussion among both male and female college students. Topics like sexuality, male domination, and female body image can be taboo, and understandingly, many educators avoid these issues in their classroom discussions. However, educators have the power to create safe and non-judgmental spaces where these conversations can happen. This is especially important for communications students who will go on to create and distribute media of all different kinds. Communications students now will determine the media climate in the future, and it is our job as media educators to make sure they are equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to fight for equality.

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.

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