SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT AT A PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

A doctoral thesis presented

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Abstract

As Generation Z (Gen Z) begins to replace the millennial student in higher education institutions, institutions will need to understand and plan for a generation unlike any other. With consideration to the high level of social media use by Gen Z and a gap in the literature surrounding this topic, this dissertation uses student development theory, specifically Arthur Chickering’s Seven Vectors of College Student Development, to explore the role social media plays in the perceived experiences of the Gen Z student during the first year of college at a private liberal arts institution in North Florida. This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis collected data from eleven first-year student participants over the course of three semi-structured interviews to add to the growing conversation in the literature regarding the generation and gaps in understanding of how they use social media. Four superordinate themes and sixteen subthemes emerged from the data collected leading into five findings which revealed that the many assumptions placed on Gen Z may not be an accurate representation of the group. Additionally, it became clear that institutions will need to evolve their practices in order to best serve the new generation of student. From the findings presented, five recommendations for practice are made as well as recommendations for future research.

*Keywords*: social media, Generation Z, first-year student, liberal arts college, student development, first-year experience
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two of the best friends a lady could ask for, Zack Thomas Paull and Cooper T. Moore, who put up with me during the process, my feline research assistant, Lola, who offered her support by napping on my notes, my mom and dad, who now have bragging rights, and to all of my friends, colleagues, and students that have provided encouragement along the way. Cheers!
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Each generation inevitably comes with a set of quirks that has the previous generation thinking something along the lines of “kids today” or “back in my day.” Within the last decade these simple, generational quirks have evolved to become significant lifestyle traits for Generation Z (Gen Z), a generation marking the end of the highly discussed millennial. While the millennial has now advanced beyond a traditional college age and begins to embark on post-college life, Gen Z is filling the residence halls on college campus across the county. This study aims to shift the focus away from the millennial experience in higher education and to the experiences of the new generation taking their place.

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological study is to understand the role social media use plays in the experiences and development of the Gen Z student during their first-year of college, specifically at a small, private liberal arts institution in North Florida. While a majority of research to date has focused on the millennial student experience, Gen Z has only just begun the transition into higher education. With the significant shift in generational attributes, this qualitative study aims to inform institutions of the role social media use is playing in student development during the first-year and retention into the second year, while possibly alleviating obsolete assumptions held by institutions.

Statement of the Problem

In the fall of 2017, the incoming class of 2021 featured a solid assortment of Gen Z with students being born between 1999 and 2000. Generation Z, or Gen Z, is a recently defined group of individuals that follow closely behind the millennial. While millennials are made up of those born roughly between 1980 and 2000, Gen Z is comprised of individuals who are born anywhere
between 1996 and 2000 to present (Brown, 2017). While there is a great deal of debate among researchers on where the separation between generations lies, a point of agreement comes down to members of Gen Z having limited or no recollection of the events that took place on September 11, 2001 and having never known a time without social media (Top 10 Gen Z and iGen Questions Answered, 2016). Researchers will argue that these two groups are significantly different and that Gen Z should not fall under a millennial generalization.

Along with showing higher levels of diversity and educational involvement, the incoming class exhibits a level of connectivity that has not been seen in previous generations; the exception to this being the later millennial born just prior to the Gen Z separation (Top 10 Gen Z and iGen Questions Answered, 2016). As of November 2016, 86% of individuals aged 18-29 used at least one social media site (SMS), Facebook being the most popular at 88% (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2017). With this level of connectivity, institutions need to be informed of what Gen Z students are doing and where they are doing it, though many members of college administration, staff, or faculty are not from digital or cloud-native generations and may not see this as a point of importance.

Gen Z has been offered a unique opportunity being brought up in a time of smartphones, social media, internet, and an intense focus on achieving an education beyond high school, greatly changing the way they go about making major decisions; including choosing where to go to college. This generation is able to shop around for higher education and, if the institution does not meet their needs physically, mentally, or financially, can quickly move on to the next option. Increased mobility and endless options resulting from a high level of connectivity may become a contributing factor to lower retention rates for institutions.
While a majority of literature is aimed at millennials and their experiences as first-year students, limited work published on the subject of Gen Z, social media use, student identity development, and the impact on retention rates in spite of research showing that institutions need to have an understanding of their students’ social and academic needs (Strange, 2004). Previous studies done on similar topics of student engagement by Malinga-Musamba (2014), Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison (2013), and Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea (2008) agree that a student being engaged in campus life, whether socially or academically, is essential to successful continuation toward a degree. Alongside student engagement, LaBrie, Ehret, Himmer, & Prenovost (2012) look at how alcohol is adopted as a coping mechanism during adjustment into college life, however, it does not take social media use into consideration, leaving a large gap in the literature for social media and Gen Z who could be engaging in risky activities through these means. Regardless of the angle taken by the researcher, the literature provides both negatives and positives that come from social media use by students. Studies have shown that social media can be beneficial in connecting students of diverse backgrounds and promote success for students when they are encouraged to use various forms of technology (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013; Shatto & Erwin, 2017). Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2015) offers an opposite argument in finding that social media use distracts from traditional college activities.

For the purpose of these studies, student engagement is considered something as modest as living on campus or participating in educationally purposeful activities. While these ideas may have worked on previous generations that had no choice but to go outside and participate in college life, how can institutions engage a student that is permanently attached to their smartphone, prefers Twitter to email, or does not leave the residence hall to interact with the world around them (Brown, 2017)? Answers to the question posed above are not readily
available in the literature, yet the reason remains unclear. It can be speculated that the gaps could be due to the speed in which technology comes and goes and research not being able to keep up with the changes. Facebook has held strong for nearly a decade while other platforms have not been so fortunate. Within the last year, or so, Yeti, Yik Yak, and Vine have met their end almost as quickly as they arrived. Data from recent surveys show that no one is safe from an untimely exit. Facebook, for example, has not been immune to a decline in use with 25% of 13 to 17-year-olds leaving the platform in 2016. The Center for Generation Kinetics (2016) argues this is because these users feel that Facebook is for older generations and prefer more visual applications such as Snapchat or Instagram.

The intended audience of this study includes any member of the five generations present on college campuses today: the greatest generation (born prior to 1945), the baby boomer (born 1946 to 1964), Generation X (born 1965 to 1976), the millennial, or Gen Z themselves (Brown, 2017). Shatto & Ervin (2017) and Brown (2017) recognize the distinct age diversity that is becoming the standard on campuses as younger individuals rise to faculty positions and older generations remain who are not ready to retire. Through evaluating how the student makes sense of the experiences, this study seeks to understand Gen Z’s use of social media during their first-year of college and bridge the digital gap between generations.

**Significance of the Research Question**

Gen Z lives in a world where endless information is at their fingertips, with a simple Google search. While institutions can utilize this level of interconnectivity to their advantage to frame how the student perceives them in marketing and attracting prospective students, institutions can also experience a great deal of negativity, including bad press, from something with their name on it going viral.
In October 2016, Hurricane Matthew took out his fury along the east coast of Florida causing severe flooding and devastation to those in its path. Whitehall College, the institution of focus for the study, is located mere steps from the Intracoastal Waterway in St. Augustine. The college was greatly impacted by the storm both physically and digitally. Not only did the town and campus experience feet upon feet of flood waters and loss of student, staff, and faculty homes, but videos of the college going underwater went viral across SMS. The spread was so wide that various national media outlets, such as CNN and The Weather Channel, were showing the images live on air.

A simple video that was less than a minute long created a lot of questions from current students, friends, families, and prospective students as to whether or not the campus was safe and if they made the right choice choosing Whitehall College. This single event was a turning point for an upper administration who had previously viewed social media as a fad or something that would go away. The realization of social media being where the students are and how Gen Z will make decisions became a harsh reality. Since Hurricane Matthew, admissions have continued to have questions about storm preparedness and overall safety. Even with all efforts made, applications were withdrawn based how students perceived the events via social media.

Unfortunately, the city was hit once more by Hurricane Irma in September 2017. This time the damage sustained by the college and city was significantly less, though the city still flooded. Along with Irma being a different storm and coming across land in a different fashion than Matthew, the college was digitally ready to prevent a social media frenzy and to protect the physical campus from experiencing further damage. After the storm, the president of the college led a Snapchat tour of the campus to help ease the minds of students that were evacuated. The social media team even released the video to other SMS to ensure proper coverage to anyone
who may not use Snapchat. Whitehall College is just a single example of how social media is changing the way students see perspective colleges. Along with natural disasters, social media has helped amplify a vast array of protests and events, even those that are not necessarily associated with the institution itself, such as the white supremacist march that took place at the University of Virginia in August 2017.

Institutions are not the only ones who may experience adverse effects from SMS. Behaviors that risk the mental or physical well-being of a student who is transitioning into college life may manifest into social or academic issues down the road. The Pew Research Center reports that nearly four-in-ten Americans have experienced online harassment from an internet troll, an online bully, to some extent. The experience left 44% claiming emotional stress and 29% feeling physical threatened (Duggan, 2017). Existing literature presents a general overview of risk behaviors, however, there is limited information available as to how Gen Z is experiencing this phenomenon. With casual dating or hookup SMS and applications (apps), such as Tinder or Bumble, could these of interactions be occurring outside of a physical space and be more escalated than we realize?

Even with the potential for negative experiences, students may see a great deal of positive identity development come from an institution being in tune with their needs and experiences (Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013). Malinga-Musamba (2014) notes that this generation communicates differently than generations of the past and has a different set of expectations that need to be taken into consideration when Gen Z is adjusting to the challenges presented by college life. Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2015) encourage faculty and staff to plan for social media use since this is a trend that will not be exiting any time soon. Within the past year, the
administration at Whitehall College has taken more care in interacting with students in a way they are more at ease with through SMS.

In alignment with the idea that Gen Z communicates differently, a significant admissions culture shift has occurred within the last few admitted classes. Admittance notices now go out electronically and is followed by a physical welcome packet that includes a #WhitehallAccepted sign that students are encouraged to use for SMS selfies. There is also an exclusive Facebook “Class of” group where newly admitted students can meet each other and share in the excitement of going to college. Unlike previous generations where a student would get an acceptance letter, then not think too much about it until fall, Gen Z expects to be connected as soon as the deposit posts, if not sooner. SMS allow for the institution to focus on students in the way they have grown accustomed to, however, it is still too early to tell if this type of interaction is producing the desired outcome of fostering cohorts of students that continue year to year.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

Gen Z is beginning to become the majority of students on college campuses, slowly squeezing out the millennial student that has been the predominant focus of researchers to date. The purpose of this study is to understand how Gen Z’s social media use differs from that of previous generations, and how this use is affecting their identity development during the first-year of college.

**Research Question**

How do Gen Z students perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first-year of college?
**Definition of Key Terminology**

The following terms are defined in relationship to SMS to help guide the audience through the study as many may not align with a standard dictionary definition.

**Applications (Apps)** - Social media sites that are typically only available in the smartphone application form and not as a traditional website. Some examples include Bumble, Snapchat, or Tinder.

**Emoji** - An icon used to express emotion through SMS or other messaging platforms.

**First-year Student** - For the purpose of this study, an individual who has recently graduated from high school with no previous higher education experience.

**Follow (Twitter/Instagram), Friend (Facebook)** - Connect with an individual or group via the preferred SMS. Terms for this activity will vary depending on platform.

**Generation Z (Gen Z)** - A generation following the millennial that was born after 1996 and generally has no memory of the events that occurred on September 11, 2001. Furthermore, Gen Z has never known a time without social media. These factors serve as a significant distinction in research between who is a millennial and who is Gen Z (Top 10 Gen Z and iGen Questions Answered, 2016).

**Hash Tag (#)** - Originally used by Twitter users but has now spread to other sites, such as Facebook. Denoted by the pounds sign, #, to identify a keyword or phrase that can be searched for on a social media site.

**Internet Troll (Person) or Trolling (Action)** - Someone who deliberately makes an offensive claim toward another user to cause upset or elicit an angry response.
Millennial- A cohort of individuals born roughly between 1980 and 2000, preceding Generation Z.

Snap- To send a message or photo via the Snapchat application. These messages and photos will disappear after the time set by the sender expires.

Social Media Sites (SMS)- Social media is a broad term used in identifying means by which people engage one another in discussion and share content (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2017). The most popular platforms of social media at the time of this study include, but is not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn (Social Media Fact Sheet, 2017).

Viral- To be spread quickly across the internet and various SMS.

Theoretical Framework

Several approaches have been taken in researching the topics of identity, student engagement, millennials, and student development, yet there remains little research in how these topics apply to Gen Z. In effort to include Gen Z in the conversation of student development theory this Gen Z, social media focused study will take an IPA approach utilizing the ideas of Arthur Chickering’s (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) Seven Vectors of College Student Development. While the vectors were developed in a time well before SMS and Gen Z, they remain open-ended enough to apply in a modern context of student development in a digital environment during the first-year of college.

Student development theory is an overarching and highly debated theory featuring a variety of viewpoints and disciplines which emphasize the development of the whole student (Jones & Stewart, 2016). The foundation for the modern form of the theory can be traced back to the American Council on Education Studies’ report on The Student Personnel Point of View...
(SPPV) (1937), though the concept has existed throughout the history of higher education (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). While many of the ideas presented in the original report are extremely dated by modern ways of thinking, the foundational ideas of student development remain relevant. The original SPPV prepared for these changes by recognizing that the report is not a static document and that an appointed committee would need to engage in continued research to remain relevant with the times (Marsh, 1937).

Jones & Stewart (2016) explain modern student development theory as occurring in waves, with the SPPV occurring in the first wave. Issues associated with the foundations of student development theory include a majority of the guiding questions and theories reflecting the societal standards of the time in which they were developed, often focusing on the white, privileged male. The theories were also based on a positivist, epistemological approach, which significantly limited the ability to look at the lived experiences of the individual student.

The second wave branches out to look at the bigger picture of the student experience and includes a stronger focus on race, gender, class, and sexuality and allows for a more constructivist, phenomenological approach (Brown, 2016; Abes, 2016). The second wave sets the stage of progressive thought for the third wave, which is currently playing out in institutions with the entrance of Gen Z. The third tackles power structures and marginalized groups, challenging social norms and assumptions. This wave is often associated with social justice topics and challenging a perceived status quo.

In the late 1960s, student affairs scholar Arthur Chickering expands on the ideas of identity creation as a piece of the development puzzle and creates the Seven Vectors of College Student Development (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The seven vectors defined by Chickering include:
• Developing competence;
• Managing emotions;
• Moving through autonomy toward interdependence;
• Developing mature interpersonal relationships;
• Establishing identity;
• Developing purpose;
• Developing integrity.

Within the vectors, there is no set order of occurrence. Students may experience them at any given time and possibly in combinations. For example, while establishing identity, the student may also be struggling with managing emotions (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). While the environment of where these experiences take place has significantly changed over the years, the foundational ideas benefited from minimal revision over the years to reflect changes in language and societal views (Higbee, 2002).

**Critics of Student Development Theory**

Since beginning in the 1930s, student development theory has grown to encompass a wide variety of viewpoints and topics across psychosocial, cognitive, person-environment, maturity, and identity-related categories (Jones & Stewart, 2016). The theory has also found a home across the positivism, constructivism, and critical theory paradigms, depending on how the study is approached (Abes, 2016; Jones & Stewart, 2016). Focusing in on a specific point of student development theory can prove daunting with the lack of solid boundaries and continuous changes in generations. Despite the flexibility of the theory, researchers understand that this
single idea is not a means to an end and that knowledge beyond theory is also crucial (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Student development theory has evolved past a singular focus on the privileged, white male, to include marginalized groups and question systems of oppression and power structures (Abes, 2016; Brown, 2016). Regardless of this progress, Abes (2016) argues the positivism and constructivist paradigms fail at empowering marginalized groups and the future of student development theory should be viewed through a critical theory lens. In the same vein, Winkle-Wagner (2012) warns that while there are countless benefits from using psychological and sociological perspectives when studying identity, a number of conflicting perspectives can arise in trying to determine what is right and wrong forms of development.

Brown (2016) finds the foundations of student development theory to be compatible with reviewing student digital development or digital identity formation but does not discount the need for the theory to evolve to enhance the experiences of a new generation. The new generation may be having experiences that were not even a consideration when the initial theory was formed; thus requiring assumptions to be revisited and possibly revised.

A common theory referenced alongside student development theory is Astin’s (1999) theory of college student involvement, otherwise known as student engagement. This theory looks at the correlation between the amounts of time spent engaging in college life, whether it be academic or social, and the effect it has on persistence. Junco (2012), Junco, Heibergert, & Loken (2010), and Heiberger & Harper (2008) utilize Astin’s (1999) theory as the lens for reviewing student social media use, Facebook and Twitter specifically, by students in higher education, though does not focus on first-year students, Gen Z, or newer forms of technology. Student development theory and student engagement theory have also crossed paths, such as in
Junco & Chickering’s (2010) study on utilizing technology to maximize a students’ identity development, success, and engaging in civil discourse.

**Rationale for Use in Study**

The rationale for choosing student development theory with a focus on identity development is that many of the foundational ideas are enduring and can be modified to fit into a digital context (Brown, 2016; Higbee, 2002). Chickering’s vectors were originally presented in the 1969 publication *Education and Identity*, then slightly reworked in the second edition of the text in 1993 with co-author Reisser. At the time of both publications, identity was something that would be developed within a physical space rather than a digital one. Brown (2016) argues that modern identity development follows a similar process, just in a digital space rather than a physical one. The example provided by Brown (2016) describes a situation where roommates have a disagreement. In the past, the fight may have been verbal or physical. Today, the same fight may take place on SMS through cyberbullying or trolling (Brown, 2016). In sum, the process has not necessarily changed, yet the environment in which it occurs has, ultimately leading to different outcomes when paired with the vectors.

Along with experiencing situations in a different way, research on millennials has noted shifts in identity given the different qualities these students are bringing to college. Strange (2004) questions whether or not interdependence would be more important to that generation than autonomy given their level of connectivity, involvement, and diversity. Brown (2016) and Turner & Thompson (n.d.) confirm this movement toward interdependence in Gen Z with the continued exhibition of similar characteristics of the millennial and the intense desire for approval via social media likes or follows. However, when considering current post-college
trends of the millennial, the process may take longer for Gen Z to achieve than it has for past generations.

For the purpose of this study, it is recognized that there are several layers of the student development theory onion and that this study is only one part of a complex puzzle. The research has shown that millennials are different compared to other generations and it is predicted that Gen Z will continue this trend. By understanding that generational change is inevitable and that technology is here to stay, institutions should aim to “advance knowledge and understanding of the new student populations” (Winkle-Wagner, 2012, p. 56). This process can begin by utilizing the seven vectors to understand the experiences of Gen Z.

**Applying the Seven Vectors to a Gen Z Study**

Following Brown’s (2016) critique on the necessity of student development theory evolving for a digital era, the study will utilize definitions of the seven vectors from the 1993 update in addition to defining how each vector will be applied to Gen Z’s identity development in the digital spaces, otherwise noted in this study as SMS.

**Developing competence.** Chickering & Reisser (1993) describe competence as a “three-tined pitch fork” breaking the concept down into intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competencies (p. 53). Intellectual competence is defined as acquiring skills within a subject from being exposed to different academic programs, such as general education at a liberal arts institution. Physical competence can be obtained from engaging in athletic or artistic endeavors, such as participation in athletics, intermural sports, theatre, or other participatory events. Interpersonal competence involves basic human skills such as listening, asking questions, engaging in meaningful dialog, and self-disclosure; all skills that, at the time of publication, were
assumed to be developed and practiced within a physical space as the SMS of today had not yet been developed.

While the first two parts of the vector are still easily satisfied by campus events, classroom time or other methods of engagement, the third part can be focused in on to look at how SMS is altering traditional interpersonal skills. Modern technology is eliminating the need to communicate in person, as shown in Brown’s (2016) roommate example. Chickering & Reisser (1993) describe a number of interpersonal skills and human relations that, when applied to Gen Z, become a part of a world without actual human interaction. For example, group projects no longer have to take place in the library or a central meeting spot, but rather in a group chat on WhatsApp or via FaceTime, feelings are expressed with an emoji, and making a commitment is as unassuming as accepting a Facebook event invite. There is little doubt that how Gen Z develops competence will need to be viewed through both a physical and digital lens.

Managing emotions. Managing emotions within this vector is a complex endeavor for any emerging adult. Chickering & Reisser (1993) waste no time in identifying that all students come to college with “emotional baggage” whether it stems from unhealed wounds, repressed anger, or distorted ideas about sex (p. 83). Even the well-adjusted student will be presented with both positive and negative emotional situations throughout the first-year. With Gen Z, these situations will inevitably involve SMS. The authors describe four points of toxic feelings, all of which can be either quelled or escalated through SMS. The four toxic feelings include:

1. fear and anxiety;
2. anger leading to aggression;
3. depression, guilt, and shame;
4. dysfunctional sexual or romantic attraction.
The first toxic feelings, fear and anxiety, are manifested for first-year students greatly through not knowing what to expect during the transition into college. Finding friends, appearance, grades, professor relationships, classroom interactions, and roommate conflict are just a few of the factors discussed by the authors. SMS can serve as a medium to alleviate some of this anxiety, such as allowing for classmates to meet well before arriving to campus as Gen Z prefers to initiate interaction in a digital space and report receiving emotional support from these connections (Status of Mind: Social media and young people's mental health, 2017).

On the flip side, SMS can also act as a medium to release anger or aggression (Status of Mind: Social media and young people's mental health, 2017). Students who were exposed to anger or violence as a child may have a harder time sorting out this emotion with males exhibiting the greatest tendency towards aggression (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Gen Z has the potential to take anger to SMS in the form of cyberbullying, trolling, or harassment with Facebook being the SMS where this activity is most likely to occur (Status of Mind: Social media and young people's mental health, 2017).

The third toxic feeling described, depression, guilt, and shame, can result from a variety of factors and is often internalized out of fear of embarrassment. Many students may experience these feelings as a result of another person’s anger or aggression through SMS or by not performing at the perceived level of close friends. A 2017 report released in the United Kingdom by the Royal Society for Public Health estimates that anxiety and depressions rates in college-age individuals has risen nearly 70% in the last 25 years and can be correlated to excessive social media use in recent years (Status of Mind: Social media and young people's mental health, 2017).
The final toxic feeling, dysfunctional sexual or romantic attraction remains extremely relevant today through Title IX cases and the rising popularity of dating apps such as Tinder or Bumble where someone can match with a complete stranger within the set area and age ranges. It is understandable that new found freedom can bring questions and curiosities, though it can also promote risky behaviors that can loop back around to the other three toxic behaviors, ultimately becoming a vicious cycle that can jeopardize social and academic successes.

Chickering & Reisser (1993) believe that while entering college is an emotionally turbulent time filled with a number of uncertainties, there is a great value to be found in the experiences so long as students are not left to their own devices. To help aid students in these experiences, the authors suggest practicing integration or learning ways to cope, help students understand that they are not alone, and engage mentors in the process rather than leaving the emotions to be expressed through simply an emoji.

Moving through autonomy toward interdependence. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence is comprised of three pillars:

1. emotional independence;
2. instrumental independence;
3. interdependence.

The basis of emotional independence is the student realizing that they are the adult in the room and no longer relying on the safety net of parents or the like. Instrumental independence encompasses the ability to be self-sufficient and able to function in a new place. In other words, be able to go off to college and maintain themselves. Finally, after a certain level of
independence has been achieved, interdependence allows for students to contribute to the world around them, either through a career or as a functional member of society.

Considering the level of Gen Z’s connectivity and the post-college trends of the millennial, this vector may prove to be a challenge to achieve fully during the college years in the modern world. With rising student loan debt and a bleak job outlook, many millennial students are opting to move back home after receiving their degrees. In 2016, 15% of 25 to 35-year-olds were reported to be living in their parents’ home, with 91% reporting they had been so for more than a year (Fry, 2017). While Gen Z is only beginning to enter college life, the data could serve as a predictor of how this vector could change in the near future.

**Developing mature interpersonal relationships.** This vector is a follow up to moving toward interdependence. Chickering & Reisser (1993) argues that by understanding themselves, students are better able to understand others “with all their flaws and strengths, rather than distorting the view with rose-colored glasses” (p. 147). Within this vector tolerance and appreciation for the differences in others along with the capacity for intimacy are key points. Again, this vector can prove to be difficult to achieve with the nature of how many relationships are cultivated digitally and with the generational divide in acceptance of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community.

Hookup culture is a trend that has become more popular as ideas of gender roles, religious ideals, and premarital sex have changed (Arnold, 2010). Apps that can create meetings within a single left swipe, such as Tinder or Bumble, could be changing the landscape of dating and intimate relationships. Oliver (2017) argues that Tinder “was invented to actualize pornographic fantasies of hooking up with women for sex only without intimacy, if not without intersubjectivity” (p. 103). However, the data appears to show the apps being used more for
finding friends, entertainment or for a confidence boost with only 20% of Tinder users surveyed reported actually using it for casual hookups (Logue, 2016).

In terms of non-traditional relationships, Chickering & Reisser (1993) note difficulties associated with someone who is unable to fully express their preferences for fear of violating a social norm. Even with 92% of LGBT adults feeling that society has made great strides in acceptance, 39% reported being rejected by family or a close friend and 30% report being physically attacked for their sexual orientation or gender identity (A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, experiences, and values in changing times, 2013). College can become a stressful time as students struggle to find themselves, leading into the next vector establishing identity.

**Establishing identity.** This vector often acts as the nucleus in which the other vectors orbit and is often what is referred to as college being a time to find oneself. Chickering & Reisser (1993) breaks this vector down into two experiences that occur during the development process, the crisis and the commitment. The crisis is not necessarily a traumatic event, but rather a moment where change is bound to occur. Commitment refers to the choices made such as political affiliation, religion, sexual orientation or career path.

Identity development is an extremely complex vector which can be viewed through a psychological lens, a sociological lens, or a balanced mixture of both, but should not be expected to provide a one size fits all answer (Winkle-Wagner, 2012). Winkle-Wagner (2012) presents the usefulness of both perspectives stating that while a psychological approach can help institutions predict the behavior of the group the sociological perspective allows for a holistic focus on the individual, which can aid in the creation of commitments and ease the inner struggle caused by not conforming to social norms.
Modern topics of identity that can be enhanced, for better or for worse, through social media include: body positivity, gender identity, sense of self, stability, and self-acceptance. Status of Mind: Social media and young people's mental health (2017) reports that 70% of 18-24-year-olds would consider cosmetic surgery in order to look better in photos posted to SMS, even though those photos are often heavily edited. On the flip side, the report notes the positive role SMS can play in identity in allowing for individuals of similar interests to connect or build an “identity catalogue” via liking or following groups, pages, or other individuals (p. 14).

**Developing purpose.** Developing a purpose essentially means finding an interest, creating goals, making a plan to attain those goals, and persisting no matter what. For the first-year student, this purpose may be something as simple as finding a major and minor that suits their interests and persisting into the second year. Toward the end of the college career, establishing a career path and personal interest become the center of importance.

Ironically, Chickering & Reisser (1993) notes that digital competency may be in order to do well in the near future. The authors discuss the potential need to become a beginner again and learn the skills associated with technology, something that is easily ingrained with Gen Z the moment they can pick up their first iPad, leading to a deviance in how an older generation and newer generation find purpose.

**Developing integrity.** Closely aligned with establishing identity and developing purpose, developing integrity is the final vector in the list, though not necessarily the last vector to be experienced by a student. First-year students often come to college with a set of principles fostered from years of living at home, attending church, or from experiences associated with a more controlled environment. Coming to college can challenge these principles as students
encounter moral dilemmas, hard life lessons, or new situations. Chickering & Reisser (1993) break developing integrity into three, overlapping ideas, including:

1. humanizing values- moving away from assumptions to benefit the individual as well as the group;
2. personalizing values- understanding one’s own values while respecting another;
3. developing congruence- matching personal values with “socially responsible behaviors” (p. 237).

Integrity may be a challenge for Gen Z in a life split between physical and digital means. While it is rare, but not unheard of, that an individual will start a physical fight over a difference of beliefs, individuals feel more comfortable to engage in this type of activity via SMS. Additionally, with a shift in socially responsible behaviors, many students may find themselves breaking free from the ideals of their family as they experience the new found freedoms of college life.

Conclusion

As Gen Z begins the journey into college life, institutions can expect to see changes in how student development is taking place. While similar to the millennial, Gen Z is already beginning to show differences in how they operate and what they need from institutions in order to be successful. Traditional assumptions may no longer hold true when attempting to reach this group. A continuing trend that institutions need to realize the location in which development is taking place during the first-year and how Gen Z makes sense of the experiences.

Activities such as engagement in college life or risk behaviors are still present, however, they are occurring more and more within a digital space rather than a physical one. With such a
great risk of negative experiences during the first-year combined with the mobility of Gen Z, institutions could face retention issues as a result. Chapter two will take a closer look at how the literature defines characteristics of the five different generations present in higher education today, how social media and institutional assumptions play a role in the college transition, and how risky behaviors are playing out in connection to social media use and the transition into college life.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Institutions already realize that incoming first-year students greatly differ from previous generations, yet continue to ask what is wrong with them (Leese, 2010). While the answer is not entirely clear, it is certainly not that there is anything wrong with the new generation, they are simply different. Generation Z is a highly connected group that communicates differently than previous generations, is more diverse, and has more choices than ever when it comes to higher education. Through the unknown, tensions between generations can arise from each party being at extreme ends of the digital spectrum. With five generations represented on today’s campus, institutions will need to understand where each one is coming from before they can determine how to meet in the middle to achieve the best possible results.

To support the goals of understanding Gen Z’s perceptions of how social media impacts their development during the first-year, this review will look at research available regarding the modern campus climate. Literature selected offers a current and well-rounded representation of the experiences of today’s student. A deviation from the intended study is that a majority of the literature reflects the millennial experience rather than Gen Z and does not touch upon more recent forms of SMS. To achieve the desired narrow focus on Gen Z’s perceptions of SMS, the review will look at each generation present on college campuses, how students are adjusting to college, ways that institutions can continue to engage a new generation, and associated risk behaviors enhanced by SMS.

Generation Z vs Previous Generations

For the first time in the history of higher education, five generations will be represented across campus through traditional students, non-traditional students, staff, and faculty (Brown,
Each generation continues to experience developmental differences based on the sociological and economic climates of the time in which they reach young adulthood or begin the transition into college life. A significant difference for recent generations is that smartphones and social media will be a part of the development, causing a digital divide between the generations that did not have access to the technology until later in life. This section will look at each of the five generations represented on campus and how the literature presents the characteristics that define them. The section will also review literature on the digital divide that is occurring between Gen Z and the previous generations.

Five Generations of Higher Education

The five generations within higher education today include: the greatest generation, the baby boomer, Generation X, the millennial, and Generation Z (Brown, 2017; Shatto & Ervin, 2017; Turner, 2015). The age diversity on campus is a result of a larger, more mobile society that is pushing off retirement or has been told since an early age that they can only find success with an education beyond the high school level (Shatto & Ervin, 2017).

Defining the constraints of these generations is no easy task. Different pieces of literature may cap generational cohorts within a range of years. This is seen consistently in attempting to determine who is a member of Generation Y, millennial, or Gen Z. In the endless debate of what defines a generation, some researchers will follow the idea of early millennials falling into Generation Y, a subset of the millennial, since they were born in the 1980s or early 1990s, have been out of college for quite some time and were the early adopters of modern technology (Seppanen, 2012). Meanwhile, Gen Z can be argued to be born as early as 1993 or as late as 2000 depending on the author (Turner, 2015; Seppanen, 2012). The following points will look to
find a basic understanding of each generation present in higher education and where they stand when compared to Gen Z.

**The greatest generation.** Born prior to 1945, the greatest generation, also known as the silent generation, are few and far between yet still present on college campuses across the county as they put off retirement or settle into higher education positions as a post-retirement career (Brown, 2017). The greatest generation, the furthest generation away from Gen Z, is often romanticized through media portrayals of World War II, the Vietnam War and Korean War, came of age in a society that embraced many ideals considered inappropriate by today’s standards (Greenberg, 2004). Miller, Maddox, & Turner (2001) argue that members of this generation are often portrayed as the “clean kind of hero” while, in reality, this was not necessarily the case (p. 2). The authors argue that while this generation is celebrated for its role in the liberation of Europe or in freeing parts of Asia it is important to remember these were the same people who returned home and supported the segregation of African Americans and inequality between genders. Additionally, relationships between members of the same sex were nearly unheard of (*CHAPTER 01: Attitudes*, 2009).

In the scope of higher education, many changes would occur for military veterans with the introduction of the GI Bill and a new accessibility to a college degree, though it would not benefit minorities or women in the same capacity. Through the introduction of older, experienced veteran students to higher education, the need for vocation and trade training rose in demand, pushing out the traditional liberal arts education of the elite (Greenberg, 2004). This new-found ability to attain an advanced degree created an upward mobility in society and the economy began to prosper for the first time since the Great Depression and World War II leading into the baby boom.
The baby boomer. Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are products of a prosperous economy following the end of World War II (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Not unlike Gen Z students of today, they grew up with a strong work ethic and a desire for uniqueness and independence rather than the conformity sought by the greatest generation (Strange, 2004). By the time those lucky enough to enter higher education began to arrive on campus, educators were struggling to understand a generation that was rejecting the norms and conventions of the previous generations (Strange, 2004). From here, many modern ideas of student development began to take shape, including Chickering’s (1969) original seven vectors. This group would also come of age in a time where civil rights and feminist movements would significantly change the social dynamic (Strange, 2004; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

It is crucial to note that the baby boomer young adult experiences were still not the same for all demographics as not everyone would see a traditional higher education, such as women or minority groups, though changes were on the horizon. While the post-war economy was more stable and moving past the effects of the Great Depression, there was still a great deal of inequality for minority groups. In correlation to a high level of unemployment in urban areas for minority groups, social tensions and crime began to rise in urban areas resulting in riots. As a result, many middle-class white families to flee to the suburbs (Teaford, 2016). This move, teamed with a rise in campus protests, changed the face of urban higher education who adapted programs to suit the need of a diverse working-class group (Freeland, 1992).

Generation X. Generation X is a fairly small generation when compared to the others, born between 1965 and 1976. While the baby boomers aimed to be individuals, Generation X strived to be different (Strange, 2004). As the generation prospering from the social and economic efforts of the baby boomer striving to be individuals and having a strong work ethic,
Generation X would be the first to have access to modern technology at their disposable with cable television, MTV, personal computers, and video gaming systems (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This generation marks a turn to more modern social and economic ideas in terms of religion, sex, and family values (CHAPTER 01: Attitudes, 2009).

As of 2008, Generation X became the most educated generation in history with 33% of those aged 35 to 44 holding a bachelor’s degree and 17% working toward a graduate degree (CHAPTER 02: Education, 2009). In contrast to the previous two generations, women have pulled ahead of men in being well educated with 35% holding at least a bachelor’s degree compared to 32% of men. Even with having a higher level of education than previous generations, Generation X feels that they are not better off than their parents (CHAPTER 01: Attitudes, 2009). This mindset may be what is contributing to the reason that, along with this generation representing career professionals, many are still students often in graduate school (CHAPTER 02: Education, 2009).

The millennial. Born roughly between 1980 and 2000, the millennial has begun to leave the world of higher education to make their mark in the professional world (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). Born to baby boomer parents, the millennial, or Generation Y, enjoyed the financial and emotional stability provided by generation of hard workers (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The millennial generation is also significantly more diverse than previous generations and better connected through social media (Seppanen, 2012).

According to Strange (2004) and Bourke & Mechler (2010) millennials can be defined as rule followers, sheltered, confident about their futures, motivated, team-oriented, in need of constant feedback, and achievers. These traits contribute to a divide between generations since millennials may not fully understand the desire of the independent baby boomers or Generation
X to be left alone (Seppanen, 2012). Consequently, baby boomers or Generation X may view millennials as lazy, narcissistic, and disengaged, since they do not share the same set of values (Seppanen, 2012; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

Bourke & Mechler (2010) presents a contrary view of millennials being assumed to be team oriented, believing that they may hold many characteristics similar to the Generation X. While millennials do participate in team-driven activities, it is speculated that this is only because they feel this is expected of them by authority figures. In terms of perceived levels of narcissism, Trzesniewski, Donnella, & Robbins (2008) question a study conducted by Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman’s (2008) claiming that levels of student narcissism have risen 30% between 1979 and 2006. Trzesniewski, Donnella, & Robbins (2008) note that societal changes and positive movements, such as encouraging students to embrace a higher level of self-esteem, could skew the results to appear more negative than they actually are. While the literature continues its struggle to create a clear representation of the millennial, a new generation has already begun its tenure as the traditional college student.

**Gen Z.** Slightly overlapping with the millennial, Generation Z, also known as iGen or Gen Z, is generally said to be born around 1996 to present. Literature involving this generation shows the greatest level of uncertainty of where it starts and where it ends. Authors such as Turner (2012) argue that Gen Z starts as early as 1993 and ends in 2005, while Tysiac (2017) argues the more common 1995 to 2012 range and Seppanen (2012) pushes the years out to born 2000 to present. Despite this inconsistency, an agreement across the literature is that regardless of the specific birth year, Gen Z typically has no memory of experiencing the events of September 11, 2001, have never known a time without smartphones, and should not be confused
with the millennial who had a remarkably different experience during those times (Top 10 Gen Z and iGen Questions Answered, 2016; Seppanen, 2012; Turner, 2012; Tysiac, 2017).

Gen Z is also recognized as the product of growing up during the recession of the early 2000s, a society with less social stigma placed upon single-parent households, interracial marriage and same-sex marriages, in addition to less concern with pre-marital sex, traditional gender roles, or religious conformity than previous generations experienced (Arnold, 2010; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016). They are also reported to be more diverse, tolerant of different races, more open-minded and motivated than generations prior, with exception of the millennial that exhibits similar characteristics (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In the return to living in urban areas rather than suburbs, Gen Z is seeing more exposure to a variety of culture and lifestyles than the baby boomers that had fled during the race riots of the 1960s and 70s (Turner, 2015; Teaford, 2016). The available literature on this generation is already predicting challenges on perceptions created by the previous generation.

The Digital Divide

Gen Z and the millennial are often characterized as the iGen, net-gen, or digital native based on their level of connectivity, while older generations are often considered digital immigrants (Turner, 2015; McCarthy, 2010). When it comes to working with a generation that identifies as “feeling emotionally attached to” technology, older generations may not see eye to eye, thus creating a digital divide (Turner, 2015, p. 107). Even with this being where the students are many faculty members are unwilling to adapt to SMS for instructional use (Woodley & Meredith, 2012). Implementation of social media or other technologies into the classroom may hold implications for a professional student-teacher relationship by blurring the lines of formal
and informal communication and may not appropriate vehicles for formal teaching and learning (Waite & Wheeler, 2016; McCarthy, 2010; Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Manca, & Ranieri, 2016).

Age has been determined as one of the main factors in explaining how new technology is adopted and used (Lüders & Brandtzae, 2017; Ruleman, 2012). A simple way to view this divide is to look at how the different generations get their news. In 2008, nearly half of Americans still got their news from television, however, the millennial was bringing the internet in at a close second (CHAPTER 01: Attitudes, 2009). In a generational breakdown, 38% of millennials utilized the internet as a news source compared to only 15% of baby boomers and 5% of the greatest generation. The variation between the baby boom and the greatest generation is also significant in that 52% of baby boomers prefer television news and 35% of the greatest generation still prefer a newspaper (CHAPTER 01: Attitudes, 2009).

When looking at online education, another part of the digital divide becomes clear in generational learning styles, expectations, and a reluctance by faculty to deviate from a traditional lecture format (Williams, Matt, & O’Reilly, 2014). Much of this struggle stems from a fear of the course being incompatible with virtual means or an unwillingness keep up with advancing technology. Alternatively, Salajan, Schöwetterm, & Cleghorn (2010) explain that while there are differences between the digital natives and those of other generations it is difficult to find the extent of the impact in academia through small studies in which the participants self-report. Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturo (2014) confirm that older generations are less comfortable using various forms of technology and that younger generation’s experience anxiety from being disconnected, putting each group at the extreme ends of the technology spectrum.
As concerns social media use, Lüders & Brandtzæ (2017) look at reasons why older generations choose to abstain from social media activity. Reason found include privacy concerns or lack of relevance, however, many see social media to be “cold and narcissistic forms of communication and gossip of little use to maintain strong ties” (p.189). Again, ideas of narcissism in the younger generations remain prevalent as discussed in earlier sections (Junco & Chickering, 2010; Lüders & Brandtzæ, 2017). Contrary to the perception that older generations do not use SMS, Ruleman (2012) finds that older generations may secretly be heavy SMS users for personal ventures but are unwilling to go beyond keeping in touch with family.

In an effort to appeal to millennials or Gen Z, many forms of communication have been moved to digital means possibly inadvertently excluding older generations that prefer more traditional means (Lüders & Brandtzæ, 2017; Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturo, 2014). Seemiller & Grace (2016) find that text message is the best way to reach Gen Z, though they view emails within the same negative scope as a phone call. Additionally, Facebook is becoming less and less popular with Gen Z as older adults begin to warm up to the platform. Seemiller & Grace (2016) explain that with this mindset Facebook is becoming used more for family interactions, while Twitter or Instagram is for friends. For example, Gen Z will maintain a family friendly persona on Facebook for “Aunt Susan”, but would rather not have her read tweets or like Instagram photos that are posted. The authors bring up an important point that, if Gen Z is one step ahead of family members of older generations in terms of which SMS they are using, should faculty, staff, or administrators be crashing the “authority-figure-free” party? And if they do, will Gen Z just move on to the next available platform?

Reinbeck & Fitzsimons (2015) describe an interesting way that nurses have tackled this looming divide. Reverse mentoring, or pairing a younger staff member with a more experienced
one, helps bridge the gap and utilized each generations skill set. The idea behind this pairing was that each time the clinic experienced a computer update, baby boomers or Generation X would have a resource to reach out to in Generation Y, and vice versa when it came to clinical experience. By doing this Generation Y, or the early millennial, reported that they felt valued and that they added balance to the team through their knowledge of technology. Ultimately, the authors prove that success can be found from meeting in the middle and utilizing the strengths of each generation, rather than calling for a complete change.

**Conclusion**

Each generation is shaped by a historical, social, and economic context. Seppanen (2012) believes that each generation’s “personality” is shaped by the events of that time. For example the baby boomer was shaped by JFK, RFK, and MLK, Generation X by Watergate, and the millennial by 9/11. Regardless of these events being anchors of different generations, a standard date rage is still not agreed upon. While the greatest generation and baby boomer present the most consistent born between date ranges, Generation X, the millennial, and Gen Z's date ranges can vary by five to ten years depending on the researcher.

Additionally, the division between generations can be a base for assumptions and tension among the five generations present in higher education today. Millennials and Gen Z are often seen as a more narcissistic group, though researchers argue that the activities the students are engaging in are no different than previous generations and that levels of narcissism have not risen (Roll, 2017; Trzesniewski, Donnella, & Robbins, 2008). Roll (2017) compares the use of smartphone and social media by today's youth to the use of snail mail and rotary phones by previous generations. All activity has led to the same goal, to engage with friends, however, for Gen Z the method always in their hand and response time is instantaneous.
There are also a number of contrasting ideas to the assumptions held about millennials with some arguing that the new generations still maintain many of the independent characteristics of Generation X (Bourke & Mechler, 2010). The term “me” generation has gained popularity when describing the modern generations, though the literature would argue that each generation prior has exhibited traits lending to the same denotation (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Miller, Maddox, & Turner, 2001). As Gen Z begins to work their way through higher education it will be important for institutions to understand assumptions and to recognize that this group is not doing anything new, but rather how they are going about it is different; ultimately creating a need to bridge the digital divide.

**Adjusting to College Life**

Transitioning into higher education offers a significant developmental opportunity for any young adult. The “purgatory of the first-year”, as coined by Kidwell (2005, p. 254), comes with a number of opportunities for first-year students to develop and adapt to their new surroundings. The literature confirms that how a student adjusts has a significant impact on academic achievement and persistence (Wohn & LaRose, 2014). Most of the literature on the topic of adjustment and engagement to date has focused on the millennial entering college and not specifically on how first-year students perceive the role played by SMS. With this group now transitioning into post-college life, the ideas on transition, development, and engagement of millennials offer a solid base for new research focused on Gen Z given their similarities.

Certainly, social media has been a part of the transition process for the millennial and will be even more so with Gen Z when compared to previous generations. The literature remains split on whether or not this is a good thing. Some research considers SMS to be a distracting waste of time while others believe it creates a sense of belonging (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2015; Junco,
This section looks at literature concerning perceptions of institutions and how institutions can assist in the first-year students’ transition and engagement through traditional methods and SMS.

Old School Meets New School

The divide between generations is not limited to only digital means. In reviewing first-year experience initiatives, Barefoot (2000) explains that college students have changed significantly since the time most faculty, staff, and administration were undergraduates themselves. Additionally, the author explains that many of the provisions and methods used by institutions are from the time where the white, privileged male made up a majority of the student body, leaving out provisions that may be needed when working with a more diverse population. These ideas may have contributed to a level of misunderstanding of a students’ ability or anxiety and fears present when entering college (Barefoot, 2000; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Modern students are often assumed to be disengaged, having a short attention span, being unmotivated, and expecting instant gratification (Barefoot, 2000). Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley, & Pearce (2009) suggest that institutions assess students to better understand where their beliefs lie and why they think the way they do. By doing so, institutions can determine where learning blocks may occur and adjust the curriculum or first-year experience as necessary. While the method in which institutions engage with students may be changing, the goal of higher education remains the same: to promote social and professional mobility (Barefoot, 2000).

Assisting the Millennial Transition into College Life

For the millennial student coming from a more sheltered environment, the transition into college can come as quite a shock (Strange; 2004; Bourke & Mechler, 2010). The social
transition may involve leaving existing friend groups and familiar surroundings to move into a residence hall with someone they have never met and basically start building their lives from scratch. In an environment where the social component is almost just as important as academics, institutions should be ready for early action to help ease the transition to ensure future successful academic performance and retention rates (Huges & Smail, 2015).

As Chickering & Reisser (1993) describe the managing emotions vector, students come to college with emotional baggage. These pre-college experiences, traumas, or uncertainties can greatly hinder the success of the student if left unchecked (Squire & Norris, 2014). With the understanding of the millennial and Gen Z’s desire for collaborative work or involvement opportunities, programs that involve an interactive learning environment and skill training may assist in creating a seamless social and academic transition (Strange, 2004; Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Turner & Thompson, n.d.). In addition to a new social and living environment, many first-year students can be thrown off by being expected to think and form opinions rather than just regurgitate answers on a test (Kidwell, 2005).

Malinga-Musamba (2014) and Kidwell (2005) agree that the first-year of college is a prime time for a student to be exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking that will ultimately changing who they are. With Gen Z, social media is bound to play a big role in the successes or failures in transition and development during the first-year as it has done with the millennial generation. The literature remains highly divided on whether or not social media should be embraced by institutions as a form of communication. While institutions have an idea of where the students are, in a digital sense, the question remains should they get involved and can they afford not to (Heiberger & Harper, 2008)?
Social media as a positive influence in transition. Woodley & Meredith (2012) make note of the social media working as a positive method for an Australian University that was suffering from statistically low retention rates. As a low cost and highly popular medium, Facebook was employed as a means to communicate with students (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Through the SMS, the university was able to collect input on initiatives, engage students that were possibly shy or unsure of where to go to ask questions, and overcome geographic isolation. Despite the long list of benefit that came from the institution using SMS, it was noted that SMS is merely a tool that should be utilized alongside other resources. Additionally, the authors note a resistance from faculty in participating on SMS, a consistent theme across the topic (Woodley & Meredith, 2012; Williams, Matt, & O’Reilly, 2014).

Queensland University of Technology took a slightly different approach to reaching students by combining a Facebook page with the learning management system Blackboard (Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock, & Carr, 2012). The rational for combining Facebook and Blackboard follows Woodley & Meredith’s (2012) ideas that Facebook cannot be used as a solo tool. Queensland decided Facebook could be used to create a more casual environment where students could interact, yet Blackboard would still serve as the formal learning system. The outcome was effective since it met in the middle and allowed for open exchange between the campus communities within the program they felt most comfortable with (Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock, & Carr, 2012).

DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfeld, & Fiore (2012) look at the successes of having a student-only website to encourage self-efficiency. It was found that having a common area to engage with other students in similar situations and residence halls leaders did increase the level of self-efficiency in first-year students by offering a method for them to connect and ask
questions. Design of the portal proved to be extremely important by allowing for ease of communications and eliminating barriers to do so. The authors also suggest slowly opening the site up to other student groups on campus, though not necessarily staff and faculty. This approach differs from other studies in that while the site would be controlled by the institution, it would be populated by student groups which could prove less intimidating to first-year students.

**Social media as a distraction from transitioning.** A key point in the counter-argument of institutions utilizing social media to reach student questions the level of the distraction this medium causes. A study by Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2015) looks at the effect of social media use by gender at two universities. The dynamic difference between the two institutions being one utilized social media while the other did not. The study concludes that while there is a connection between social media and college adjustment, it is not a positive one. Students that used social media were reported to be a retention risk with lower grade point averages and lower adjustment rates. The study also found that students who used Facebook for friendships were more concerned with keeping in touch with old friends rather than making new ones, distracting from adjusting to college life.

Corwin & Cintron (2011) lay the foundation for similar studies done later in the digital space, such as by Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2015) and Mazzoni & Iannone (2014). In the study, physical social networks are explored and determine a possible hindrance for student engagement during the first-year with the “old friend circle” playing a role in how student socialize (Corwin & Cintron, 2011, p. 32). Mazzoni & Iannone (2014) make a comparison between real-life social networks and digital ones. Findings of this study show that a residential change can make a difference in how a student adapts to the college setting, as well as blurred lines between a physical and digital social network since the physical group also uses the same
digital technology. It is also found that social media is a convenience tool in maintaining social relationships and not just a trend or a real necessity of life.

The need to maintain older relationships may be perpetuated through the nagging feeling of homesickness (English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2016). With 94% of first-year students reporting to be some level of homesick within the first term of school, adjustment issues will require the institution’s attention (English, Davis, Wei, & Gross, 2016). Homesickness can occur for a variety of reasons and leave the student feeling isolated in their new surroundings. Through feeling isolated, they may reach out to those long-established bonds, while losing barely formed new ones. English, Davis, Wei, & Gross (2016) find that homesickness is temporary and does not have a significant impact on academic success as previous literature has stated. The study does not look at how social media plays a role in bringing on or eliminating homesickness.

Wohn & LaRose (2014) touch on the ideas of social media being a distraction on academics and begin to question the levels of addictive or habitual use. Findings include the ideas that Facebook use is hindering social adjustment in college students since they are more concerned with maintaining existing relationships rather than forming new ones. Additionally, the claim that Facebook can be used for emotional support during the transition is questioned since it would seem that students use SMS for information gathering and not necessarily for forming new relationships as assumed.

Creating a Millennial and Gen Z Friendly First-year Experience

Once the initial transition into college life is complete, creating a campus of continued millennial and Gen Z friendly engagement that positively contributes to the seven vectors of student development can be difficult considering those doing the planning on behalf of the
institution are from very different generations. Literature has shown that millennial and Gen Z students communicate differently than previous generations preferring digital communications over face-to-face interactions (Lüders & Brandtzæ, 2017; Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturo, 2014; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). While a majority of institutions have a social media presence, many do not have a centralized department to focus on the initiative and even fewer have a dedicated social media manager (Sessa, 2014). Regardless of many prospective students using SMS to gather information on institutions of interest, Peruta & Shields (2016) find that many still operate on a “gut feeling” rather than best practices (p.10). This could present a problem for institutions who are accepting cohorts of digital natives that expect access to digital content.

Gen Z is on its way to campus and they are bringing technology with them meaning institutions will need to plan for how they will use social media as a campus community (Raacke & Bonds-Raacle, 2015). As the literature reiterates, successful transition and engagement cannot occur through the use of social media alone. The development of a comprehensive first-year experience program to encourage a community feeling through the first-year focused curriculum and encouraged student-instructor relationships has shown to be a contributing factor to preventing “academic suicide” or “student burn out” (Turner & Thompson, n.d., p. 103; Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, Jr. & Boone, 2012, p. 661; Leese, 2010).

Traditional methods of engagement. Literature shows traditional methods of socially engaging millennial students, such as living on campus, participating in the classroom, or participating in a first-year experience program continue to show positive outcomes for both student and institution. Living on campus during the first-year, though stressful at first, can encourage more participation in campus activities than commuter students that live off campus and an overall successful adjustment, so long as the roommate match is compatible (WilcoxB
Winn, Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman, 2007). Additionally, institutions can take on-campus living a step further by offering a living/learning community through academic themed floors in the residence halls, creating further opportunity for first-year students to connect around a similar theme (Purdie & Rosser, 2011).

Nobel, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton (2007) look at the ESSENCE (Entering Students at South Engaging in New College Experiences) at a university in Alabama piloted during the 1998 academic year. The goals of the program intended to increase achievement of first-year students and retention rates. The program would only be open to recent high school graduates and not mandatory. As an added perk, students participating in this program would be allowed access to the newest residence halls. The foundation of the study recognizes that academic and social behaviors are linked and that students must remain committed to engaging in university activities to be successful. Though this study was done in a year when Gen Z was only beginning to enter the world, the study recognizes a significant social component that is necessary to build a foundation for persisting.

Encouraging a smooth college transition and continued engagement finds a solid foundation within creating a sense of community, which is not always possible for students not living on campus. Harmening & Jacob (2015) take the idea of the first-year commuter student into consideration, explaining that engagement takes place within the classroom and not solely in the residence halls. Turner & Thompson (n.d) find that roughly 67% of first-year students participate in activities, though 57% do not feel that they have a strong faculty-student rapport. Strange (2004) explains that with the millennial generation, it may be that they do not want to be involved, but rather do not know how to be. By understanding these needs and hindrances, institutions may be able to meet Gen Z in the middle to create the best possible outcome.
Integrating SMS for engagement. Most literature agrees that social media can be a great tool for connecting a diverse group of students from around the world, of different cultural backgrounds, or on and off campus, outside of a physical space such as a classroom or residence hall (McCarthy, 2010; Woodley & Meredith, 2012; Gray, Vitak, Easton, & Ellison, 2013; LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman, 2007). Heiberger & Harper (2008) shares an example of Facebook to promote weekend events at South Dakota State University. By promoting events through Facebook, the cost was minimal, students could opt in as they wished and even see who else was planning on attending any given event. Positive feedback from students and student leaders confirmed that Facebook was having a positive effect on encouraging engagement. On the contrary, Junco (2012) warns that though the students spend time engaging on Facebook or checking up on friends, it actually has a negative effect on engagement in the real world.

Junco, Heiberger, & Loken (2010) look to Twitter to test the success of utilizing it within a classroom assignment. The findings reveal that Twitter can create an engaged learning environment by going where the student already is and applying the concepts to a medium they understand. By having faculty moderator’s present questions, students were quick to respond and continue to engage. Students also offered support to one another through encouraging comments to those who posted about being stressed or unable to manage the work load. The study does note many limitations in size and diversity of sample, and understanding of levels of participation in the actual classroom setting.

While Heiberger & Harper (2008) and Junco, Heiberger, & Loken (2010) offer up stories of potential successes with SMS in student engagement, Junco & Chickering (2010) and Manca & Ranieri (2016) warn of privacy concerns attached to SMS, including cyber bullying, along with increased levels of narcissism. Junco & Chickering (2010) does not discount the fact that
SMS can offer positives but argues that the internet cultivates a culture of zero boundaries, something that in itself requires a high level of emotional and intellectual competencies, which first-year students may not be prepared to take on. It is also argued that, contrary to the ideas of SMS allowing for focus on old relationships, a majority of relationships occurring strictly through SMS are superficial and do not reflect actual friendships (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). These superficial relationships are fueled by the attention given to post likes making the user feel better about themselves more than interaction with close friends (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012).

**Conclusion**

While the literature presents great ideas for how institutions have engaged students over the last 20 years, significant gaps remain in how engagement looks when applied to SMS and Gen Z. It is unclear if these traditional methods, many of which are still in use today, will continue to see success. Institutions seem to have an idea that social media is here to stay and that integration is inevitable, yet still experience resistance in the implementation. In order to be successful in engaging Gen Z continued work needs to be done on the faculty end to help meet the needs of the student both academically and socially to create the proper balance (Kidwell, 2005; Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley, & Pearce, 2009). Utilizing an existing, low-cost SMS, such as Facebook, in tandem with other methods, may foster the connectivity sought by both the commuter and on-campus Gen Z student (McCarthy, 2010).

With retention rates being a primary focus of many institutions, it is important to remember that in order for a student to have a successful transition into higher education both student and faculty should be involved. Success can be achieved through strong student-instructor relationships, the first-year oriented events, development of strong study skills, and
encouragements to be active in the community (Turner & Thompson, n.d.; Kuh, Cruce, Shoupe, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). When creating programming or curriculum, it is also important to remember the high achieving students to reduce the risk of boredom. Retention rates are not only affected by low achieving students who fail to adapt to college life, but also by high achievers who are not feeling challenged enough (Kuh, Cruce, Shoupe, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). For many, they will be asked to think in ways that they never have before and not simply recite a memorized answer, which can be terrifying (Kidwell, 2005).

Heiberger & Harper (2008) and Junco (2012) contribute to the conversation of implementing social media to increase engagement by suggesting that Facebook can be used to effectively create interest in events and collect RSVPs, but it remains unclear if it is effective in ensuring that the student actually attends the event. The types and frequency of posts may also determine how effective SMS is for institutions. Media posts, including photo or video, are found to be the most popular, however, posting too often can have a decrease in engagement (Peruta & Shields (2016).

Additionally, institutions will need to consider how each form of social media operate and which will offer the most success. While Facebook may be the best way to promote campus events, Twitter may be the best to promote discussion and an LMS may be the best to hold virtual classrooms (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2010; Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock, & Carr, 2012; Neier & Zayer, 2015). Limited research exists on how Instagram, Snapchat, or other newer forms of SMS fall into the mix, though they do present themselves within the risk behaviors section (Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, & Witkovic, 2016). In identifying which SMS works for the given task, a strong social media policy would need to be put in place to avoid disciplinary issues for misuse (O’Connor, Schmidt, & Drouin, 2016).
Risk Behaviors

Something that has remained consistent across all generations is the temptation to try things that were out of the question before coming to college. While for some it is simply an opportunity to try new things, for others risk behaviors can manifest as a result of uncertainty and a rough transition into college. When looking at risk behaviors engaged in by college students, alcohol is the forerunner though with the onset of technology, hookup culture and technology addiction have become areas of concern as well (LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost, 2012; Oliver, 2017; Status of Mind: Social media and young people’s mental health, 2017). Social media can be credited with changes in areas of concern and how students participate in these risky behaviors. The following sections will look at the role SMS plays in risk behaviors for millennial students and how this information may translate to what Gen Z is currently, or will be, experiencing in the coming years.

Hookup Culture

Looser restrictions on socially acceptable behavior and a reliance on digital relationships have changed the way young adults engaging in intimate relationships. Hookup culture, a phrase used to describe how millennials and Gen Z engage in non-committed intimate relationships, is alive and well on today’s undergraduate campuses and does not look to be going away anytime soon (Arnold, 2010). Hookup culture can be connected to rape culture by promoting dangerous types of sexual experiences, particularly for women (Sutton & Simons, 2015; Aubrey & Smith, 2013). Through the increased risk of hookup encounters happening spur of the moment and with the involvement of alcohol, there is a heightened level of risk (Aubrey & Smith, 2013).
Media exposure is thought to encourage this type of behavior from males, though the same is not said about a female who often suffer the emotional consequences of a casual encounter (Aubrey & Smith, 2016; Aubrey & Smith, 2013). Dating apps, such as Tinder or Bumble, may have an impact on initiating hook-up activities, though it is unknown if this is the only reason folks use the app (Timmermans & De Caluwe, 2017; Louge, 2016).

Monto & Carey (2014) argue that there is a misconception on what hooking up actually means that the level of activity, specifically number of sexual partners of college students between 2004 and 2012, is not drastically different than that of those in college 1988 to 1996. However, the authors do note that the modern relationships show fewer in a committed relationship and are more accepting of activity among members of the same sex.

**Alcohol Use and Drinking Games**

Often seen as a rite of passage into college life, alcohol and drug use may stem from deeper reason than simply the desire to try something that has been previously off limits. Reasons for drinking can be contributed to a students’ desire to feel better, seem more outgoing and cool to their peers, to coping a with situations attached to transitioning into higher education (LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost, 2012). An estimated 80% of college students report using alcohol, making it the most commonly used substance by college students (LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost, 2012). Often times, the use begins as experimental and quickly move to frequent and excessive amounts (Moreno, Cox, Young, & Haaland, 2015).

LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost (2012) look at how alcohol is used as a coping mechanism to compensate for poor adjustment into college life but does not look at how social media plays a role. This study, in particular, revealed that women were more likely to engage in
some risky behaviors to cope, even though a distinct limitation of this result can be linked to this group is more willing to self-report than men. Further studies do show that despite lower levels of self-reporting, male students are found to be more active in alcohol-related SMS posts while females tend to offer the most positive feedback in the forms of likes or comments, reinforcing a culture of drinking norms (Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, & Witkovic, 2016). Furthermore, the gender divide of who is posting and who is participating remains curious. Females in social situations are reported to be the subject of content featuring alcohol consumption, while males are often depicted using marijuana in solo settings (Morgan, Snelson, & Elison-Bowers, 2010).

Moreno, Cox, Young, & Haaland (2015) look at how Facebook and alcohol use can be related, as well as if students at risk could be identified through posts to SMS. The study determines that “Facebook alcohol references in a highly visible location, such as a profile picture or as a photograph, was positively associated with reporting excessive drinking in the past 28 days” (p. 650). For the study, students self-reported their alcohol consumption. In an actual campus setting, students may be less willing to report for fear of consequence, though many may forget themselves when posting to Facebook, with only 20% of users hiding content from certain viewers. When reviewing SMS beyond Facebook, Boyle, LaBrie, Froidevaux, & Witkovic (2016) find that alcohol-related content posted to Instagram and Snapchat may be more influential than posts to Facebook.

Social media continues to change the way drinking games are played and the occurrences are not limited to a single SMS, meaning that institutions may be unaware of items posted to SMS that they are not a part of (Wombacker, Reno, & Veil, 2017). Drinking games are simply made up of drinking in relation to rules or challenges. Through drinking games, men are likely to
drink more than women and both genders are likely to drink to consequential levels (Ray, Stapleton, Turrisi, & Mun, 2014).

In 2014, the “Neknomination” craze took social media by storm in Australia and soon went viral to universities in the United Kingdom and around the world through YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat (Wombacker, Reno, & Veil, 2017). Simply put, a user would be videoed chugging an alcoholic beverage while doing something ridiculous, then challenge a friend via SMS to do one up them, and so on (Moss, Spada, Harkin, Albery, Rycroft, & Nikčević, 2015). In a UK study of 145 participants, 54.4% admitted to participating in this challenge, citing significant pressures from friends to do so (Moss, Spada, Harkin, Albery, Rycroft, Nikčević, 2015). The rapid spread of activities like this combined with potentials of social pressure or cyber bullying begins to raise concern.

Technology Addiction

Addictions to technology or social media is a relatively recent addition to the risk behavior conversation. While one in five young adults report waking up in the middle of the night to check SMS and exhibit a high level of fear of missing something or being left out, there is limited means available to determine what constitutes SMS addiction or high use (Status of Mind: Social media and young people & mental health, 2017; Van den Eijnden, Lemmens, Valkenburg, 2016).

In a study conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) entitled Status of Mind: Social media and young people & mental health (2017), findings reveal that excessive SMS use can contribute to anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, body image issues, cyber bullying, and
fear of missing out (FoMO). The RSPH recommends that provisions be put in place to alert SMS users when their activity begins to reach levels of excess. Recommendations include:

- Popups for heavy usage warnings.
- Denote photos that have been digitally altered.
- Educate users on how to identify reliable information.
- Teach safe SMS use in school.
- Identify SMS users that may be suffering from poor mental health.
- Train professionals that interact with young adults in SMS.
- Conduct more research on this topic.

While this study provides a wealth of statistics, more information and research is needed as SMS continues to evolve and generations change.

Similar to alcohol use, when SMS is used to relieve stress or as a coping mechanism, the original problem is not solved. Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol (2015) find that social media addiction can cause emotional exhaustion by forcing users to engage in emotion-focused coping rather than problem-solving methods. While the study is focused on people in the work place, the ideas can translate to how students adjust to college and take to SMS rather than finding a solution to making the situation better. FoMO also plays a significant role in levels of SMS use and is a fair predictor of SMS addiction, more so than neuroticism, attachment, or extraversion since many will continuously check SMS to ensure they are not missing out on activities or events that their peers engage in (Blackwell, Leaman, Tramposch, Osborne & Liss, 2017).

As all angles of the literature on Gen Z or SMS reveal, not everyone is in agreement that technology addiction exists. Ozkan & Solmaz (2015) looks smart phone use by 276 participants
aged 18-23. Findings conclude that the level of smart phone use is not necessarily addictive, but rather a part of Gen Z’s life where they “find a place in society with their own personalities” (p. 96). To determine whether or not levels of SMS use are addictive or simply high use, Van den Eijnden, Lemmens, Valkenburg (2016) recommend utilizing the Social Media Disorder (SMD) scale. When tested on 2198 participants between the ages of 10 and 17, results show that SMD is a sound tool for measuring SMS use.

**Intervention and Program Evolution for Success**

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea (2008) argue in favor of early intervention programs to ensure that students are engaged and successful. They recognize that the classroom may be the only common ground for first-year students where both commuters and on-campus students will experience regular interaction with faculty. Thus, faculty have a responsibility to be involved in student engagement and should ensure that classroom time is used efficiently. Harmening & Jacob (2015) agree with this idea finding that both commuter and on-campus students received benefit from having faculty that took an interest in them and offered encouragement.

In terms of engaging in risk behaviors outside of the classroom, LaBrie, Ehret, Hummer, & Prenovost (2012) suggest incorporating protective behavioral strategies to reduce drinking and alcohol-related consequences. This can be accomplished through orientation programs promoting healthy habits or by identifying students who are reporting distress socially or academically that may turn to risky behaviors to cope with the stress. Campus health providers can utilize SMS to promote healthy norms and explain the consequences of excessive drinking (Hoffman, Pinkleton, Austin, & Reyes-Velázquez, 2014; Ray, Stapleton, Turrisi, & Mun, 2014).
A fine line does exist in what institutions should become involved in. While Neier & Zayer (2015) are keen to use SMS in the classroom to coincide with their desire to be connected, Rowe (2014) find that student draws a line between in class room use and institutions having authority over student-run communications. Seventy-two percent of students feel that student-run sites are a “no-go zone” for institutions and just over half of faculty and 42% of staff feel the same. It is found that they support monitoring of university related SMS, but it should end there. This follows with Seemiller & Grace’s (2016) findings with faculty attitudes toward institutions being involved in SMS.

Early intervention may not be the only method that institutions employ to see their students successfully transition and succeed. Rather than asking what is wrong with the new generation of students and expecting them to adapt or perish, institutions could evaluate where changes are needed in how communication occurs or how the curriculum is delivered (Leese, 2010). This movement would require a shift in culture and require a more hands-on approach by faculty and staff that extends beyond an orientation. Leese (2010) also makes the argument that assumptions by staff and faculty can cause issues for students, specifically with higher proficiency levels with technology. A noteworthy point of this study is that it looked to post-1992 university undergraduates and would have been made up of Generation X students. It is unclear whether this idea remains true or not, with the perceived level of available technology. Further study could alleviate this question with Gen Z students and look to lower income and minority groups to see if they have access to and are using SMS in the same way their peers are.

Conclusion

Underage drinking and other risk behaviors engaged in by first-year students is nothing new, however, how they are engaging in these behaviors is. Through viral drinking games that
take place through video posts and challenges combined with peer pressure to fit in, institutions cannot afford to turn a blind eye to SMS. It is difficult to figure out where Gen Z will take these behaviors or which SMS will be the next preferred method, but it is possible for institutions to become involved in changing the message (Wombacker, Reno, & Veil, 2017). Clearly stated social media use policies about consequences that may occur from posting risky activities or cyber bullying may avoid disciplinary actions in the future and could possibly act as a preventive measure (O’Connor, Schmidt, & Drouin, 2016).

Hookup culture forms as an odd mixture of alcohol, SMS, and generational changes in acceptable behaviors and social expectations. There remains a gap in the literature explaining how SMS ties into the mindset, though most authors can agree that the outcomes of hookup encounters are less than positive for women for a wide range of reasons. Recent discussions on sexual assault on campus can be tied back to behaviors leading up to the encounter such as alcohol use that impairs judgment or the SMS where the parties met (Sutton & Simons, 2017; Timmermans & De Caluwe, 2017). Few studies look at the use of SMS as a main contributing factor to hookup culture. While SMS like Tinder or Bumble seem like the obvious place students go to find a hookup, it may not be the case (Timmermans & De Caluwe, 2017; Louge, 2016).

Finally, ideas on technology addiction and the effects are still a relatively new concept and more research is needed to determine whether it is a true issue or rather just a new means to navigating a daily existence (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Van den Eijnden, Lemmens, Valkenburg (2016) find that this determination can be made via the SMD scare. Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol (2015) argues emotional responses and exhaustion, similar to outcomes when using alcohol to cope. Additional findings show that FOMO causes more SMS activity as students do not want to miss out.
Summary

The incoming classes of Gen Z will be a turning point for institutions across the country. Presently, there is minimal research directed to the Gen Z and great discrepancy in attempts to define what makes Generation Z different from the millennial. While research is attempting to catch up to what each of SMS does and how it may best serve an institution, the students may already be on to the next best thing. The inability to keep up with technology could prove to be a part of the problem for institutions who are trying to manage successful transitions, engagement, and high retention rates. Furthermore, risk behaviors such as alcohol addiction, hookup culture, or technology addiction, are occurring and escalating through SMS that could be a sign or contribute to unsuccessful transition and engagement leading to lower retention rates.

Going forward, it will be important for institutions to understand who the Gen Z student is, how and where they communicate, what they bring with them to college whether it be emotional baggage or high academic performance, and how SMS plays a role in all of these elements. To begin to understand the experiences of the Gen Z student, there is no better person to ask than the students themselves. Rather than operate on the generational assumptions of narcissism and inability that is often attached to Gen Z, institutions may see benefit from entering into a dialog and asking the students how they perceive social media’s role in their development during the first-year of college. Additional student to faculty dialog could help Gen Z understand the older generation’s hesitation to adopt the levels of technology they have known since birth. Understanding these experiences will begin to close the digital divide and possibly allow the groups to meet in the middle under a common understanding of SMS.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The aims of research in this particular doctoral program is to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research site, and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. The purpose of this study is to help institutions understand generational differences in alignment with the role social media plays in the experience and development of the Gen Z student during the first-year of college. The points this study examines include engagement, adjustment, and risk behaviors. This chapter will take the research process step by step in identifying the approach, strategy of inquiry, participants, procedure, potential biases of the researcher, and limitations of the study through the research question, how do Gen Z student perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first-year of college?

Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative research approach allows for a broader understanding of the topic by allowing the participant’s experiences to be the center of focus (Creswell, 2003). Unlike quantitative study where the data tells a black and white story, the qualitative study allows for open-ended questions and use of text or image data which becomes an asset when looking at how the participants experience SMS. Studies of this nature occur in a comfortable, familiar setting, allows for interaction with the researcher, can remain fluid as experiences are revealed, and are presented in laymen’s terms utilizing direct terminology from the participant to encompass the explained experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Creswell, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Pontorotto, 2005; Creswell & Miller, 1997). The role of the researcher is to interpret or make sense of what the participants are disclosing within a social and historical context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).
Through the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is able to accept multiple accounts from the participants as being precise since it is understood that each one has different experiences (Pontorotto, 2005). This paradigm was selected based on the researcher’s philosophical alignment with its assumptions and how it applies to the varied experiences that come from SMS use. In addition to looking at SMS as a main point of experience, the qualitative study paired with a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the hope of the researcher is to better understand the lived experiences of Gen Z as they are presumed to be different than any generation prior.

The chosen research strategy of this study is the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Gen Z and SMS use. As the literature made clear in chapter two, results greatly vary when it comes to understanding Gen Z and SMS, though many argue that it is not necessarily that this generation is wrong or bad, but only different than anything seen before. Despite being seen as lazy, narcissistic, and too dependent on technology by the casual observer, there may be more to the story that requires an investigation that goes beneath the surface. The IPA approach will offer an opportunity to allow for Gen Z students to share their lived experiences free from fear of distortion, prosecutions, or repercussions so that the intended audience can have a better understanding of how SMS affects their first-year of college (Alase, 2017).

IPA is not to be confused with descriptive phenomenology as they are distinctively different approaches. Descriptive phenomenology, also known as transcendental phenomenology, is a product of Husserl while IPA comes from Heidegger’s ideas on hermeneutics (Connelly, 2010; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Shinebourne, 2011). The primary differences between the two strategies involve the position of the researcher and how the
participant’s experiences are made sense of. In descriptive phenomenology, the researcher attempts to put aside biases not sway the results in any way. On the flip side, IPA looks at how events are perceived and explained by the participant and encourage the researcher to be conscious of biases as it is a feature of the whole person (Connelly, 2010). IPA takes phenomenology a step further by involving the researcher in interpreting what the participant is saying or allowing for the researcher to stand in the shoes of the subject (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Alase, 2017; Shinebourne, 2011). IPA features a smaller number of participants than other forms of qualitative research to allow the researcher to engage each participant with a majority of data being collected from interviews or observations, both taking a great deal of time to transcribe and analyze (Connelly, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Phenomenology**

Originating in its modern form in pre-World War I Germany, phenomenology became a popular trend in philosophy and was later expanded by Edmund Husserl (Dowling, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). While extremely complex, descriptive phenomenology’s aim is to find meaning in the lived experience and not simply a reaction to a situation (Connelly, 2010). In descriptive phenomenology, Husserl proclaimed “Back to the things themselves!” meaning that the researcher should not be too vested in the interpretation, a significant difference from IPA (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011).

Husserl’s ideas on phenomenology took into consideration a positivist paradigm and focused on a reduction, or bracketing of the phenomena, being explained by the participant and aims to create an eidetic structure or essence of experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Dowling, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Dowling, 2007). Larger sample sizes are possible for descriptive phenomenology given the nomothetic nature in
which the participants can be analyzed (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Shinebourne, 2011). This method seeks a group understanding or generalization and does not look to the individual lived experiences as IPA does.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

IPA is a relatively new approach, making its debut in psychology research in the mid-1990s (Shinebourne, 2011; Wagstaff, Jeong, Nolan, Wilson, Tweedlie, Phillips, Senu, & Holland, 2014). Based on the ideas of Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger and continued by Max van Manen, IPA is argued to make phenomenological underpinnings accessible to researchers that are not versed in philosophy (Shinebourne, 2011; Alase, 2017). Smith, Flowers, & Larkin’s (2009) ideas on making the approach accessible to novice researchers has contributed greatly to the continued success and acceptance of IPA.

IPA is based on three key points related to the philosophy of knowledge: Husserl’s ideas on phenomenology as discussed above, Heidegger’s ideas on hermeneutics, and ideography (Wagstaff et al., 2012; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Shinebourne, 2011). IPA still follows the descriptive phenomenological tradition in terms of how information is bracketed, though IPA encourages the researcher to be a part of the interpretation (Connelly, 2010). Through this requirement, IPA becomes the top approach in analyzing the experiences of SMS use by first-year students.

The second key point that separates IPA from descriptive phenomenology is the use of hermeneutics and the double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The word hermeneutic is often found within the description of IPA and simply means to interpret or make sense of the mind-set or language of the participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The role of the
double hermeneutic is to create a duel interpretation of the subject being explored. The first part lands on the participant to make sense of their experiences through words, body language or story, while the second part falls to the researcher to make sense of it all and find meaning in what is being explained or shown (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

The third point in the philosophy of knowledge that is necessary for an IPA study is the use of ideography. Ideography refers to an in-depth analysis of small groups of participants to understand their unique experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The goal is to form findings based upon common themes taken from interviews and comparing the results to other participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Through smaller, homogenous sample, IPA strives to find and make sense of these experiences, the opposite of descriptive phenomenology (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Shinebourne, 2011).

**Why Choose This Strategy?**

Choosing IPA for this particular study makes the most sense since the approach does not seek to prove something right or wrong, but rather see how something is being experienced, an essential part to exploring how Gen Z differs. Gen Z is coming to college connected to a digital space that a majority of previous generations know exists, but may not fully understand. Through the phenomenological tenant of IPA, the researcher can focus on a small group of participants and “give a voice” to the individual stories of how SMS has affected their first-year experience (Wagstaff et al., 2012). In tandem with the double hermeneutic, idiographic tenants allow for the researcher to be a part of making sense of the individual’s experience, which will be a significant point of interest given the researcher’s positionality on the subject and study site and a predominate reason as to why descriptive phenomenology on its own was not conducive to this particular study.
Participants

The setting for this study will be conducted at Whitehall College, a small, private liberal arts college located in north Florida. The college opened its doors in the late 1960s as a women’s college offering a traditional liberal arts education and would become co-educational a few years later. As of 2015, the college enrolls an estimated 2,500 students with a 60/40 female to male ratio, a majority of whom are first or second-year students. Similar to peer liberal arts institutions, Whitehall College has a one year residential requirement for all first-year student. In 2017 to aid in the demand by upperclassmen for on-campus housing and in keeping up with current social trends, Whitehall College opened a new housing complex that offered gender-neutral rooming options; a great contrast to the other residence halls that are strictly only male or only female.

Since 2014, the college has become more aware of SMS and the expectations of the millennial and Gen Z student creating an office dedicated to maintaining a digital presence. The college has profiles available on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, GooglePlus, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest. Additional pages are available for individual departments usually through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In 2013, Whitehall College implemented a First-year Experience (FYE) program with a specialized focus to incoming students. With this program, “class of” Facebook groups were formally created by the college to welcome the incoming classes and allow students to connect. Each “class of” group is monitored by various members of the college administration ranging from admissions to the director of FYE and technology services. This supervision does not extend to other areas of SMS where students may be gathering, leaving a gap in knowledge to be explored.

The participants in this study will be ten young adults who use social media on a
regular basis, are first-year students at Whitehall College, and members of Gen Z. This sample size is commensurate with current studies which have used IPA, such as Dias (2017), Denovan & Macaskill (2013), Conroy & de Visser (2014), Symeonides & Childs (2015), and Parks (2015). Through the use of purposive sampling, participants will be selected based on their similar academic progression and lived experiences to ensure a small, homogenous sample, as recommended by IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2012). Gender identity and ethnicity, though an important point to how experiences are made sense of by the participant, will not be a significant factor in the selection process. Criteria for consideration in participant selection include:

- First-year student at Whitehall College, entering their second (spring) semester.
  - For the purpose of this study, a first-year student will be defined as someone who is 18 to 19 years old that has no previous college experience, with the exception of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or Duel Enrollment credits received in high school.

- Has completed at least 15 credit hours within the first (fall) semester and is enrolled in 15 credit hours within the second (spring) semester.
  - Fifteen credit hours is considered the norm, though not a requirement, at the site institution to ensure a student finished their degree within four years.

- Each participant should represent a different academic department on campus.
  - Academic departments include: Art & Design, Business Administration, Communication, Education, English, Humanities, Natural Science, Social
A purposive sample allows for the researcher to pick a sample based on characteristics that will “enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 78). It also reinforces the ideas of IPA in having a limited, meaningful sample, rather than a large number of participants or sites as often found in quantitative research (Creswell, 2003). This method makes the most sense to fulfill the purpose of the study will require participants that use SMS. In spite of there being a high level of attention placed on the type of participant the researchers wants, there is no room for biases within the selection process. Ritchie & Lewis (2003) suggest that the sample is selected through clear objectivity.

In line with the IPA methodology, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with observations of SMS profiles maintained by the participant. Interview questions will be conducive to a semi-structured interview environment to allow for the participant to share experiences encounter through SMS use (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Unlike the structured interview where questions are short and specific, semi-structured interview questions can be adjusted based on participant response and allow for a more fluid dialog between researcher and participant. In looking at SMS use, flexibility to pursue points of interest or concern of the participant will be crucial to painting a full picture of the experience rather than a simple yes or no exchange. While questions created through the IPA lens are suggested to be general and avoid prompting a specific answer from the participant, funneling may be necessary to get needed views on specific topics. In formulating questions, Smith & Osborn (2008) recommend using neutral language, open-ended questions and avoiding jargon or assumptions of proficiency.
While the interview structure is flexible, the amount of interviewing required of each participant can be extensive. IPA recommends that each participant is interviewed at least three times, possibly more if the situation calls for it. Baker & Edwards (2012) warns that this may become an issue with the Internal Review Board (IRB) as the application to move forward with the study is extremely specific. Additional weaknesses of interviewing is coordinating a time for all interviews to take place in person so that the researcher can see responses that may not be verbal. While phone or group interviews are adequate for convenience sake, they can limit the natural flow of the interview and prompt bias responses (Creswell, 2003).

Considering the number of interviews per participant, length, and level of attention required to execute an IPA study, interviews will need to be recorded, transcribed, and coded to find themes across each participant. Since the study included SMS use, reviewing participant’s social media presence may be necessary to gage levels of engagement and use (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Alase (2017) suggests a three-cycle system in coding interview transcripts allowing the researcher to sift through the data collected in chunks. The following sections will take an in-depth look at participants and procedures in relation to this particular SMS study, as well as how the researcher’s positionality offers a unique perspective to the IPA approach.

**Procedures**

In order to uncover how first-year students are perceiving social media’s effect on their first-year, follow protocol as required by the study site, and align with an IPA underpinnings, a well-structured procedure will be required to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Once the study proposal is approved, an application for the Internal Review
Board (IRB) will be submitted for review at Northeastern University. Upon approval by the IRB, approval from the study site will be acquired and participant selection will begin.

During the approval process, an interview protocol will be developed for the first semi-structured interviews which will last around 60 minutes each, not including the initial briefing or wrap up comments (Alase, 2017). Once the study site is approved, the first interview will take place in a natural setting where the participant feels comfortable to speak freely. Interview questions will be based on a reflection of the students’ transition into higher education, events of the fall semester, and how social media played into where they are now going into the spring semester. A second interview will occur at the midway point of the semester and a third interview will occur during the end of the spring semester when the participant should have a clearer idea of if they will return for the second year. Questions for the second and third interview protocols will follow up on themes found during the first interviews, on top of looking for new information as the participants navigate their second semester of college. All questions will be carefully constructed to ensure that responses are not being prompted and do not elicit a simple yes or no answer.

All interviews will follow Ritchie & Lewis’ (2003) interview stages to ensure consistency and comfort across participants. These stages include focus placed on the arrival, introduction to research, beginning the interview, during the interview, and after the interview. Given the potential sensitivity of the topic, it will be assured that all participants will remain anonymous and not experience any retaliation for sharing their stories. During this time it is essential that the researcher and participant develop a good rapport to encourage candid responses to the interview questions. Additionally, interviews will be audio recorded, with the participant’s consent as required by IRB (Alase, 2017). Interviews will be transcribed shortly after the interview takes
place, while it is still fresh in the mind of the researcher, then reviewed at a later date. The researcher will also keep notes on body language and nonverbal responses to refer to during analyzing the transcription. Once interviews are transcribed and some time has elapsed, the researcher will look for emerging themes, or codes, to determine where overlap lies across participants and draw conclusions from there for the discussion. Additionally, each participant’s SMS profiles will be monitored as available and not require the participant to friend or follow the researcher or vice versa to preserve anonymity and alleviate potential biases created from postings. Private SMS materials, such as SnapStories, Tinder matches, private messages, and posts to personal or friend profiles may be shared voluntarily by the participant.

**Data Analysis**

The first step of analyzing the data is to organize and prepare the data through transcribing the interviews using a line numbered template noting hesitations or breaks in speech and time stamps after individual question and answers in case the researcher needs to go back to review the audio recording (Creswell, 2003). Smith & Osborne (2008) note that the tiny details such as a laugh, a pause, or a false start are just as important in IPA study as the words being spoken.

After transcribing, the second step of the analysis process is to read through the materials to understand the participant’s experiences a look for ideas or phrases repeated across interviews (Alase, 2017). Smith, Larkin, & Flowers (2009) suggest a six-step process for analyzing data collected. The process includes: reading and re-reading documents, create initial notes, develop emergent themes, look for connection across emergent themes, continue with the processes for the other participants, and, finally, look for patterns across participants. Attention will need to be
paid to one transcript at a time to ensure that the researcher can become familiar with its content and not jump to conclusions (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009).

Once emergent themes begin to take shape, the researcher begins the third step which includes coding, or chunking out, data that falls among prevalent themes across participants will begin. This action incorporates that hermeneutic aspect of IPA by aligning the participant’s words with early interpretations, thus creating the double hermeneutic (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). Noting emergent themes in the margins or color coding sections of each interview will assist the researcher in this process.

Steps one through three will be repeated for each transcript, resulting in 24 to 30 different sources of data from eight to ten participants. From here, each transcript will be cross-referenced to find common emergent themes, or patterns, across participants. Superordinate themes found will be grouped by similarity and continue to grow through each cycle of analysis (Smith, Larkin, Flowers, 2009). Robust findings will support claims and interpretations made by the researcher and assist in eliminating any potential biases. For the purposes of this study, coding software will not be utilized as it may hinder in identifying critical experiences and underpinnings essential to the researcher’s interpretation of IPA’s underpinnings. The codes will finally be interpreted by the researcher to determine what role SMS is playing in the lived experiences of the first-year student and how this role contributes to a positive or a negative for the institution. The final presentation of data collected will include recommendations for institutions based on the experience of the student and hopefully shine light on what the first-year student is experiencing and eliminate wrongful assumptions held previous.
Ethical Considerations

In line with IRB regulations when working with human subjects, this study will follow a strict code of procedural ethics (Tracy, 2010). The study will not harm the participant, their reputation, or academic standing within the study site. As chapter two discusses, many members of Gen Z exists within a digital space, along with a physical one. The content of this method of study may reveal sensitive information (Creswell, 2003). The findings may include topics that the participant may not wish to be publicly associated within a physical space or may violate an institutional policy. In order to completely understand the experiences without fear of retaliation, it will be necessary to protect the identity of the participants and secure all documentation including interview recordings and transcripts. In the presentation of findings, pseudonyms will be used when talking about participant or location. Additionally, the name of the institution has been changed to promote the integrity of the study site and the participants.

Trustworthiness

The purpose of this study is to uncover the experiences of first-year students that use SMS. It is not to determine whether something is right or wrong, but rather to determine what and how through IPA (Alase, 2017). While trustworthiness and rigor is a corner stone of executing a study utilizing any form of phenomenology, many researchers associate this terminology with the positivist paradigm (Connelly, 2010; Shenton, 2004). For the qualitative study, there are a variety of ways to ensure the trustworthiness of a study, though it remains up to the researcher on which to choose since there is insufficient guidance in the literature as to why one would be better suited than another (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
A significant difference between descriptive phenomenology and IPA lies in where the researcher places themselves. Descriptive phenomenology requires that a researcher bracket their biases and remain neutral, IPA invites the researcher into the experience (Connelly, 2010). In the face of this difference, researchers should still remain aware of personal biases and not allow for them to create a “premature closure of analysis” (Connelly, 2010, p. 128). To establish a trustworthy study and separate from the positivist point of view in qualitative research, Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommend employing a series of techniques to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each point translates to the positivist ideas on internal validity, external validity/generalizability, reliability, and objectivity (Shenton, 2004).

**Credibility.** Creswell & Miller (2000) considers paradigm assumptions and suggests the utilization of a disconfirming evidence and prolonged engagement in the field to ensure credibility, or validity, of a constructivist study. Alase (2017) suggests that IPA studies can benefit from using member-checking, while Creswell & Miller (2000) listed this method under the positivist paradigm assumption. Lincoln & Guba (1985) support the use of both member-checking and prolonged engagement for establishing credibility.

Member-checking allows for participants to review data previously collected to confirm the validity of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). In IPA, this can easily be achieved through the requirement of multiple interviews. Participants may review transcripts, themes, and offer comments that contribute to the final narrative (Creswell, 2000). Further positives of this method include avoiding errors in interpretation and an opportunity for the participant to offer further information or clarification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Drawbacks of this method may include
participants not agreeing with the interpretation or later regretting sharing experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged engagement with the study site and participant pairs well with member-checking in the amount of time available to create a level of comfort, trust, and understanding between participant and researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Multiple encounters with participants through interviews and prolonged involvement with the site also allows for evidence and data to be checked against the environment. While there is no specific answer to what is a long enough engagement at a site, the research should ensure enough time is spent to become oriented to the situation, be able to account for changes in data stemming from an increased level of comfort in the participant, and allow for the researcher to rise above their own biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability. Transferability will be difficult given the ideological nature of the IPA study and researchers should be cautious (Wagstaff et al., 2012). Any action or anecdote can be interpreted differently by other individuals when presented without context. Successful transferability is still possible in IPA through theoretical links and generalizability by providing enough information to allow for others to relate the findings to their own positions and create meaning for themselves (Wagstaff et al, 2012; Creswell, 2000; Tracy, 2010; Shenton, 2004). Thick description and review of each individual case are necessary to aid in this transfer. Thick description is a method through which the researcher provides enough information on the study that an outsider would be able to apply the conclusions to another time, setting, group, or situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). According to Shenton (2004), key components to a thick description for transferability include:

- the number of organizations taking part in the study and location;
• restrictions on the type of participants that contributed to the data;
• number of participants involved;
• data collection methods utilized;
• number and length of data collections sessions, or interviews;
• the time period in which the study was conducted.

Each of these components contributes to painting a vivid picture for the reader and “transports them “into a setting or situation” and allows them to see the study through the eyes of the researcher (Creswell, 2000, p. 129).

**Dependability.** Maintaining an internal audit, or audit trail, will assist in confirming the dependability of the study. Dependability is able to be established through the ability of an outside researcher to replicate the study, often seen as the “prototype model”, though not necessarily to yield the same findings (Shenton, 20004). Maintaining field notes, interview recordings, transcriptions, coded themes, or any materials related to the study, participants, or site becomes essential (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, clear explanation of design, implementation, detail of data gathering, and a reflective appraisal of the study will also be present within the audit trail (Shenton, 2004).

**Confirmability.** Confirmability can be established through the keeping of a reflexive journal and triangulation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2000). The reflexive journal is a product of the audit trail where the researcher keeps a log of reasons for making decisions such as why a method or certain questions were chosen. It also reflects upon the study, potential biases held by the researcher, and outcomes that result from this. The aim of
an IPA study is to interpret the experiences of the participants, though the researcher must understand their own assumptions to not inadvertently taint the outcome or alter the participant stories.

Triangulation comes from using multiple sources of data, which is in the case of the study is multiple participants. Through the comparing of multiple accounts, emerging themes can be compared across interviews to confirm or disprove elements of the existing literature or existing assumptions on the topic (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation of sources may prove useful to this study since levels and types of SMS use will vary by individual as will the experiences associated with it.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher’s positionality for this topic and study site is fairly complex. In 2007 the researchers began their undergraduate career at Whitehall College and went on to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication in 2010. Shortly after completing a Master of Fine Arts in 2012, they were offered an administrative position at Whitehall and by 2013 was teaching their first course. In 2017 the researcher was promoted to assistant director of the office and celebrated a total of ten years at the college in some capacity.

The experience of going from student to administration has a great impact on how the researcher views the school and the changes that have occurred in the last decade. It has also instilled a great love for the college. The researcher had many of the same experiences as the current students, such as eating the dining hall food, living in the residence halls, and even taking classes with some of the same professors. Keeping these experiences in mind, the researcher can
predict where the potential holes in administrative thinking lie, but must create enough distance to see what is actually being experienced by the student being interviewed.

As a member of the dreaded millennial generation, the researcher finds themselves not far removed and able to relate to many experiences, yet at the same time feel like a complete outsider to Gen Z. As a person, they certainly have opinions about how things should be done, but as a scholar practitioner, the researcher has an obligation to make sure their assumptions of student experiences are not going unchecked. Thankfully, through an IPA approach, the research does not have to be fully removed and could add to further understanding of the participant’s experiences by having similar ones when they were a student at the research site.

Gen Z is greatly different than previous generations and the experiences are being had more and more through digital means. Social and academic structures have changed, more technology is accessible, risk behaviors are on the rise, and though this group of students are more involved and diverse than ever, they still experience trouble in transitioning into college life. The goal for the researcher is to find out what experiences these students are having and how the institution can work with them to ensure that looming issues are not continued for future Gen Z students.

Limitations

No study is without limitations, especially one that is aimed at interpreting a specific experience within a set time. This study will take place over the spring semester during the participant’s first-year using Chickering’s (1969; Chickering, & Reisser, 1993) Seven Vectors of Student Development. Right away the time constraints of the study will offer only a snapshot of the college experience, unlike a longitudinal study which can cover start to finish. Transferability
could prove difficult as well given that potential for experiences to differ based on the location of the institution, diversity of the student body, and size of the institution.

As an IPA study, a study conducted by different researchers of varied backgrounds has the potential to find slightly different outcomes. Through this method, this study is intended to reflect only some of the experiences of eight to ten participants who use SMS during the first-year at a small, private liberal arts college. While a small sample may work well to represent an institution of 2,500, it may not be sufficient in representing the experiences of students in an institution of 30,000. Additionally, findings may change with the evolution of popular SMS and the demise of other apps.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year students are perceiving social media’s effect on their development during the first-year of college. The analysis of the transcripts yielded four superordinate themes and sixteen subthemes. The superordinate themes and their subthemes include: 1. The Digital Fatigue of Gen Z (1a. Uncertainty of Generation Classification, 1b. No Longer Fazed by ‘Likes’ on Posts, 1c. Facebook Data Breach. 1d. Varied SMS Participation); 2. Development Away from SMS (2a. Exposure to More Diversity than at Home, 2b. Noticeable Growth into Adulthood, 2c. Recognizing Immaturity or Lack of Motivation in Peers, 2d. Nervous about Returning Home for Summer Break); 3. Multiple Realities and Perceptions in Physical and Digital Spaces (3a. Social Media Etiquette, 3b. Recognizing Physical and Digital Differences within SMS, 3c. The Generational Divide, 3d. Different Posts on Different Platforms); and 4. Relationships and Connectivity (4a. Would Rather Meet in Person, 4b. Using SMS Because Friends Do, 4c. Breaking the Hookup Culture and Risk Behavior Assumption, 4d. Constant Connectivity is Difficult). Superordinate themes and subthemes were identified by their recurrence across a majority of the eleven participants. This chapter will look at evidence extracted from the transcript analysis of individual interviews to support the superordinate and subthemes presented. A general breakdown of superordinate and subthemes across participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 4.1 - Recurring Themes among Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>Bea</th>
<th>Richard</th>
<th>Caitlin</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>Kara</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Courtney</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Kayla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Digital Fatigue of Gen Z</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Uncertainty of Generation Classification</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. No Longer Fazed by ‘Likes’ on Posts</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. No Real Concern with Facebook Data Breach</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d. Varied SMS Participation</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Development Away from SMS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Exposure to More Diversity than at Home</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Noticeable Growth into Adulthood</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Recognizing Immaturity or Lack of Motivation in Peers</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2d. Nervous about Returning Home for Summer Break</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>N**</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Multiple Realities and Perceptions-Digital/Physical</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. Social Media Etiquette</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. Recognizing Physical and Digital Differences</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3c. The Generational Divide within SMS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3d. Different Posts on Different Platforms</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Relationships and Connectivity</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a. Would Rather Meet in Person</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b. Using SMS Because Friends Do</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c. Breaking the Hookup Culture and Risk Behavior Assumption</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4d. Constant Connectivity is Difficult</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participant is local.  ** Participant will be remaining in town over summer.

The Digital Fatigue of Gen Z

While conducting the study over a course of three months with different participants in an individualized setting, the researcher found it to be curious that a majority of the participants had the same, detached attitude when it came to SMS and how it meshed with their daily lives. The first superordinate theme that emerged was a significant level of digital fatigue in Gen Z when it comes to SMS with most participants stating that they used various SMS platforms because it was “there” or because “that’s where my friends are.” Additionally, the SMS platforms used correlated back to what friends were using with a few outliers, such as Tumblr or Pinterest, that were used for personal interests rather than keeping up with friends.

It is argued that Gen Z is the most connected generation to date, although it seems to have come to a point where being connected is as normal as waking up in the morning and no longer the novel concept once experienced by millennials only a few years prior. Each day Gen Z is presented with another fake news story, another data breach, or the next cool SMS platform or device that they just have to have. For better or for worse, it is a never-ending cycle. Through the
study, each participant showed a level of apathy when it came to different topics regarding their generation, SMS participation, or how their personal data was being used. This superordinate theme is broken into four subthemes to focus on the different aspects of fatigue that appeared as they navigate their lives during the first-year of college. The four subthemes discussed are: Uncertainty of Generation Classification, No Longer Affected by ‘Likes’ on Posts, Facebook Data Breach, and Varied SMS Participation.

**Uncertainty of Generation Classification**

Generations have been a subject of interest in the media recently, usually with popular topics including how millennials are ruining one industry or another. Regardless of its prevalence in mass media today the researcher found that when asked about their generational classification each participant, with the exception of Kara, delivered a shaky or hesitated response. Kara was the only participant to respond, with confidence, “depending who you ask I’m either Z or a millennial.” Michael and Victoria were correct in their thinking that they were Generation Z, but still answered with hesitated uncertainty. April, Courtney, and Rachel were similar in their understanding of a break between the millennial and another generation, but were not completely sure where that break off occurs or even what came next. Courtney was the only participant to mention searching for the answer before, “I never know. Google has like four different answers whenever you look.” April responded, “Some classify us as Generation Z and…some as millennials? I’m not really sure” while Courtney stated with hesitation, “Gen…Z…? Because we aren’t millennials.” Rachel offered a similar response to the question also admitting that she was not entirely sure after having a conversation about it with friends, “Some say millennials. Some people say Gen Z. I’m not 100% sure which is which.” Caitlin also mentioned that “my friends
and I got into a huge debate that other day” on this topic, but was still caught in the uncertainty between millennial and Gen Z.

Answers from Bea, Richard, Mark, and Kayla, while each participant being of the same 18-19-year-old age bracket, ranged from Generation X to 21st century. Bea and Kayla responded with Generation X and were surprised to learn how far off they actually were. Bea laughed and responded, “Oh, I am so far away…I didn’t even know the difference.” Kayla was shocked to discover her generation, “Oh! Wow! So I’m Generation Z. That’s fascinating…I thought x was after millennials.” Mark originally replied with millennial, then followed up with “or x, y, or whatever. I know there’s a bunch of them.” Richard was the only participant to not respond with a traditional generational classification stating “21st century. I don’t know.”

No Longer Affected by ‘Likes’ on Posts

The ideas presented in the literature of Gen Z being a self-absorbed group that relies on people “liking” their photos for validation does not seem to hold much merit when speaking directly with members of Gen Z. With the exception of Caitlin, each participant noted that they no longer found themselves concerned with the number of “likes” or comments if they post to SMS. The male participants were particularly blunt in their answers about not feeling affected by receiving likes. When asked about the need for validation through receiving likes on SMS posts, Michael showed no hesitation, “I mean, I never did. It’s nice to go on Instagram and post a picture and get a couple hundred likes on it, but then again, I mean, if you are that superficial of a person then what are you doing?”

The female participants were similar in their responses to their male counterparts, though more likely to admit to once seeking validation through these means. Bea notes that “If there was
like two people that liked my pictures on Instagram I would get so sad.” Now, she is no longer affected by the number of likes. Courtney makes the connection that this is something that is outgrown between high school and college, “When I was in high school, it had to have 30 likes or I would take it down, but now it really is not that much of a problem. It's just like, do I like that photo? Yes? Then I am just going to put it up there.” Rachel reveals that she uses posts to SMS as more of a personal scrapbook to look back on, “So that in a year or two I'm looking back and am like 'huh, wonder what I had forgotten about my freshman year' and I can scroll back and see oh I did this, this, and this.” Caitlin was the only outlier of the group stating that “Yes, I definitely find more value in having more likes or comments” falling in line with generalization of Gen Z behavior on SMS.

Overall, “liking” and commenting has become such commonplace in the SMS world of Gen Z that it is to be expected and no longer a source of excitement for the user. “Liking” can even be seen as a form the user acknowledging that they saw their friends post whether or not they actually liked it or even read it. More recently, Facebook made an attempt to revive the “like” by offering different reactions such as love, laughter, anger, or sad which may once more trigger the excitement once felt by the simple “like” if the right person “loves” a photo instead.

**Facebook Data Breach**

Prior to the last interview taking place, news broke about a potential Facebook data breach that may have compromised the data of millions of users. Given the timely nature of this subject, the researcher folded in a question about how this data breach made the participants feel and if they understood that they may have voluntarily shared more information than they realized. Again, as with other topics, participants were mostly unaware of the situation or learned about it from indirect means. The responses varied but all participants exhibited a level of
concern, however, the concern was still not enough to change SMS behaviors. They had no problem accepting the situation as it was. On the subject, Michael notes that he was “indifferent” to the situation:

…it’s not like the information I put on my Facebook page is all too private. If there was something I didn’t want the world to know I wouldn’t put it on a public site where everyone could see it. I mean, I guess the more private things are going to be like what’s your phone number, I mean so, I don’t really know. I guess it is a little concerning that someone knows every single thing I have liked and commented on. All that is stored away somewhere anyway. It doesn’t concern me all too much...we put it out there. We did it to ourselves. So if there was something that we didn’t want everyone to know, I feel like, this may just be me, we wouldn’t have put it out on the internet for everyone to see.

Rachel admitted to weighing options about what to do about Facebook and experienced how difficult it actually is to remove yourself from Facebook when her boyfriend tried to remove his own account:

At this point like, I’m not sure what I want to do about that. Part of me really wants to delete my Facebook, but another part of me, my summer job relies on finding Facebook contacts and working with them through that. Like through messenger and everything. Um, but I was on Skype with my boyfriend the other day and he tried to delete his Facebook account and he said that he was walking me through everything they have you do. There are six or seven steps just to delete your account and then it is still up and searchable for a year even after you delete it. So even though he went ahead and deleted it, per se, it is still out there for everyone to look at. Which is something that really
creeped me out. There is no way around that. There is no way to say I don’t want this out there anymore and to immediately have it go away. It’s like, ‘if you change your mind in the next year you can have it back.’ Like, no! So it’s still out there. I don’t like that idea very much.

April was also not aware of the situation, but felt that we “definitely put ourselves at risk” when posting, even if we do not mean to, “Like you click accept and you don’t even think about it but then well it has too much information attached to it.” Victoria was not aware of the situation with Facebook, but did admit that her information was probably a part of the compromised set given her SMS habits. Kayla was also not aware of the data breach and felt uncomfortable, but understood how it could happen by doing things without meaning to, “Like I’m sure I have consented by clicking on it, but really I didn’t mean to.” Kara notes that she was more “freaked out” by the data breach that hit Equifax some time ago, “but it is also something that people have come to accept, which I don’t know what that says about us necessarily.”

Courtney, a communication major, spoke on how the topic was discussed in her classes and how the professors seemed to be “more weirded out” and taking it more seriously than most students, “Like she was talking to us about this and was like ‘how many of you are really uncomfortable with this?’ It’s not cool, but it didn’t freak, it seems like, any of the younger kids out, the students as much as it did for the professors.” She also felt “that kind of stuff kind of happens” and that “we are just resigned to the fact that, you know, it’s the internet.”

Gen Z is so used to an open information society that the idea of their personal data being made part of the open information is not a shock or enough reason to leave social media. Remaining connected is more important. Participants rationalize their decisions with the
knowledge that they have willingly done it to themselves or that it was bound to happen, unlike older generations who maintain a tighter grasp on personal details.

**Varied SMS Participation**

Each participant reported using the classic SMS package of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. April describes the reason for using this particular set of SMS as “I don't really know any others. These are the main ones and that's where most of my friends are.” Michael admitted to using “Tinder on occasion”, while Bea and Victoria admitted to using Tinder to “meet people” in town. Other applications included Pinterest, Tumblr, and YouTube. Mark was the only participant to allegedly “delete” all social media except for Facebook, which was needed for his on campus job. When asked about the time spend using SMS each day, most participants were hesitant in answering and unsure of exactly how much time gets spent. Bea admitted that she was “low key addicted”, while Caitlin, Victoria, and Courtney stated they used it “a lot” noting anywhere between a few minutes to six hours during any given day.

Regardless of having multiple SMS profiles, they described how the content posted to each can vary and how each platform is used for a different purpose. Participant responses help conclude that Facebook is where the grandparents are, while Instagram is filled with their peers, and Snapchat has replaced traditional texting. Caitlin describes an example of the generational difference between Facebook and Instagram by how she posts things to Instagram that she would never share to Facebook, such as pictures of her tattoos because “that’s where my grandparents are. They don’t approve.” She makes is clear that there are just some things that need to be kept away from family. Michael describes the differences of his SMS use by platform:
Facebook is where my family and distant family and old friends. Like those kind of people. So that is where I will post like great end to the first semester. Instagram is a little bit more, a little less restrained. That’s where I can have beach pictures and um, skinny jeans and cardigans. I do have a span account on Instagram and that’s the one where there can be paraphernalia in the picture because I think there are like 20 people following it maybe. I definitely rant on twitter. I like little snarky things on twitter.

Opinions on Tinder varied widely among participants, with the male participants having more direct answers on the topic. Michael notes his experience with the app, “I have used Tinder on occasion. Sometimes I'm like 'oh my God this is so stupid. This is not the right way to meet people', but normal ways aren't working, so…” On the same topic, Courtney stated that “It invites awkward moments if you are not on the same page. A lot of kids I know use it to just make friends.”

**Conclusions.** In a world that is heavily connected it was fascinating for the researcher to see a high level of unwillingness to actively engage, yet a reluctance to fully remove themselves from digital life. It would seem that this generation’s involvement in SMS is as natural as breathing. There is a level of exhaustion present among the participants with the continuous checking and updating of the digital spaces. In the college setting, this behavior is often seen through the lack of response to emails or campus communications from advisors or professors. It is nothing more than another notification on their phone that receives a quick glance before the next notification comes along and the message is quickly forgotten.

Even more fascinating, a quick Google search or check of the campus email can provide any student the access to information for any number of topics. The question becomes, how is it that most of the participants were uncertain or had no idea when asked about some of the topics
presented during the interviews, such as generation classification or the Facebook data breach, when the information seems to be readily available on any SMS feed or a quick search away?

The reality is that individuals of this generation have become so inundated with information that rather than sifting through it to find the correct answer for later use, Gen Z would rather take the step back and not have a full understanding because they know they can still access the information later, if needed. Some may ask then, if it is so tedious and tiring, then why continue to engage in the activity? The answer is simple, this is the reality the generation has always known. They have never known a time where SMS did not exist or a time when no one would have considered taking a picture of their lunch to show their friends later. SMS is how this group communicates, grows, and learns. They will continue to persist in this manner no matter how exhausting it becomes since this is life and it’s “there.”

Moreover, as Rachel discusses under the Facebook Data Breach section, deleting yourself from SMS is not necessarily the easiest thing to do. It is almost easier to just accept participate. While considering this level of hyper-connectivity among Gen Z, there are still many experiences and areas of development that cannot be answered or executed through digital means and that require careful thought and planning.

**Development Away from SMS**

A great deal of growth still appears to be taking place in the real-world, though often tie back to SMS in some fashion. There is still a high level of trial and error that goes on in the real-world experiences of Gen Z. Of the eleven participants that took part in the study, each one showed development in ways that cannot be answered by a Google search. Many of these areas
were related to real-life decision making or required some light guidance from family members to navigate.

On the subject, most of the participants are taken aback and laughed when the researcher presented with the idea of looking for the adult in the room and then realizing that they were the adult. Some participants then thought back to some of their experiences early on in the fall semester with Hurricane Irma and having to evacuate the town not even two weeks after moving into the residence halls. Some participants joked that they were trying to figure out how to properly do laundry and suddenly here they were waiting in line for gas and trying to flee the state before the storm.

Beyond the hurricane, participants noted experiences that varied greatly from their familiar home environment. Participants also noted a higher level of independence, ability to make sound decisions, and exposure to things that they may not have had the opportunity to explore prior. From these experiences, four subthemes discussed are: Exposure to More Diversity than at Home, Noticeable Growth into Adulthood, Recognizing Immaturity and Lack of Motivation in Peers, and Nervous about Returning Home for Summer Break.

**Exposure to More Diversity than at Home**

An interesting theme that repeated across participants from more rural communities in central Florida or out of state involved the level of diversity encountered on campus. The site of the study is often viewed from the outside as very homogenous, however, many of the participants would disagree. Participants from more rural or conservative areas situated around Florida discussed how being on campus has opened their eyes to more diverse situations and has
taught them more about acceptance in their development. Michael discussed the differences between the home and college experiences as an openly gay male:

I didn’t know, I knew one other gay person. I didn’t know any transgender people. My high school was very, very homogeneous. There were no black people in my grade. I mean I think there were two Asian people. Everyone was white. This is different in a very good way… I was definitely not open in high school. No one knew in high school, you know the south, it’s not really acceptable. So um, that’s the reason I didn’t want to go to FSU and stay home. So I came to school knowing that wasn’t going to be a secret and if someone had a problem with it then that’s not somebody I want to be friends with. So that was the most significant shift.

April is from a small town in central Florida. She noted how the experience has challenged her perceptions on acceptance and has made her think about her values. Overall she feels that it has been a pleasant experience:

I would say I am a more open person to things, and I guess more tolerant of things. Where I was from everyone has this one view and this one way and they don’t think of anything else outside of that one way. Here it allows you to be more accepting and tolerant of people’s backgrounds and different views. So that is on that has been different. Seeing how other people act and respond in some situations probably makes me glad I was raised the way I was and stick to my roots…For me, this place was very diverse because we probably had like a 10% maybe diversity rate from my high school. It’s a rural area and the 10% probably came from migrant workers, not just to be, that’s just how it was. Very few minorities. Then, um, one of my roommates, one of the reasons she moved out was because she felt like there was a lack of diversity here. I was like ‘wow
that is crazy’ and she was like ‘there’s just not enough people here like me’ in her program or whatever. So she decided to move. She had multiple reasons, but that was one. It’s crazy to me because this is the broadest span of people I’ve seen.

Kara came from a small school out of state that she dubbed “German Catholic Military high school” and describes her experience with the change:

I have been encountered with different people. And I think that has shifted my perspective… I come from a very tiny high school that was basically, our joke was German Catholic Military high school because that was basically what it was. I think the hardest part was people that had different work ethics than I did and who had different opinions about how hard you should be working and how much you should be sitting back and enjoying the roses. That was hard for me to kind of take in that people had different views of how you should live your life, but I am learning to accept that. I can live the way I want to and you can live the way you want to and we don't have to get in each other's way.

Rachel discusses underlying prejudices and how coming to college has helped her leave her comfort zone and “realize some small things” about underlying prejudices:

I think everybody has little prejudices that they don't want to admit or that they don't realize it themselves. I think it's good to always be pushing yourself further out of your comfort zone so that you can recognize those things and try to fix them. I didn't necessarily think I was a close-minded person before coming to college, but I definitely realized some small things about myself that, some small attitudes toward people that have changed interacting with more groups of people.
Mark describes his friends as being all international students and finds it to be “interesting.” He admitted to having friends of “different ethnicities and stuff”, but never having three friends who had lived in three different countries prior to coming to college. He agrees that he has been “exposed to it more.” Finally, Bea was an outlier in this theme as one of the few women of color on campus and resident of the local community. Her experience on campus varied greatly in this regard and she did show more concern when it came to fitting in and making friends at the start of the school year.

**Noticeable Growth into Adulthood**

Often referred to as “adulting”, the participants recollected on moments during their first-year of college where they were suddenly matched with adult level decision making, whether it be with housing, health, finances, or environmental disasters. Though most saw success in these decisions it was still noted to be a “wild” or “weird” feeling. Courtney felt “weird” when thinking of herself as an adult because she does not consider herself to be there, “yet.” She is also not sure exactly when it will happen, “I'm not quite there yet, but like in definition, I am an adult and you have to take care of yourself and stuff. It's kind of wild to think 'oh, that's me now!'” Victoria, who lived locally with family during the first-year rather than on campus, noted a distinct difference between living at home with parents and feeling like a kid, then coming to school and being an adult, “My mom is like 'you live under my room still so you have to follow my rules', but when I go to school it's 'I'm an adult, I have to stay on top of my stuff.' I have to keep track of my homework. There isn't someone there saying, 'hey, you need to do this!'”

While signing a lease on an apartment at the end of the school year with friends, April had the realization that adult signature meant hers and not her parents. She explains the moment of realization:
We had to fill out the forms and we were all filling them out together and it said adult signature. It was like ‘do we need to get out parents to sign this’ and they were like 'no, you do it.’ They are asking us all of these questions and it’s like 'do you want our parent’s answers?’ And it's like, ‘nope we want yours’.

In terms of finances, Courtney spoke of having her debit card compromised and taking care of everything the bank before calling her mother, “Then I called my mom. She was like 'ok you need to call the bank' and I was like I already did. I felt very proud of myself. I felt like I was ‘adulting’ that day.” April also reflects on having to handle her own medical affairs, such as making doctor appointments away from her parents, but not always having the answers she needs, “My dad tried to help me out with something, as far as medical bills, but he couldn't because I was 18 and has signed some form that he couldn't do it. I was like this is crazy.” Additionally, on the medical front, Kara tells of learning that she was anemic during a routine blood donation on campus and having to handle that situation on her own while trying to navigate the campus meal plan:

I went to donate blood at the red bus last time it was here and I got the results back and it turned out I'm severely anemic. So normally, if I were at home, my parents would be like 'ok, so, we are going to change how we eat to make sure you get enough iron'. So that was a big adjustment for me because I was like I consciously when I go into the dining hall go, ‘what can I eat? What can I not eat that will remove the iron from my blood? So that has been a real tricky thing just for me to manage. It's really hard for me to make the conscious decision.

One of the more profound moments for this group during their first-year was Hurricane Irma forcing the evacuation of campus and the surrounding town. Rachel, a participant from out
of state, tells of her experiences with having to navigate the evacuation and having to make
significant adult decisions for the first time without her parent’s guidance. She also notes a
higher level of responsibility as the only one of her roommates with a car:

I think the first time that happened was probably when we were evacuating for Hurricane
Irma. I was the only one of my roommates with a car, so I was responsible for getting
everybody where they had to go. I mean I had lived in Florida before and had moved
back to Kansas, so I didn't really know anything that was going on. I was trying to find
someone to tell me what to do and I realized I'm in charge of getting out of here. That
was scary, but I think it has made me a lot more confident in a lot of other small things
that I have to take responsibility with.

Richard makes a connection between ‘adulting’ and learning the consequences of actions.
He notes that “my parents are never telling me to do well in school. They are depending on me to
make my own decisions and do well…They aren't holding my hand anymore." He goes on to
explain:

I think the hardest thing was making my own decisions and understanding the
consequences. Having to learn the consequences for next time. So like, saying you are
going to wake up early the next morning to write a paper or finish the rough draft so you
can go hang out with your friends, but you don't wake up early. It's stuff like that. You
gotta’ do your stuff.

All in all, coming to college has been a significant moment development in ways that had
never been considered before for this group. The training wheels have come off and they are
beginning to take on real world tasks whether it be maintaining health, taking care of financial
interests, signing legally binding documents, or evacuating for a hurricane. While SMS can offer support on each of these topics, it cannot be a substitute for real world decisions.

**Recognizing Immaturity and Lack of Motivation in Peers**

Participants discussed varying levels of immaturity and lacking motivation in their peers in situations ranging from life in the residence halls to using SMS as a megaphone to stir up trouble regarding campus life, but fail to do anything about their cause away from SMS.

Michael offered a passionate argument on the subject of inter-hall how folks are quick to complain, yet reluctant to take any real action:

You know the Facebook page is so aggressive. I saw this, I don’t even go on it. I mean I do if I want to be entertained and I literally have nothing to do, but like, the other day I saw one kid put a poll about the administration isn’t hearing our voices. The paraphrased version of what they said, ‘they’re not hearing us about how bad this sucks, so here’s a poll for what you think we should do with this so they hear our voices’. I’m like ‘oh my God, calm down. You’re not making a stamp on the world complaining about inter-hall at your college. They know!’ Like, how many times have we been over this? I’m sure they know. Every class has some little thing, I doubt it is as crazy as my class, but I’m sure it’s there on other pages. SGA had an entire meeting on it. If everyone cared as much as they pretend to they would have all showed up.

Kara offered a similar take on the lack of motivation that arises when it comes to their peers and their methods of complaint:

I think there is a lot more passive aggressiveness that people think they can get away with….To me, I really find it frustrating, my policy is don’t complain unless you have a
plan to fix it. So don’t whine about it, or closer to ‘don’t whine about it unless you have plans to fix it’. Like, I want five points of how you are going to change this, otherwise, I don’t want to hear it. That’s a personal kind of thing of mine.

Bea and Rachel note a high level of immaturity when it came to interactions with peers and situations of bullying on SMS. Bea discusses:

Bullying is present and as far as maybe administrators should probably get a hold of some of these people that are posting these things and maybe talk to them because, you know, stemming, coming out of high school you should learn some type of self-control. If you see someone that is different, don’t bother them. If they are not who you talk to, then don’t talk to them. It’s just not, it shouldn’t be a problem. If someone is messing with your clothes in the laundry, I don’t think you should post on the Facebook page that ‘I’m going to beat you up because you are messing with my stuff’. What was the purpose of that? To show everyone that you are immature? Bullying stems from immaturity, honestly. If somebody has something different people are immature so they talk about that difference. If you are mature, you are just going to be like ok they are different let me just go on about my day. This is middle school things and high school things. I don’t think it should be happening in college.

Rachel touches on the level of pettiness that occurs online and how it should be up to their peers to sort out issues for themselves, however, does not feel that this is occurring:

I think people get way pettier than they need to be online. I think that is something that everyone is conscious of. I see people posting a lot about ‘can the people above me stop stomping around’ and I’m really confused as to why they don’t just go and ask them. If
somebody, there is no one living below me, but if someone came up and said ‘you’re being kind of loud, can you cut it out’ I would understand. I’ve also seen a lot of posts about like, in my hall, there are people that come running through the halls at like two in the morning just screaming, just because they can, I guess. Someone made a post about that. Then that person replied with ‘you better keep your doors locked’ and I’m like ‘ok, are we really doing this here?’ Um, I don’t think, I haven’t seen, I also haven’t been looking on there a whole lot, but I haven’t seen any administrators on there really get into those things very much. They are kind of there to answer the questions that people have, but they don’t seem to like get involved in all of the drama there. I don’t necessarily think it is them underestimating how serious it is, but them trying to get us to solve our own problems because honestly at this age we should be able to sort that out on our own. We’re not sorting it out, which is a problem. I think it is a little bit too late for an adult to come step in and say why don’t we compromise on this? I don’t think they are underestimating the seriousness of it, but they are just trying to let us figure it out for ourselves.

**Nervous about Returning Home for Summer Break**

As the study concluded, so did the participant’s first-year of college. Participants that were returning home for the summer spoke about a level of apprehension about returning to their parents’ house and hometowns. A theme of “my house, my rules” came into play when considering how they would have to adjust from a year of unlimited freedom while at college. Bea, Victoria, and April were the only exceptions to this as they were remaining local or were already with parents. Michael describes his feelings on the topic:
I’m freaking out. I really don’t want to go home for summer. I mean, if I could have a couple of choice friends just like, you know, just come over here and just hang out with me all summer I would be set. That would be great. I could find a little job somewhere where I could just do something in the evenings and have the day to like actually do my research and things. That would be awesome. You get the while you’re under my roof you follow my rules. My dad won’t do that, but my mom probably will.

Richard describes similar thoughts on returning home for summer:

Yeah, that’s a big thing. I have free reign of whatever I want to do. Like if I want to go hang out with some friends at two in the morning then I can, no one is going to stop me. I don’t have to tell my parents where I’m going, I can just go and do whatever I want to do. Yeah, it is going to be hard going back, because you are under their roof again and it’s like saying ‘hey is it ok if I go do this tonight?’ I don’t think it’s going to be that bad. It’s just going to be different.

Kayla realizes that she is fortunate to have “supportive” parents, but realizes that some of her peers are not going back to these situations:

I think it will be a little weird. My parents are really supportive and aren’t too strict, so I am fortunate. It won’t be too bad. Some of my friends have really strict parents and they are stressed about going home because they don’t know how much longer they can live in that confinement. Because, like, you finally get your breath of fresh air where you are free to go out and be who you are and you have to be forced back into that. I think that will be hard. I am fortunate because I have really caring parents and they respect and support me.
Furthermore, ideas of returning to their high school selves or clashing with hometown ideals were also apparent when thinking about the next impending change in their lives. A few participants also noted being worried about having to start fresh again when they return in the fall. Caitlin makes feels that she will be one that returns to being a “high school student again”:

I know the second I get home I’m going to feel like that high school student again. Living at home and needing her mom to pick up her groceries for her. Everything is going to revert back to that. Here I am a few seconds away from everything. I can walk there. At home, I am like 20 minutes outside of anything that you want to get to from my house, so it is really inconvenient if you want to go anywhere.

Rachel discusses making decisions for herself, but still seeking her parent’s approval. She also makes note of how the home dynamic has changed:

I actually also recently made plans to go visit him [her boyfriend] on base in Chicago a couple weeks after I go home in the summer. I messaged my mom about it. I was like hey is this ok with you? I know I am an adult and everything now, but are you alright with that? She goes, it’s a mom thing, but you can do what you want, but it’s a mom thing. I wasn’t really sure how to take that. I think that is going to be kind of odd. Because I think that she is driving me to the airport because I don’t want to leave my car in the parking lot and pay for it. It is going to be interesting interacting with her and my dad a little bit more like, I don’t want to say like roommate, but kind of on the same level. I am going to make my decision. You are going to make your decision. If we agree with the ok. If not ok. That is going to be kind of strange.
Participants did not know what to expect when going home for the summer, but realized that they were bound to notice some changes. They noted winter and spring breaks as small previews of what was to come. While many were excited to see family and friends, they still realized that they may have grown apart from some folks simply based on the appearance of how their lives were going on SMS. Further study would be needed to verify these ideas, but could also link into the ideas on physical and digital appearances.

**Conclusions.** Generation Z experiences a great deal of development during their first-year of college and much of it is not tied to SMS. While SMS is there as a tool to connect and communicate, it cannot be used to make certain decisions or factor into certain events. When SMS is used, it is being used as a platform to aggressively present ideas, yet lacks the follow through to excite change. Both points are recognized by the participants of their peers. As Rachel found with the hurricane, Kara found with health scares, and April found with signing a lease, some decisions need to be made in the real-world or there could be real consequences.

The researcher interprets these findings in a way that challenges the narcissistic or disengage perception of Gen Z that is often presented in the literature. While there are many members of Gen Z that embody those traits, there is still a great deal of growth occurring outside of SMS in terms of maturing as a member of society or adapting to and engaging with new surroundings. From here it can be concluded that while a sizable group of the generation has found their voice on SMS platform it has subsequently drowned out those with similar characteristics to the study’s participants who are not willing to participate in the “lawless land” that is SMS, as Courtney put it, but would rather go out and make something happen rather than just posting about it. Consequently, this silence can lead to a misinterpretation that they are the ones who are disengaged.
Multiple Realities and Perceptions across Digital and Physical Spaces

Over the course of the interviews participants often underscored their statements with an understanding of a digital reality not always reflecting a physical one. A major contributor to recognizing the differences between the two occurred at the start of the first-year experience when SMS groups formed to connect the incoming class of 2021. Initial connections were being made online several weeks prior to school actually starting with the reality in the back of everyone’s mind that the connection would never carry into the real world. In most cases, people did not meet in person for weeks or months after moving into the residence halls, if it happened at all. Participants noted being friends online with some, but never actually meeting in person, which is surprising considering the study site is only made up of 2,500 students and not 25 or 30 thousand.

In this section, participants reflect on varying aspects of the interactions occurring over summer and leading up to move in when everyone is meeting in person for usually the first time and the awkwardness that follows. Participants also discussed subthemes which included: Social Media Etiquette, Recognizing Physical and Digital Differences the Generational Divide within SMS, and Different Posts on Different Platforms.

Social Media Etiquette

Even in the digital age where SMS use is accepted as a standard practice, there are still many unwritten rules when it comes to social media etiquette and it varies by individual. While SMS is used a great deal to “friend” peers over the summer, there is no clear-cut rule as to how one combines the digital space with the physical one or if you even need to combine them. Caitlin noted that she used SMS prior to coming to school to “friend” people, but did not actually
make friends from it. She explains, “A lot of them I haven't met in person still. Still just know them through social media… [My roommate would] tell me all of this stuff and I would be like 'how do you know these people?' and she would be 'oh, we're in a GroupMe'.”

Courtney makes the connection that through SMS, “You know people you wouldn't even make friend with in real life, but you follow them on Instagram because they go to Whitehall.” Kayla follows this thought by reflecting on how “cool” it is to sort of know people at the school, “Even though you aren't necessarily best friends with somebody you know who they are. You know their name, you know what they look like, you know a little bit about them.”

Among participants, there was also some discrepancy on when it was appropriate to “friend” someone on SMS. Richard preferred to “friend” after meeting in real life because “You don't want to be the weird kid. You've got to meet them first, then friend them. Otherwise, it's just weird.” Caitlin discussed her methods for using SMS to determine “what kind of person I think they are” then friending them, “I think, in theory, I would say that I want to make friends and introduce myself in person, but in practice, I know more people on social media before I meet them in real life.” She also admitted to still only knowing people online, “A lot of them I haven't met in person still. Still just know them through social media.”

Types of posts were also carefully considered since participants did not want to come off as complaining or a pity case. Rachel states, “I don't want to look like I'm complaining. I know that inevitably somebody's day is worse” and Richard commented, "It's no one’s business. I don't want to be pity case. A lot of kids have a lot worse than I do.” Mark discusses how part of the reason he left social media was that he would over think what to post or how to post, “I'm an over-thinker…I have always been super anxious about it, even before social media.”
April discussed the awkwardness that arose once on campus after weeks of communicating via SMS, “You know them because they post a lot on social media…so you see their pictures and stuff, but then you see them in person and it's like 'do I say hello?'” Courtney had similar thoughts on encounters in the real-world and thinking to herself, “Oh, hey, I'm friends with you on Facebook. Should I talk to you?” On this note, Caitlin admitted that had recently met someone in person that she had been friends with on SMS for “several months.” This subtheme feeds into the next subtheme of recognizing the physical and digital differences that occur when meeting online before meeting in real life.

**Recognizing Physical and Digital Differences**

Gen Z is not oblivious to the idea that what is presented in a digital space does not always reflect a proper reality. The participants also recognize that they may be guilty of presenting a false front as well, whether or not intentionally. Mark, who had stepped away from SMS at the time of the study, spoke on how people develop ideas about other people based solely on SMS, "People form ideas of someone based on their social media in a way that is pretty destructive, in my opinion." April notes that SMS is not her preferred way to meet people, “I don't really like to use social media to make friends since people can put up false appearances.”

The digital appearance of others, even though it is understood to not be real, can cause stress and anxiety for others since it can appear “you're being left behind”, as Kara described it. Kayla describes how she felt anxious or even jealous of seeing others post, "even though we know it's not who they are.” Rachel talks about feeling the need to get ahead to keep up with the appearances of others:
I think that social media is a part of the reason why first semester I felt like I had to get ahead. Everyone wants to post online when things are going well for them, about how successful their projects are. I saw a lot of my classmates doing that and I always felt like I wasn’t quite up to par and if I could add one more thing to my schedule I would get there. It took me a while to realize that wasn’t really the case.

Richard told about an awkward Tinder encounter a friend had on campus:

My friend, he found this girl on Tinder, and you know, she looked good in her picture. She goes here. So he goes ‘yeah’ and she goes ‘come to my room’. So he walked over, she came out and as soon as he saw her, she did not look like the picture and he was already committed to doing it. So he was stuck with her for the whole night. It wasn't a good experience for him.

Kara note the differences between meeting people online and then in real life, as well as the expectations that get built leading to that moment:

I often find when you talk to someone online and then you talk to them in person, you get this picture of them in your head and then you meet them and they are completely different…I remember thinking 'oh they look to different' from their profile pictures than they do in real life. It's different someone typing to you versus when they speak and you can read their body language and how they behave.

She also discusses a degree of self-censoring that plays into the ideas of projecting the “artsy” digital appearance that may not align with real life:

I think I do alter it a little bit…I am conscious of how artsy it is if it is on Instagram because a lot of my friends that follow me on Instagram or Facebook or something are
very artsy and have very articulate, lovely and pretty Instagram's. I have to be really careful about this one and only put out the artsy moments in life. As opposed to Facebook where it is kind of whatever and Snapchat is 'look at this weird thing that is right here.'

Michael also describes intentional posting to look a certain way online:

If we are being honest, nowadays the main purpose of Instagram and, Instagram specifically, is not to be like, just updating people about your day. I feel like that is more of a Facebook or twitter thing. It’s like a ‘ok let’s put things on here that will characterize me so when people come stalk my profile I will look better. I will seem like an appealing person.’

Differences between physical and digital realities is understood and expected when transitioning between the different spaces. The participants realize that there is bound to be a significant different between what a person actually looks like when compared to their profile photo and expect a difference in personality. While some are harder judges of this than others, they recognize that they too are guilty of creating the same differences in their own digital and physical realities. It is completely normal to know someone as one way on Facebook, a different way on Snapchat, and even a third way in real life. Everything becomes significantly compartmentalized from one platform to the next.

**The Generational Divide within SMS**

Among the standard SMS bundle of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tinder, there is a clear divide that separates the generations and their preferred SMS. In ranking SMS use or purpose, Rachel feels that “It's a lot more compartmentalized based on the age range and the demographics of the users.” Bea confirms this thought by stating that, “I prefer Facebook over
Instagram because my grandparents use Facebook and I can connect with the older crowd”, Michael notes that, “Facebook is where my family and distant family and old friends are”, and Caitlin keeps it neutral, “I mainly use Facebook for sharing videos and stuff like that. Otherwise, everything is kept away from the parents and family.”

Between platforms, it is not a secret among Gen Z that older generations have no idea how things work and they use it to their advantage when posting. Courtney uses Snapchat’s disappearing features as an example of how parents would never know what she was up to since the content expires after 24 hours of being posted to a story or quickly after being viewed by the recipient, “Four hours later she'll be like show your dad and I'm like ‘it's gone, Mom’.”

Following on the idea of a generational divide, as presented in the literature, different posts on different platforms become a subsequent subtheme.

**Different Posts on Different Platforms**

Following with the recognition of a generational divide of who is using what platforms, Gen Z has learned to funnel content to certain SMS based on who is there to view it. Following on Michael’s comments about Facebook being where the family is:

Facebook is where my family and distant family and old friends, like those kind of people. So that is where I will post like ‘great end to the first semester’. Instagram is a little bit more, a little less restrained. That’s where I can have beach pictures and um, skinny jeans and cardigans. I do have a spam account on Instagram and that’s the one where there can be paraphernalia in the picture because I think there are like 20 people following it, maybe. I definitely rant on twitter. I like little snarky things on twitter.
Michael continues to talk about how he keeps multiple accounts on certain platforms, such as Instagram, that range from the “family friendly PG thing” to the “spam account” or “F-Insta.” F-Insta, in this case, being the “Fake Instagram”:

Facebook is definitely the political one. Instagram, ok my main Instagram, is the nice family friendly PG thing. That’s what most of my family is on. Twitter is the funny one where I'll put funny things. It’s not all rants. Sometimes it’s a ‘this is funny and it happened to me today’. My spam Instagram account, what some people like to refer to as their ‘f-insa’, the ‘fake insta’, basically where they put things they don’t want everyone on their Instagram to see. Basically their choice few. I think I only have like 30 following mine. It’s a combination of people from home and people from here. That’s where I will put like a picture of me with a cigarette in my mouth, or if there is like a beer in the background, or something, or in my hand or whatever, I'll put it on there.

Michael was not alone in the Finsta or “spam account” area with Victoria and Courtney making mentions of this, though not going into further detail on the topic.

Richard tends to keep away from Facebook, but is more inclined to use Instagram and Snapchat for various reasons, “Snapchat is when I am having fun with my friends. Instagram, I post pictures of like graduation, anniversaries for the girlfriend, or birthdays… Buy yeah, Snapchat is how you keep an eye on someone.” Caitlin notes that certain things are kept off of Facebook, since that is where her grandparents are and she knows that they would not approve, “Usually just like pictures of myself or when I got my tattoos. That was something I didn't want to share with Facebook. That's where my grandparents are. They don't approve.” Finally, Mark recalls what he used SMS for prior to stepping back from the apps. With his boss and family on Instagram, Twitter became his least filtered form:
Twitter was my least filtered form of social media. I think that is the case for a lot of people because less people use it. The primary focus of social media, like Instagram or Facebook is to share photos and life events. But Twitter is you ranting or looking at fun stuff. So I was goofier. But like Instagram is, it wasn’t serious but I didn’t cuss that much. I didn’t really do anything that ridiculous. There was no alcohol or drug use on it. Which is a general thing that everyone should do. I followed the basic rules on that.

**Conclusions.** Gen Z is a generation who knows how to harness the power of social media in a way unlike any generation before it. The rules of SMS engagement are blurred as to when it is appropriate to “friend” someone, but one thing remained common among participants: they are connected by circumstance since they are attending the same school and are all first-year students. A new connection is a tap or swipe away. Additionally, a connection on SMS is not necessarily a guaranteed connection in the real world. It is entirely possible that they will never meet in real life. Gen Z realizes this detail and is not bothered by that idea, it is just a part of life with SMS.

Furthermore, all SMS is not created for equal purpose and users are not limited to single accounts on any given platform, as found with the creation of “spam” accounts and the “F-Insta.” They can easily live multiple, carefully curated, versions of themselves through any given platform. Participants described an understanding of this disconnect being the norm and expecting variances between digital and physical realities.

Though they do not necessarily like the idea of being different in real life than what is presented online, they are accepting of it since this is the life they have always known, unlike previous generations that have spent the majority of their lives without SMS. Additionally, Gen Z knows how to hide. They can use one SMS, such as the “class of” group on Facebook where
administrators lurk, as a springboards to connect on other SMS, such as Instagram, GroupMe or Snapchat.

**Relationships and Connectivity**

The final superordinate theme that resulted from the study is how SMS has made Generation Z reconsider their relationships and how they connect. While a majority of time is spent behind their screens, it was surprising to hear that many traditional ideas are still intact and would be the preference to how the generation is often assumed to be, although they do not always feel it is a possibility for one reason or another. They want to have traditional romantic relationships, would rather communicate in person, and are generally afraid of the repercussions associated to risky behaviors. They are more considerate of their safety and realize that technology does not always have their best interests in mind, such as with catfishing or cyber bullying. Answers varied between male and female participants in areas that are expected according to the literature when it came to dating and risk behaviors, though participants showed many commonalities. From here four final subordinate themes emerge: Would Rather Meet in Person, Use SMS Because Friends Do, Breaking the Hookup Culture and Risk Behavior Assumption, and Constant Connectivity is Difficult.

**Would Rather Meet in Person**

For a generation seen tethered to their electronic devices, the participants of the study would prefer to meet and build connections in person rather than meeting online and would prefer to go out and be involved. The participant’s spoke of how they go about meeting new friends once on campus, since many of the connections made through SMS fizzled out in the first few days, and even how some participated in local protests at the start of the year.
Michael and Bea spoke of how they have no problem just going out and talking to people. Michael described himself as a “person-to-person kind of person” who has “no problem just leaning over and talking to people around me.” Bea explains, “I just go out and start speaking to people. If I'm just standing there by myself I just hop in a group and start talking and just make a friend then.” April prefers meeting in person since you cannot get close to someone due to a “physical barrier from technology. She also described herself as a “visual person” who liked to meet people in person, but also noted that “I’m a bit of an introverted person, so it’s kind of difficult.”

Victoria describes her outgoing personality who has no problem connecting in the real-world, “I just try to put myself out there and be generous or nice to everyone I see. Usually I am described as that crazy person who waves at everybody.” Rachel described being a “generally talkative person” and having no problem with sitting with random people and starting conversations, “I’m that annoying kid in the dining hall that comes and sits down next to you and says ‘hi, how’s your day going’ when you don’t want to be talked to.”

Using SMS Because Friends Do

In discussing SMS with each participant a strange circle began to appear when trying to find out what apps they used and why. The “pretty encompassing”, as Michael put it, collection of SMS included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat because that’s where their friends where. Other sites, such as Tumblr, Reddit, or Pinterest were mentioned, but more so for personal interest and not communication. April’s reason for using the main set boiled down to, “Don’t really know any others. These are the main ones and that's where most of my friends are.” Victoria feels that SMS acts as a "connector for friendships. It keeps my friendships alive. Because without it I wouldn't really be able to see how my finds are doing."
The researcher found it to be particularly curious that few SMS applications were used for personal interest, but rather to only be connected with friends and peers. It would appear that the merry-go-round of SMS use comes down to I use it because my friend does, but at the same time the friend is using it because another friend does, and so on. This raises the question of does anyone actually want to be here participating or are they participating because that’s just what is done these days?

**Breaking the Hookup Culture and Risk Behavior Assumption**

With the creation of dating and hookup apps, such as Tinder and Bumble, Generation Z is usually associated with hookup culture, although, as the participants of the study made quite apparent, this is not the case. Female participants did not feel that hookup culture was for them and did not understand why anyone would want to participate, however did not judge anyone who did and admitted to being curious about the whole concept. Courtney feels that, “It invites awkward moments if you are not on the same page.” Two participants, Bea and Victoria did admit to using Tinder to find friends. The male participants had a slightly different take all together.

Kayla described hookup culture as “sad” and that people should care more about others, “Even if there is no sexual thing going on it is still using them emotionally and throwing them away because I can swipe right on another person and go out with them the next day. I think it's wrong.” April expressed more traditional values when it came to dating and a concern for safety when using the apps. She used her grandparents as an example of how she would prefer to go on dates stating that, “I kind of like how it was back several years ago when our grandparents were younger. You would ask to take them on dates. You actually would go on actual dates and have set plans. I'm a planned. This is just chaos casual.” She also noted how no one wants to state
their feelings, go on dates, or commit to anything. Kara noted not wanting to be a part of the sort of culture that is associated with using dating apps, “I know that's not why everyone uses it, but I don't really like that aspect of it. Makes me uncomfortable…not necessarily a culture I want to get wrapped up in.”

Of the male participants, Mark had used Tinder randomly and felt that it was the “least subtle of the ways to hurt your self-esteem” and Richard, who is in a relationship and has not used any of the apps, admitted, “My friends do it to find girls and hookup and that's it. They're not looking to be friends. If they say that, then they're lying.”

Even though participants generally did not agree with hookup culture and dating apps, a majority of them felt that this was the future of dating and relationships, even though they really hoped that it was not. Bea states, “I feel like Tinder and all of those, they are the future because people just don't like to go out any meet people anymore, they like to speak behind their fingers.” Caitlin, who prefers for “friends becoming romantic partners”, had thought about the concept of this being the future of dating, but had never voiced an opinion on it:

I actually think about this a lot, but I never voiced my opinion. Yes, I think Tinder is the way a lot of people are going, especially typically for hookups and not relationships. Though I know some people are looking for relationships through Tinder or Bumble, but I feel that they rarely find a match who is also looking for a relationship at the same time. Like, I feel that is not how it ends up.

April agrees that in the technology age, this seems to be where dating is going, but hopes it does not:
We're in an age where technology is so, it has kind of taken over all aspects of our life in a sense. I guess that is the way that we are going. I know there are apps that are obviously for hooking up, but then you have, I guess you could say old school dating apps like Match and stuff like that. It's so scary. So many things could go wrong. So many issues with it. What if they are crazy? What if they are like a serial killer?

In terms of risk behaviors, often associated with drug or alcohol use, female participants, while more reserved in their answers, projected more concern with the consequences attached to the behavior or expressed fear in even trying it. Bea noted that she tried to “stick to the educational aspect of college” and Victoria stated that, “I'm pretty much terrified to do those [drinking or drugs].” April made note that her roommates were “enjoying their college experience” but that she does not “agree with any of that.” Courtney simply stated, “I’m a good bean.”

Unlike the female participants, all three male participants had no issue admitting that they take part in various behaviors from time to time. Michael discusses that the behavior was not a new development after coming to college, but has perhaps changed into more of a stress related coping mechanism, “I have drank and done drugs since I have been in school. Drugs sounds harsh, but I've smoked pot with my friends…We'd smoke cigarettes frequently, so I guess that would count.” Richard does not feel like he is doing anything out of the ordinary when compared to other folks his age, but does set limits on what he will do and feels that the activity has turned more toward coping with stress, “I would just go to school and deal with it the best I could. I started working out and on the weekends I'll drink….I feel like every kid does it. I haven't turned to smoking weed. I won't do that. I had a bad experience with it in high school, so that's just not for me. Mark fell in line with his male counter parts in that this behavior was nothing new to
him, but does not agree that it is a coping mechanism, “I wouldn't say it was necessarily just for coping because it's stuff I did in high school, too. I have kind of done more of that stuff since coming to college, but that is mostly just because of the freedom.”

It is a comforting idea that tradition is not lost among this generation. They realize that world is changing around them when it comes to risky behaviors, dating, or creating general relationships, though they long for what is not considered to be slightly old fashion, real life connections versus digital ones.

**Constant Connectivity is Difficult**

The sheer volume of information and relationship potential can also become an overwhelming experience as Victoria and Kara discuss. Victoria noted how overwhelming it was to interact with peers leading up to school starting, “there is so many people in there, it gets hard to distinguish who is who” and Kara found it “frustrating a lot of the time.” Victoria also noted pressures from friends or family for not posting enough since coming to college, “I had a strong connection with social media, then I came to college and found out I cannot keep up with it…everyone is like 'you didn't post enough' and I'm like 'sorry!!’.” Victoria intends to do a social media “cleanse” over the summer. Furthermore, Mark intends on remaining off of social media.

When asked if they would keeping in touch with their new connections over the summer via SMS, most participants admitted that there was maybe one or two people they would make the effort to stay in contact with. Bea explains:

I’m the type of person, if you don’t, like, show that you want to talk to me, or if you send one message or are the type of person that is like ‘oh we need to hang out’, you’re like the main person saying we need to communicate and get together during the summer, but
you don’t contact me, not one time, I’m just like ‘um, yeah, I’m not even gonna break my neck trying to talk to you even though you were the one saying that we should talk’. I don’t like that. This girl actually did it to me after spring break. She was like ‘yeah we need to talk more often’. She never texted me or nothing. She was the one who said that and I’m under the impression that she is going to be the one contacting me, to show interest.

Caitlin feels that she will keep in contact by “liking” or commenting on posts made by friends, but not much more than that. She notes that, “I probably won’t be communicating with them a lot, like messaging them... I feel like it is stressful to try to keep in touch with all of those people.” Courtney tells about the “snap streak” with her roommate that she simply cannot break over the summer, “I’m at like a hundred and fifty something with my roommate so I think that will have to stay intact.”

While the reasons for staying connected vary, the common theme among each participant is that the volume of people that they plan on keeping in touch with is significantly smaller than in the summer leading up to school starting. They have trimmed their close contact list down to a few, but remain friends on SMS with almost everyone they added before. It is likely that these connections will remain on SMS until someone decides to clean out a friend list or possibly simply lie forgotten forever in the cluttered world of SMS.

**Conclusions.** This superordinate theme may be the most impactful when considering ideas in the literature attached to Generation Z and their SMS use. Each participant expressed a desire to have more real-world interaction and experiencing further exhaustion when it comes to keeping connected, though they continue to engage because their friends do and that is what is expected. Given the opportunity, many of them were not overly keen on maintaining too many
SMS relationships over the summer beyond the occasional like or comment. They have significantly downsized from the initial feelings that they must friend or follow everyone or risk not having friends once they came to school.

While risk behaviors and hookup culture is still a thing, it is not a thing that all members of the generation subscribe to. Many participants still hold traditional views when it comes to dating or developing friendships. They have a desire to be authentic and engage in the real-world, however, it seems that the world is not constructed in a way for them to have this opportunity as previous generations had.

Conclusion

Interacting one on one with Gen Z students proved to be an interesting experience and shed a great deal of light on the research question of the study: How do Gen Z students perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first-year of college? From the analysis of 33 interviews across 11 participants, the following findings emerged through the four superordinate themes The Digital Fatigue of Gen Z, Development Away from SMS, Multiple Realities and Perceptions in Physical and Digital Spaces, and Relationships and Connectivity:

1. Gen Z has become too exhausted to engage, but unable to disconnect.
2. Gen Z lives multiple versions of themselves depending on SMS, or even multiple versions within a single SMS.
3. SMS cannot be a substitute for certain areas of development, though it may act as a tool to help.
4. Gen Z’s SMS activity is not the best way to measure their engagement or involvement on campus.

5. Gen Z prefers real life relationships versus digital ones but may be held back from cultivating these by SMS or other factors.

These findings were discovered and validated through the stories told by the participants themselves. While interviews were conducted in an individual setting, the researcher found that each participant was expressing similar experiences and desires. Chapter five will look at the five findings in depth and will make recommendations for practice and future study.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research study is to understand the role that social media use plays in the experiences and development of the Gen Z student during the first-year of college at a private liberal arts institution in North Florida. The study utilized student development theory as the theoretical framework, specifically Arthur Chickering’s Seven Vectors of College Student Development:

- Developing competence;
- Managing emotions;
- Moving through autonomy toward interdependence;
- Developing mature interpersonal relationships;
- Establishing identity;
- Developing purpose;
- Developing integrity.

The qualitative approach selected, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowed the researcher to employ a double hermeneutic interpret the experiences of the participants through three semi-structured interviews. From a total of 33 interviews across 11 participants, the following four superordinate and sixteen sub-themes emerged: 1. The Digital Fatigue of Gen Z (1a. Uncertainty of Generation Classification, 1b. No Longer Fazed by ‘Likes’ on Posts, 1c. Facebook Data Breach. 1d. Varied SMS Participation); 2. Development Away from SMS (2a. Exposure to More Diversity than at Home, 2b. Noticeable Growth into Adulthood, 2c. Recognizing Immaturity or Lack of Motivation in Peers, 2d. Nervous about Returning Home for Summer Break); 3. Multiple Realities and Perceptions in Physical and Digital Spaces (3a. Social

Chapter five will look at the five findings of the study that emerged from analysis and interpretation of the superordinate themes and subthemes:

1. Gen Z has become too exhausted to engage, but unable to disconnect.
2. Gen Z lives multiple versions of themselves depending on SMS, or even multiple versions within a single SMS.
3. SMS cannot be a substitute for certain areas of development, though it may act as a tool to aid in the process.
4. Gen Z’s SMS activity is not the best way to measure their engagement or involvement on campus.
5. Gen Z prefers real-life relationships versus digital ones but may be held back from cultivating these by SMS or other factors.

In addition to the five findings, the chapter will draw conclusions and discuss the implications of these findings for the private liberal arts college and provide specific examples of how the findings can be used in practice by faculty, staff, or administration when working with members of Gen Z and future first-year students. Finally, the chapter will note some limitations of the study and suggest areas for future investigations that could be utilized at larger institutions or over a different time frame.
Too Exhausted to Engage, but Unable to Disconnect

As the participants reflected on their SMS use during the first year of college, they began to realize a few things about themselves that they had not previously considered or had not wanted to admit, a key piece of this being how passive SMS use has become with endless updates and scrolling then the fatigue or burnout that follows. Bright, Kleiser, & Grau (2015) explain this phenomenon happening in the literature when the user becomes so overwhelmed by information that they begin to back away from the offending source, whether it be email, Facebook, or the like. This is frequently seen in practice when students missing meetings or important information that was sent out via official campus communication; official campus communication in many cases being email. From here, the initial noteworthy finding of the study suggests that Gen Z, though eternally connected with their phone in hand, may be growing tired of it as they blindly follow the next trend. Regardless of being exhausted, users still continue to move from platform to platform adding to the volume of content, posts, and friends needed to be maintained. Gen Z is always ready for the next dose of excitement when it comes to the next big thing, as found by Han’s (2018) work on SMS burnout. The unknown of new technology or SMS almost acts as a means for a high without actually using a substance, though can be abandoned just as quick once that euphoria wears off and the layman begins to catch up, as seen with the brief popularity of anonymous SMS apps such as Yik Yak and Yeti on college campuses between 2014 and 2016.

Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol’s (2015) ideas of emotional exhaustion are seen throughout this finding, especially when students are more likely to engage SMS than seek to solve a problem. Other concepts presented in the literature are supported by this study, including Facebook losing popularity with Gen Z as older generations move in, Twitter and Instagram
being for friends, and personas varying by platform (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In relation to the establishing identity vector, identity is no longer a singular thing, but rather one per SMS account. The second finding goes into more detail on this idea. A deviation occurs in literature stating that text message is the best way to contact Gen Z. The participants of the study suggest that text message is beginning to go the way of email and phone call, being replaced by Snapchat. Getting someone’s phone number is no longer normal practice. At the speed technology changes it is a distinct possibility that in five years’ time text messages will become something used to communicate only with a group of older, millennial friends or parents, and Snapchat could be yesterday’s news, similar to how millennials look back fondly on MySpace or AIM.

This finding also goes against literature that presents SMS as a distraction and hindrance to transitioning into college. Contrary to work done by Corwin & Cintron (2011), Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2015) and Mazzoni & Iannone (2014) that suggests users of SMS tend to be more concerned with maintaining relationships from home, Gen Z has accepted that those people are present in the digital world and can be accessed at any time. There is nothing to maintain other than an occasional like or comment on a post. Additionally, homesickness was not a determining factor in how relationships were maintained and most participants were happy to not have to see many of the original connections on a daily basis. Fear of missing out, or FoMO, has even begun to fade as Gen Z has increased understanding, or even a desensitization, of what gets posted is not always the reality of an event and they are not taking it to heart as quickly. However, it may remain an underlying trigger that motivates compulsive checking of SMS updates (Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur, & Chen, 2018). The desensitization aligns with findings by Han (2018) where the initial excitement of joining a new SMS begins to fade and slowly becomes
mundane. This experience is reflected by the participants in the initial excitement of joining their cohort Facebook group, connecting with everyone on every SMS, then finally fading off or disconnecting from it all together.

Technology addiction remains a distinct possibility with Gen Z, though it may not be as easily recognized as other addictions since it is now common to see people walking down the street with their phone in hand. When asked about the amount of time spend on SMS, only one participant admitted to being addicted to it, while others did not have an exact answer of time spent with SMS. This unknown supports the need for more awareness of SMS use and recommendations made by the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) for tracking individual SMS use. Features such as with a pop up for heavy usage or an easy to use counter that tracks daily use could be of benefit to bring awareness to exactly how much time is being clocked on their phone, whether or not the user is actively participating (Status of Mind: Social media and young people & mental health, 2017). Endless scrolling through Tumblr or swiping on Tinder still counts as activity, even if it does not feel like it.

This finding touches on many points presented in current literature but deviates in directions not previously explored in a formal research setting. Much of the literature to date focuses on the negative aspects that SMS has on students transitioning to college, however, the points made were not reinforced by this study, such as with the level of homesickness experienced or desire to keep in touch with friends from home. What was not found in current literature was an idea that the students are becoming exhausted by maintaining their digital identities, but are not able to disconnect since SMS is such an essential part of their existence. Furthermore, the perceptions from Gen Z of SMS being a part of a normal day has blurred the lines of how much time is actually being spent on their devices.
Multiple SMS Equals Multiple Identities

Gen Z has grown accustomed to having multiple versions of themselves across different platforms or even multiple variations within a single SMS. The concept of needing to look across SMS platforms when looking at Gen Z and its use is supported in the literature by Hayes, Carr, & Wohn (2016) who found that different platforms and audiences yielded different outcomes when it came to studying social support. Participants of this study and the existing literature confirm a substantial variance in content and use between Facebook to Twitter and Instagram to Snapchat.

The literature on the subject of fake accounts is only beginning to emerge, especially regarding groups on college campuses, though researchers have begun to deconstruct the concept of having fake accounts where people can be their “authentic selves” for a limited audience (Namaste, 2017). Participants of the study confirmed having spam or fake accounts of carefully selected followers where they could let their hair down that are often under a pseudonym rather than their real names (“Fake Instagram profiles often show users’ real side”, 2018). While the content of these accounts is not always extreme, they still edge on things they do not want their parents seeing.

In the long run, the Finsta becomes an area where expectations are non-existent when compared to official personal accounts. The fake accounts could include anything from images of risky behaviors, underage drinking, curse words, or other unfiltered content. The November 2017 issue of the magazine *Wired* offered a comprehensive table showing the differences between the Insta and the Finsta to which the participants of this study confirmed using without realizing that they were following a distinct pattern. The points separating the two types of accounts are shown in Table 2 as published in the *Wire* (2017).
### Table 5.1 - How to Finsta

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Insta</th>
<th>Finsta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photos</strong></td>
<td>Take 100-200 photos to find the ones that look effortless and natural--aka planned candid, aka “plandids”.</td>
<td>No plandids, not ever. Post a photo of yourself mid-sneeze.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Captions</strong></td>
<td>Short and witty. Stoop to taking photos just to fit your clever caption idea.</td>
<td>Free-associate. Rant. Describe a rock. Cry. Average length is six sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rate of Posting</strong></td>
<td>Unless you're Insta-famous, limit yourself to one post every few days (and only during high traffic hours).</td>
<td>Post four times before noon or not at all for two months. Whatever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing Like</strong></td>
<td>If half an hour passes and you have &lt;40 likes, erase the post.</td>
<td>There's no minimum--but it's nice if a few friends acknowledge your brilliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Followers</strong></td>
<td>No limit. Scrounge for more.</td>
<td>Who cares!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raunch</strong></td>
<td>Don't post pictures of your butt.</td>
<td>Definitely post pictures of your butt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Beyond fake Instagram accounts, it is important to note that not all participants subscribed to using SMS in this way. They noted not feeling concerned about the number of likes or followers but did take care in considering what was being posted and when. Despite not necessarily having a fake or spam account, similar activities occurred on another form of SMS, Snapchat. Snapchat’s disappearing feature often lured users into a sense of security in knowing that the content would expire after a few seconds. Participants used this feature to their advantage in posting more sensitive materials.
**SMS May Help, but Cannot Be a Substitute Certain Areas of Development**

Regardless of SMS existing in the day to day life of Gen Z, many participants found out that their social media networks or technology cannot act as a substitute for certain areas of development. Rivera (2015) asks the questions, “can students have too much technology?” She gives examples of a pre-teen not being able to tell time on an analog clock, a teenage boy that asks for a pill to stop him from stealing, and a husband convinced that his wife is cheating because she is Facebook friends with a man that he did not know. While these examples come off as silly and unimaginable, the forms a basis to other, larger areas of development that Gen Z student encounter as they begin to navigate the world by themselves.

Not readily presented in the current literature when considering student development is the need for quick, independent problem-solving in personal or community matters. The literature spends a majority its time focusing on SMS and it’s positive or negative effects on academic and social transitions, but not on how Gen Z uses SMS to attempt to fill in the gaps of life skills. Findings confirm ideas presented by Strange (2004) and Bourke & Mechler (2010) that coming to college can be a shock, especially for those who came from a more sheltered environment. While the social transition can easily be fostered through SMS, logistical life decisions cannot, as many found out very early on in their college experiences. There is still a need for rational thought and determining feasible solutions that SMS cannot offer (Rivera, 2015).

The first wave of quick decision making came when Hurricane Irma threatened Florida. Students barely had a chance to unpack their bags and establish a friend group before they were being placed under a mandatory evacuation from the town. While SMS was an extremely helpful tool for orchestrating carpools and places to ride out the storm, it could not help in the final
decision to leave or with the sudden shortage of gas and bottled water. Additionally, many found themselves without their parent’s guiding hand in the emergency. In terms of literature, emergency response and SMS was not a forethought when looking at the first-year experience of Gen Z. As the world grows more and more volatile and college campuses become subject to more protesting, this could become an area worthy gap in the literature for further research.

Beyond emergency response, personal health and finance were areas of concern. The biggest challenge arose when faced with scheduling appointments, dealing with credit card fraud, and accidentally signing a document saying that the doctor could not talk to their parents. SMS can still be harnessed to take on topics that just cannot be Googled. As DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore (2012) suggest in the literature a student-only portal designed with the local community in mind to give Gen Z access to the things that generally are not thought about until they are needed, such as a pharmacy or a doctor.

**Campus Engagement or Involvement Cannot be measured by SMS**

The third finding shows that while SMS is a tool that can be used for creating opportunities for engagement on campus, it cannot be used as a tool to gauge actual participation. Participants of the study reported having strong GPAs, involvements in different clubs on campus, local employment, and enjoyment in class. Gen Z is still capable of developing their purpose and integrity away from SMS. Participant responses on becoming more tolerant and being exposed to more diversity than at home fall in line with ideas proposed by Malinga-Musamba (2014) and Kidwell (2005) in how this exposure will ultimately help change and shape the student for the future.
In addition, 11 out of 11 participants expected to return for the following academic year when the interviews concluded and were choosing to continue to live on campus even though there had fulfilled the first year housing requirement. This theme confirms statements in the literature regarding the successes of living on campus and having first-year experience programs when it comes to retention in to the second year. Literature goes on to state that this success is due greatly to a compatible roommate situation, though most participants seemed resilient to changes and even expected them. Participants were generally more resilient to change than research gives them credit for.

Furthermore, when matching academic performance with SMS use, a thought-provoking trend developed. Participants reported doing more lurking than participating on SMS. Lurking occurs when someone is simply on the SMS reading posts from others, but not necessarily contributing to the conversation. This behavior may come off to the casual observer as being disengaged, when in fact, these may be the most engaged students who are out affecting change in the real world. On the contrary, the ones who are seen participating in SMS are replicating the ideas presented in the literature that Gen Z has a short attention span and expects instant gratification.

A similar structure has been presented in the literature where some SMS participants are more central and others are more peripheral in their placements (Garcia, Elbeltagi, Dungay, & Hardaker, 2015). The deviating point from this example is where the authors suggest that those in the center are more likely to achieve their goals and follow through on participation. This finding may heavily rely on what the SMS is being used for, whether academically or casually, and who is involved in the conversation. This claim is supported in the literature by Sharma,
Joshi, & Sharma (2016) in that using SMS for academic purposes could create a different culture of participation than simply using it as a social space, as many of the “class of” groups are.

Participants confirmed Junco & Chickering’s (2010) on SMS becoming a place of zero boundaries when referring to the campus “class of” groups where emotions can run rampant if something goes array in the student’s experience. This is often reflected in harsh reactions to topics that are not widely agreed with on campus. Participants also confirmed Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield’s (2012) ideas on the creating of superficial relationships. For example, just because people met their roommates through SMS it does not guarantee a successful outcome or just because someone posts an event to SMS, it does not guarantee that people will attend the event. Most participants confirmed these ideas when recounting their experiences with changing roommates or trying to start a club.

While institutions can and should make the effort to harness the power of SMS to reach its students, SMS in itself cannot be used as a means of measuring the success of student engagement or involvement. As seen with the participants, their online behavior looks disengaged while their actual behaviors are highly engaged. As we enter an era where SMS is becoming the norm for all ages, Gen Z is putting a decent amount of effort to post more carefully whether it is to avoid scrutiny from grandparents or to appear a certain way to their audiences. Based on responses from participants, it can be concluded that anything institutions see posted on Facebook is only half of the story. The whole story is on an SMS platform that older generations are not a part of, the photo was probably carefully cropped and edited, and, if it is on Snapchat, we may never know it happened. In carefully constructing this existence, Gen Z realizes everyone is doing the same and wishes to break through the digital barriers and just meet in person.
SMS May Interfere with the Real-life Relationships Gen Z Wants

The last finding was more unexpected when considering what most of the literature from Lüders & Brandtzæ (2017), Van Volkom, Stapley, & Amaturo (2014), Seemiller & Grace (2016) say about Gen Z preferring digital communications over face-to-face. In a digitized world where finding a date is a swipe away and “friends” can be collected with a press of a button, Gen Z still longs for more traditional interactions that do not involve SMS. However, the commonality of SMS and the insinuated expectations associated with it may act as a hindrance when achieving these goals. Vetter (2017) describes Gen Z as being somewhere between the millennial and the baby boomer. They want a physical office in the workplace to facilitate face-to-face communications, yet at the same time, they want access to SMS or instant messaging for communication as well. Strange (2004) presents similar ideas on the millennial generation wanting to be involved, but not necessarily knowing how to be.

While covering the vector on developing mature interpersonal relationships and moving through autonomy an interesting trend occurred across most participants. Grandparents, parents, and siblings were a common reference when speaking about relationships, dating, or developing basic values. Members of the baby boomer, Gen X, and millennial generations are actually being looked to as source material by Gen Z while, paradoxically, these are the generations asking what is wrong with Gen Z. The literature on the digital divide between generations supports this disconnect. The ideas presented by Turner (2015) that Gen Z typically seen as emotionally connected to technology and Woodley & Meredith’s (2012) ideas that the older generation’s unwillingness to adapt to SMS further compartmentalizes the situation which eventually spills into the first-year experience when the interactions shift to professor and student rather than within the family dynamic.
Hookup culture on campus was confirmed by participants and reinforces Arnold’s (2013) ideas that it is not going away anytime soon, although its presence does not mean that everyone agrees with or participates in it. The ideas on relationships and hookups confirm ideas presented in the literature about misconceptions of what hooking up actually entails. It also confirms Monto & Carey’s (2014) suggestions that the number of sexual partners of college students between 2004 and 2012 is not drastically different when compared to those of the previous generations between 1988 and 1996. The only significant difference between the two is the level of technology present and even then, this generation would prefer to be going out on dates or meeting people in what they now consider to be the old-fashioned way, in real-life rather than online. Students, particularly women, were aware of and concerned with safety for themselves and their friends or roommates that chose to take part in the Tinder or Bumble experience.

In a world where a generation seems permanently attached to their devices, it is interesting to learn that they long for the old days, yet with a modern spin. Similar to members of the baby boomer generation that protested the war in Vietnam or campaigned for Civil Rights, the Gen Z participants noted high levels of activism and local protests regarding similar political or social topics, though with Gen Z it was not without the presence of an SMS element. Lane, Kim, Lee, Weeks, and Kwak (2017) make note of this phenomenon by looking at how online disagreement funnels into offline activism.

While it is not known if this due to interactions with grandparents or if it is ideas developed from having access to media from the 1980s or 1990s available at their fingertips, but Gen Z is fascinated with how it once was and wish for the same, however, the world that they know is not designed for this idea. To help encourage Gen Z into participating away from SMS, more traditional forms of student engagement may still work well for this group. This concept is
supported by Shensa, Sidani, Escobar-Viera, Chu, Bowman, Knight, and Primack’s (2018) findings that close, face-to-face interactions resulted in a decreased chance for depression while leaving relationships to online-only interactions lead to a higher chance in depression for SMS users. Furthermore, this interaction can be fostered by suggestions presented in older literature living/learning communities may offer an opportunity for students to engage by inviting them away from SMS and providing programming that fills downtime outside of classes. SMS will always be a part of their existence, but it does not have to be the end all.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to answer the research question, how do Gen Z students perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first-year of college? The study did its job in answering the question as well as uncovering ideas for future study as society and technology continue to evolve. Gen Z’s experience with SMS is having a profound effect in their experiences and identity development during the first year of college, just not in the way that was previously expected with many of the traits found with the millennial generation to be fading away. Gen Z experiences cannot be accurately compared to those of the millennial, yet oddly enough Gen Z still wishes to have experiences in ways similar to generations past.

SMS has become as essential to daily life for this generation and it is not strange to be seen walking down the street endlessly scrolling away. However, spending time on SMS does not mean that they are actively participating. Many of the actions are passive, such as throwing a like on a photo or comment or sending the same Snapchat to a dozen people. Furthermore, the generation has a great acceptance of how SMS is involved in their daily lives despite having desire to go beyond it. Unlike findings in the previous literature, Gen Z becomes less concerned
with missing home and more excited for moving into the first-year experience. It would seem that they have become more of an SMS packrat, keeping connections made with fellow members of their cohort and friends from home, just in case. Gen Z knows that if they need to contact someone or want to see what a person is up to, all they have to do is go on SMS. No need to call or text.

In sum, there are great opportunities available to institutions to reach Gen Z where they lurk and bring them back into the real world, though this does involve a bit more hands-on interaction on the part of the institution and interest in combining the digital world with the real world. Based on current literature and findings of this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations for practice and recommendations for further study.

**Recommendations for Practice**

It should be noted that the recommendations for practice are formulated for a small private liberal arts college of around 2,500 students, where one-on-one contact with administration or faculty on any given day is a reality. Recommendations for larger universities would vary greatly. Based on conclusions drawn from the findings, the following recommendations for practice are presented:

1. Attempt to contact students through a means they prefer and are comfortable with, such as texting rather than email.
2. Understand that SMS profiles cannot be held at face value and focus attention accordingly and be aware of campus groups attempting to hide accounts from the institution.
3. Create a SMS space to direct students to campus resources and offer community or emergency resources via a student-only website with student monitors.

4. Review SMS practices to avoid operating under assumptions and inadvertently ignoring the lurking populations.

5. When students post questions to public campus SMS, invite them to office hours or encourage them to contact departments directly rather than simply answering the question on the platform.

This first recommendation is one that may excite some push back and rightfully so as staff and faculty struggle with maintaining a hard line between personal and professional lives. However, findings of the study propose an answer to a question by Heiberger & Harper (2008) that asks if institutions should get involved or if they can afford not to. The answer is simple: institutions have to, but not without limitations. In realizing that students will not answer a phone call or read an email but respond almost instantly to a text message, it becomes clear that if there is any hope for reaching the Gen Z student, staff and faculty will have to have to play by their rules, within reason. If willing, staff and faculty have an opportunity to open new doors of communication which may lead to greater student success.

Programs, such as Google Voice, allow for a user to create an alternate phone number to text from rather than using a personal number and an app can be downloaded to any smartphone to funnel the text messages away from personal ones. It would be important to note that the text message could not be used in place of official campus communication, which in many cases is email, but could direct the student into checking their email more often. For example, if an advisor is trying to get in touch with someone via email, a simple text to that student saying, “Hello, this is your advising office. Please check your institutional email for a message from Ms.
Smith.” The vagueness of the message is enough to comply with FERPA regulations, yet still prompts the student to check their email for a message.

With the ability to have multiple accounts, or the Finsta, it is impossible to know for sure if the content projected from the account is real or constructed. The second recommendation is a result of trying to determine who is real and who is legitimately associated with the institution. While the main account may be playing nice in one spot, the fake or spam account could be projecting a completely different image in another. By understanding the complexity of SMS and realizing that most users are operating under multiple accounts, institutions can attempt to sift through the noise and only admit legitimate accounts to campus hosted SMS. This may be accomplished by only admitting students to groups that can prove their affiliation with the cohort or that use their real name on their profiles. Additionally, fake accounts are not limited to individuals. Campuses around the country are being presented with cases where items are posted regarding a campus group or activity without the institution’s knowledge that could potentially violate rules and regulations.

The third idea stems from a suggestion in the literature of a student-only website combined with the unspoken needs of the Gen Z student. In moving to a new location the first thoughts are usually about making friends and what color their bedding should be, not what to do in the event of a hurricane or a health scare. For the most part, SMS is not going to be the place where people ask embarrassing or overly personal questions. Having a student monitored area to offer recommendations on different areas of life could assist Gen Z in transitioning to college is often overlooked areas. Similarly, with the continued focus on mental health on college campuses, recommendations can be made to local providers for students who are far away from home. This idea works two-fold in helping Gen Z engage in life via a platform they are
comfortable with, but also that they are not lost in the cracks when it comes to receiving continued care.

The fourth recommendation for practice suggests that most campus social media is operated under assumptions of how students are participating and could use a review to determine effectiveness. As the findings show many of the strong students are present on SMS, but not necessarily participating, thus allowing the attention of the institution to be pulled to those who are lodging complains or trying to create issues in order to do damage control. While damage control is necessary for any institution’s image, it can become an extremely time-consuming task and inadvertently lead to a toxic SMS culture that folks no longer wish to participate in.

Most of the fault may lie in the pace in which new literature and best practices are published resulting in many institutions utilizing out dates ideas and the lack of an established SMS decorum, as described in Chapters Two and Four. Moreover, social media exclusive staffing continues to be slim or non-existent as described by Sessa (2014). With only a few people in control of a campus’ SMS, it can easily become overwhelming to answer questions across multiple platforms and in a 24/7 work environment since SMS does not have a closing time.

By means of actively engaging students, within reason, SMS staff can begin the process to create further harmony within campus run SMS that people actually want to participate in. Within the “class of” groups, staff may review members of the group, remove instigators or students who are no longer enrolled, confirming cohort association, and establish a list of guidelines and expectations from day one may aid in this process. A further review of which
members actively participate on a regular basis versus how many people are just members of the group could reveal an actual population that is lurking.

In addition, directories may be made available with commonly asked questions for the lurkers who may have a question, but do not want to post it and student SMS staff could be employed to answer questions that arise outside of typical business hours. This altered level of interaction and monitoring could lead to better relationships on SMS, but without the burnout or stress of the unknown that often occurs when working with a technology that does not come with a rulebook.

The final recommendation stems from Gen Z looking for more face-to-face meetings and real-life relationships. While it is certainly easier to post a blunt answer of the facts requested, it may behoove everyone involved to offer a small nudge away from SMS. Having representatives from different departments available to answer on behalf of the department could aid in facilitating these introductions. For example, if a student asks how to change a major rather than saying “go to the advising office”, the response could offer a direct point of contact such as “Go see Ms. Smith in room 202 and she will be happy to assist you in the process.” Inevitably, Gen Z will take to SMS to seek out an answer to a question, but at the same time administration could be made available to lead them back into the real world and establish campus relationships outside of the digital world.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The study conducted focused on the small, private liberal arts college of about 2,500 students. Further study could include larger, state universities where the experience of the first-year student can greatly differ. Additionally, longitudinal studies of a similar nature could be
done to follow the experiences of a group beyond the first-year and into graduation to see how experiences change for the participants as they get older, develop further into adulthood, and the technology around them continues to evolve.

The study could be replicated at the same institution using a different group of students with a lower academic standing. This study utilized first-year students with good academic standing and a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher. A similar study could be conducted utilizing students who are below the 2.5 cumulative GPA, that have received an academic warning or are on academic probation. This would allow for a researcher to understand if the experience of using SMS during the first year of college vary for higher and lower academically achieving students. It would further allow institutions to realize retention rates among students who are highly active on SMS versus student that lurk.

Finally, a new gap in the literature occurred unintentionally when reviewing areas of development where SMS will not have all of the answers but can act as a tool. It is known from Chickering & Reisser’s (1993) emotional vector that students come to college with “emotional baggage”, however, the definition of emotional baggage has shifted significantly since 1993. In an era where school shootings, extreme weather events, fake news, data breaches, and mental health concerns, are topics usually paired with SMS, it is worth considering how this generation’s behaviors on and off SMS are affecting areas outside of academic life. It may be too early to measure an extent to which SMS is useful may not be clear for quite some time, and by the time it is the world may have moved on to the next best thing in SMS. The rapid pace of technological evolution will always seem to keep researchers one step behind.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Sarah Deagle, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. I am also the Assistant Director of Student Success & Advising at [obscured]. I am writing to ask your help in my current research to fulfill my dissertation requirement.

I am researching the role that social media plays in the experiences and development of the Gen Z student during their first-year of college and need to recruit eight to ten participants for interviews. You have been identified as a prospective participant given your status as [obscured] as a first-year student.

The research process will include the following: three hour-long interview sessions and the participant's review of their interview transcriptions. Given the focus on social media use, you will need to participate regularly in at least one social media site. All information will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed to anyone at [obscured] or through the final dissertation, as prescribed by the stringent university protocols. The only exception to this is if the information collected is required to be reported by law, such as in Title IX.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at my NEU email address, deagle.s@husky.neu.edu, from your personal email address and I will send you a consent form to review and schedule the first interview. Emails sent to my [obscured] email address regarding this study must be deleted with no response per Northeastern University IRB. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. You may also withdraw from the study at any time after agreeing to participate.

If you do not volunteer, you will not receive any further emails from me regarding this study.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Deagle

EdD Candidate
Northeastern University at Boston, MA
dea gle.s@husky.neu.edu

IRB# CP517-12-05
Approved: 1/30/18
Expiration Date: 1/29/19
Appendix B: Facebook Posting

LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS: Hi folks! It's your Assistant Director of Student Success & Advising and I need your help. I am working on my doctoral dissertation through Northeastern University in Boston, MA and need your help to complete my research. I am looking at the role social media plays in the experiences and development of the Generation Z student during the first year of college. To complete my research I need 8 to 10 first year students to interview between now and the end of the semester in April. There will be three one-hour interviews that cover a wide range of topics about you and how you use social media. Your participation is voluntary and will not be revealed to anyone at [REDACTED] If you are interested in helping me out, please email my Northeastern University email address [REDACTED] (NOT MY EMAIL) from your personal email (NOT YOUR EMAIL) to ensure confidentiality in this process. Please DO NOT post your interest in the comments 😊

Basic requirements to participate:
- Began in the fall and will complete 30 credit hours by the end of the spring semester.
- Have a major declared.
- Have a mid-range GPA 2.8-3.8
- Use social media.

I would like to get started as soon as this weekend, so please contact me right away and we can set up a time to go over the specifics and do the first interview. Thanks in advance!

---

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Sarah Deagle, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. I am also the Assistant Director of Student Success & Advising at [REDACTED] I am writing to ask your help in my current research to fulfill my dissertation requirement.

I am researching the role that social media plays in the experiences and development of the Gen Z student during their first year of college and need to recruit eight to ten participants for interviews. You have been identified as a prospective participant given your status at [REDACTED] as a first-year student.

The research process will include the following: three one-hour long interview sessions and the participant’s review of their interview transcriptions. Given the focus on social media use, you will need to participate regularly in at least one social media site. All information will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed to anyone at [REDACTED] or through the final dissertation, as prescribed by the stringent university protocols. The only exception to this is if the information collected is required to be reported by law, such as in Title IX.
Good morning!

Please see the email below from Assistant Director of Student Success and Advising, Ms. Sarah Deagle. Ms. Deagle is currently completing her Doctorate and is seeking a small number of freshmen to participate in a research study. Information about the project and its requirements are detailed in the message below my signature.

In particular, Ms. Deagle is seeking participants who are majoring in Art, Business, Communication, Coastal Environmental Science, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Sport Management, although ALL majors are welcome to participate.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact Ms. Deagle at her Northeastern University email address: deagle.s@husky.neu.edu

Thank you for your time!

[Redacted]

Director
First-Year Experience and Co-Curricular Programs

[Redacted]

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Sarah Deagle, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. I am also the Assistant Director of Student Success & Advising at [Redacted]. I am writing to ask your help in my current research to fulfill my dissertation requirement.

I am researching the role that social media plays in the experiences and development of the Gen Z student during their first-year of college and need to recruit eight to ten participants for interviews. You have been identified as a prospective participant given your status at [Redacted] as a first-year student.

The research process will include the following: three one hour long interview sessions and the participant’s review of their interview transcriptions. Given the focus on social media use, you will need to participate regularly in at least one social media site. All information will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed to anyone at [Redacted] or through the final dissertation, as prescribed by the stringent university protocols. The only exception to this is if the information collected is required to be reported by law, such as in Title IX.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at my NEU email address, deagle.s@husky.neu.edu, from your personal email.
address and I will send you a consent form to review and schedule the first interview. Emails sent to my [redacted] email address regarding this study must be deleted with no response per Northeastern University IRB. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. You may also withdraw from the study at any time after agreeing to participate.

If you do not volunteer, you will not receive any further emails from me regarding this study.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah Deagle

EdD Candidate
Northeastern University at Boston, MA
deagle.s2@husky.neu.edu
Appendix D: Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Joseph McNabb, Principle Investigator; Sarah Deagle, Student Researcher
Title of Project: Social Media and the First Year Student at a Private Liberal Arts College: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you verbally first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You have been asked to participate in this study since you are a first-year student at [Redacted] and will have an anticipated 30 credit hours at the end of the spring semester. Additionally, you use at least one form of social media regularly.

Why is this research study being done?

This study is being done to fulfill the dissertation requirement for completion of the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University.

What will I be asked to do?

As a participant, you will be asked to meet with the student researcher three times to discuss your social media use and how you feel that it is affecting your experience as a first-year college student.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed three times over the course of the spring semester in a location of your choice and at a time that is convenient for you. Each interview will take about one hour. While the meeting time is your choice, we ask that you plan to meet at the beginning, middle, and end of the spring semester.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is minimal risk or discomfort associated with participating. All interviews will take place off campus, in a comfortable location for you. Additionally, precautions will be taken to ensure confidentiality and that none of your statements can be used against you by the college. You can decline to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There are no direct benefits associated with participating, however, your responses may help the college better understand how other first-year students, like yourself, are using social media and what they are experiencing.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or as being a part of this project. The researchers will do all interview transcriptions and analysis. Audio recordings will be destroyed upon transcription and files will use a false name in the place of your own. All files will be maintained away from school-owned technology and under password protection. Information will only be revealed through the proper channels in the event of legal reporting requirements, such as with Title IX. The final presentation of data will feature the use of false names.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you quit at any time in the middle of the study, all existing information, transcripts, or recordings will be immediately destroyed.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Sarah Begen, begen.s@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Joseph McBride, jmcbride@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact: Nan C. Regina, Director, Northeastern Univ., Human Subject Research Protection 560 Huntington Ave., Mailstop: 560-177, Boston, MA 02115-5000 Phone: 617.373.4588, Fax: 617.373.4599 n.regina@northeastern.edu

Will I be paid for my participation?

Participation in this study is on a voluntary basis and will not be compensated.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You will be required to talk about your activity on social media and the applications you use. Personal profiles will not be monitored any more than publicly available and you will not be required to “friend” or “follow” the researcher.

I have read, understand, and had my questions answered. I understand that I can withdraw at any time and agree to voluntarily take part in this research without the expectation of compensation.

Signature of person agreeing to take part

Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study and obtained consent

Date

Printed name of person above
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview #1 Protocol Form

Institution: [Redacted]

Interviewee: (Participant)

Interviewer: Sarah Deagle

Interview Time/Date/Location: (Chosen by Participant)

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do Gen Z students perceive the role of social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first year of college?

Part I:

Introductory Session (10 minutes, not counted toward total time)

Objective: Obtain signed consent from the participant through the signed consent form (see Appendix C) and explain to the participant of what the study entails and what this first interview will cover. Answer any questions and assure the participant that the interview is to gather data for doctoral dissertation purposes only and will remain confidential.

Thank you once more for agreeing to participate in this study. As a reminder, the information you provide will be used to fulfill the requirements for the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. The study will look at how first-year students, such as yourself, use social media and how it contributes to your college experience. I will ask questions about your social media use, college experiences as a first-year student at [Redacted], and how you feel these have all affected you during your first-year of college. You are participating on a voluntary basis and if at any time you are uncomfortable with providing an answer, we can skip on to the next one or end the session.

To meet our ethics requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop participating at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process, this form, or how your data will be used?

In order to have data to review, I need to record and transcribe our conversation. Do I have your permission to record this interview? (If yes, thank the participant and turn on equipment). I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. Only myself and my faculty advisor, if needed, will have access to the recordings, which will be deleted after they are transcribed. I will personally be transcribing each interview.
This interview should last about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that would like to cover but encourage you to answer freely and not worry about time constraints. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II:
Interviewee Background (20-30 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the background story of the participant to build a foundation for the study.

Interviewee Background/Demographics

1. Gender: M F Other __________________________
2. Age:
3. Race/Ethnicity:
4. Home Town:
5. Current Major:
6. On-Campus Residence:
7. Why did you choose __________
8. Do you know what generation you are classified as?

Social Media Use

1. What social media apps do you use regularly?
   a. What draws you to these apps over others?
   b. How much time would you estimate that you spend on social media each day?
   c. Could you imagine a life without social media or smartphones?
2. Have you participated in the __________ Class of 2021 Facebook group?
   a. If no, why not?

Part III:
Chickering’s Seven Vectors Part 1 (30-45 minutes)
Objective: To focus on the presented research question and gain perspective from the participant through the first two vectors of Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development. Using the vectors as a guide, questions will use the lenses of generation, college transition/engagement, and risk behaviors. The vectors are broken up across the three interviews.

**Developing Competence**

First, we will look at competence. Competence is often broken into three categories, intellectual, physical, and interpersonal. Each point can be developed in a number of ways. I am going to ask a variety of questions on the subject and please feel free to elaborate or tell stories as needed.

1. Tell me about a time you felt intellectually competent on a subject in one of your classes since coming to college.

2. Tell me about the activities that you participate in outside of the classroom.

3. What methods do you use to make friends?
   a. Do you use social media to find friends?
      i. If so, could you give me an example of how you “met” people?
      ii. Did you make new friends before coming to [blank] via the Facebook group?

   b. Did you find your roommate via the Facebook group or other social media?
      i. If yes, how is it going? Do you get along?
      ii. If no, did you feel comfortable letting residence life choose your roommate based on the questionnaire that you filled out?

   c. Did you come to college with a “premade” friend group from social media?

   d. Do you use Tinder or Bumble?
      i. Do you use this app to simply meet people or do you use it for dating?

4. What role has social media played in your transition to college?
   a. If you could do a repeat, would you use social media more or less before coming to college in your first semester? Why?

**Managing Emotion**

The next topic is managing emotions. Coming to college is a stressful time for any student and offers the opportunity to feel emotions that you’ve never felt before or enhance others. The
following questions will ask you to describe some emotional items. Please answer as you feel comfortable and feel free to include stories or examples.

1. Tell me about your adjustment to college life.

2. Can you give me an example of when you had instances of fear, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt, shame, or dysfunctional romantic attraction since coming to college?
   
   a. Has social media played a role in these feelings?

   b. Have you turned to risky behaviors to cope, such as drinking, drugs, or other similar activities?

3. Have you been bullied through social media since coming to college?

   a. What happened and on what social media app?

4. Do you keep in contact with friends from home via social media?

   a. Does this make you feel more or less homesick?

5. If you are having a good day (or even a bad day) do you share to social media instantly?

   a. Does it make you feel better to share (or not share)?

   b. Can you give me an example of a time you shared and the response?

Part IV:

Wrap Up (5-10 minutes, not counted toward total time)

Objective: Wrap up the interview and clarify any questions the participant may have.

Once again, I would like to thank you for meeting with me today and ask if you have any questions or further comments. You will have a chance to review my transcription and analysis of this session at our next meeting. At that time you can further elaborate on themes or clarify as needed.
Interview #2 Protocol Form

Institution: [Redacted]

Interviewee (Title and Name): [Participant]

Interviewer: Sarah Deagle

Interview Time/Date/Location: [Chosen by Participant]

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do Gen Z students perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first year of college?

Part I:

Introductory Session (5-7 minutes)

Objective: Review member check form and obtain a signature for the previous interview. Transcript was sent to the participant via email prior to interview for them to review at their leisure.

Introductory Protocol

Thank you for participating in the second interview and reviewing the transcript from our first session. Do you have any questions or issues with the transcription or initial notes made on the first transcript?

(Open dialogue between participant and researcher on this topic, if needed.)

If you are in agreement with the content of the transcript, please sign off on this form. This form only verifies that you received and reviewed the document and are in agreement with the representation. If you are not in agreement, you may leave your comments below.

Part II:

Updates on SMS Use (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To see if there have been any new developments on SMS or in the participant’s life.

Updates

1. How would you describe your SMS use since the last time we met?

2. Have there been any new developments in life outside of SMS?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel would be of interest to the study?

Part III:

Chickering’s Seven Vectors Part 2 (30-45 minutes)

Objective: To focus on the presented research question and gain perspective from the participant through the next three vectors of Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development.

Moving Through Autonomy toward Interdependence

 Simply put, moving through autonomy toward interdependence is the act of “adulting”. Being able to maintain yourself away from your families watchful eye, make important decisions, and basically develop the ability to be independent begins the day you move into the residence hall. The following questions are going to look at your journey thus far. Again, please answer the questions as you feel comfortable and feel free to include stories or examples.

1. Do you ever get the feeling where you look for the adult in the room and then realize you are the adult?
   a. Do you feel that your professors/peers/parents treat you as such?
   b. Are you aware that once you come to college you are legally considered an adult and the college cannot talk to your parents unless you sign off on it?

2. Explain the most difficult thing you have encountered, thus far, on your journey toward independence.

3. If you cannot figure something out, which is your first move: google it, ask someone on SMS, or call your parents?
   a. Why did you choose that option?

4. Do you rely on your SMS to feel good about yourself?
   a. Are you disappointed if a photo does not get enough likes?

5. Here’s a situation: There is an event downtown that you really want to go to, but none of your close friends want to go. Do you: go alone, make an open post to SMS or the Facebook group asking for someone to come with, or just stay home?
a. Explain your choice.

Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

Following up on the last topic, interdependence is the ultimate end goal in development, simply meaning that a person is able to function in a society through relationships, careers, interaction with others and so on. The following questions will look at developing mature interpersonal relationships. This does not have to mean romantic relationships, per se, but the friendships you have developed since coming to college.

1. Prior to coming to college, did you feel that you needed to have a pre-set friend group through SMS or were you willing to risk it and make friends once you came to college?

2. Do you feel that you are tolerant of other lifestyles, races, genders, religions, etc.?
   a. If so, have you become more tolerant since coming to college or has this always been a part of who you are.
   b. If not, why do you have these feelings?
   c. What are your personal experiences with tolerance and diversity, especially on SMS?

3. Did you date before coming to college or have you since coming to college?
   a. How do you feel about hook up culture?
   b. What do you think of people that use apps such as Tinder or Bumble for hook ups? Is this the future of dating?
   c. What is your experience, either personal or through a friend, with these apps?

Establishing Identity

The last section for today looks at identity. This is where folks often say that coming to college is a time to find yourself. Identity is often broken into the crisis and the commitment. The crisis is not always a traumatic event, but rather the ah-ha moment where you decide to take one path over another or enter into a change. The commitment is the choices made along the way such as a political affiliation, religion, career, or sexual orientation. Please answer these questions to your level of comfort.

1. Did you come to college with the plan of leaving everything behind and starting fresh?
   a. Has this been possible with SMS and being connected to friends and family back home?
2. Have you experienced a crisis that caused you to rethink a situation?

3. Have you considered making a commitment to something for yourself that may deviate from what your friends or family back home expect of you?
   a. Give me an example of something that you have decided for yourself that your family may not approve of.

4. Do you feel free to express yourself since coming to college?
   a. Do you alter things on your SMS page to appear a certain way to your audiences?

Part IV:

Wrap Up (5-10 minutes)

Objective: Wrap up the interview and clarify any questions the participant may have.

Once again, I would like to thank you for meeting with me today and ask if you have any questions or further comments. You will have a chance to review my transcription and analysis of this session at our next meeting. At that time you can further elaborate on themes found. We have one more session after this one.
Interview #3 Protocol Form

Institution: [Redacted]

Interviewee (Title and Name): (Participant)

Interviewer: Sarah Deagle

Interview Time/Date/Location: (Chosen by Participant)

RESEARCH QUESTION: How do Gen Z students perceive the role social media plays in their experiences and identity development in their first year of college?

Part I:

Introductory Session (5-7 minutes)

Objective: Review member check form and obtain a signature for previous interview. Transcript was sent to the participant via email prior to interview for them to review at their leisure.

Introductory Protocol

Thank you for participating in the third interview and reviewing the transcript from our second session. Do you have any questions or issues with the transcription or initial notes made on the second transcript?

(Open dialogue between participant and researcher on this topic, if needed.)

If you are in agreement with the content of the transcript, please sign off on this form. This form only verifies that you received and reviewed the document and are in agreement to the representation. If you are not in agreement, you may leave your comments below.

Part II:

Updates on SMS Use (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To see if there has been any new developments on SMS or in the participant’s life.

Updates

1. How would you describe your SMS use since the last time we met?

2. Have there been any new developments in life outside of SMS?
3. Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel would be of interest to the study?

Part III:

Chickering’s Seven Vectors Part 2 (30-45 minutes)

Objective: To focus on the presented research question and gain perspective from the participant through the final two vectors of Chickering’s Seven Vectors of Identity Development.

Developing Purpose

Developing purpose consists of finding an interest, creating goals, making a plan to attain those goals, and persisting no matter what.

1. Tell me about your experience with finding a purpose during your first year of college.
   
   a. Did social media help or hinder in this finding?
   b. Did you seek out resources on campus or rely solely on social media and your peers?

2. Will you be returning to [blank] in the fall?
   
   a. If not, why not? Do you feel that your purpose is taking you in a different direction?
   b. Either way, will you keep in touch with the friends you made during the first year via social media?

3. Tell me about your goals for the near future.

Developing Integrity

The final point we will cover is developing integrity. You come to college with a set of values learned from your previous environment whether it be parents, high school, or friends from home.

1. Tell me about how coming to college has changed these values.

2. Do you feel that social media allows for you to explore more?

3. Do you keep a digital catalog of your interest through what you like/follow on social media?
a. What are some of these interests that you like/follow?

4. Do you feel that coming to college has exposed you to a wider array of values and has taught you more about acceptance?

5. Tell me about your ideas on bullying on social media. Does the college over or under estimate its presence?

Part IV:

Wrap Up (5-10 minutes)

Objective: Wrap up the interview and clarify any questions the participant may have.

1. Is there anything you would like to add or have known that was not covered in the interviews?

2. Is there anything about social media and how students use it that you feel the institution would benefit from knowing?

Once again, I would like to thank you for meeting with me today and ask if you have any questions or further comments. You will have a chance to review my transcription and analysis of this session even though this is our last meeting.
Appendix F: Member Check Form

Member Check Form

Interviewer:

Participant:

Interview Time/Date/Location:

The researcher has reviewed the findings from the interviews with the participant, and I attest to the following statements (check boxes that apply and initial):

_____ I have verified the accuracy of the report.
_____ I agree that the description is complete and realistic.
_____ I agree that the themes are accurate.
_____ I agree that the interpretations are fair and representative.
_____ I do not agree with the description, themes, and/or interpretations and I make the following suggestions (see comments below).

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
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Comments:

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