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MY SELFIE-IMAGE: AN ARTIST'S MULTIMEDIA PERSPECTIVE TO SELF-DISCOVERY

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MY SELFIE-IMAGE:

AN ARTIST'S MULTIMEDIA PERSPECTIVE TO SELF-DISCOVERY

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

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MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

OF

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ABSTRACT

The world we live in today is filled with different types of media and images constantly. Online technology allows for the exchange of this mass media instantly. With so much media swarming our daily lives, social media and visual imagery have become a part of our culture creating new forms of visual and perceptual communication to thrive online. Social media allows for an organizational system in which symbolic and expressive elements of *visual culture* are formed. This visual culture draws new platforms of social structures and interactions that include visual imagery such as pictures, videos, emoticons, gifs, memes, etc. Every tiny moving picture, to the personal information you post online, to the video clips from the news and captivating videography among various social media, how can we define which of these images matter? Visual communication & social media theory have changed the ways in which we acquire information, foresee connection, communicate, and make meaning in society. This thesis dives into the past of a young artist and picks apart her understanding of self throughout the duration of four years. Selfies are presented as new forms of socialization that continue to develop and innovate the ways in which we form our perception of the world. This perspective gives us a grounded view on how visual imagery can be defined within specific social media platforms. Specifically, the influence of digital images in our youth's perception of the self, self-identity, or "selfie" has provided a specific form of image interpretation. Without a clear understanding of what selfies do to our perception we may become blinded by misguided intentions. As a society we need to put a

focus on the study of visual imagery in the media and its effect on the self-identities. We must broaden our understanding of what these pictures are, how they create new communicative processes, and why they hold such value in our social world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I'd like to point out that this paper has a total of 46 Figure or pictures that you'll find scattered throughout the chapters. These images have either inspired or help motivate me along in this process. Most figures are either explained or described in the text although a few are only strategically placed to help the reader digest and ponder this creative artistic project. Second, I want to address the level of intimacy some of these photos may reveal about me, the author. Some of the art or images in this thesis is bold and projects me in an exposing light. This is done only with the intention to draw focus and educate the audience. If you are my friends, family, or academic advisors, please read this with an open-mind and without judgement. This thesis means a huge deal to me and hopefully you'll enjoy reading it. At the end of this you I can guarantee you will have a great understanding of what it's like to grow up in the age of social media and you by far *will* have a greater knowledge of who I am.

PREFACE

This is a deeply passionate and personal story of how I've become the person and the artist today because of social media. Specifically, social media immediately caught my eye and gave me a platform to express myself with art. Throughout my entire life, so many unique forms of new media have added great significance on my attitudes, beliefs, and perception of myself and the world around me. While social media opened a plethora of new communication interactions, it has also opened a great deal of controversy in the patterns through which we collect and understand information. As someone who's incredibly dependent off media I became subjected to media's underlying propaganda messages and values. This story, autobiography, and thesis conception describes the steps I went through to become attached to media. How I become consumed by societal ideals, depressed and by the person I was becoming, and relentlessly hooked on a technology that was feeding unhealthy obsessions. Without the knowledge obtained from going to graduate I would have never understood the motivation and research it took to push me to share this thesis project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

The Perception of My Body

1A. My Selfie-Image - Personal Rhetorical Narrative

When I was around eight or nine years old, I had this hobby. It wasn't like your normal little kid hobby like knitting or playing hopscotch. No, this hobby was different. I would take blank white pieces of computer paper 81/2x11 and fill hundreds of them with drawings of girls, as you can see on the right in *Figure 1.1*, that I named "Rows and Columns." So, you can even picture, to everyone else I was just another girl with a knack for doodling. But what appeared to be a fond pastime was undoubtably an obsessive passion. When I was little, I would fill notebooks upon notebooks of these girls in endless rows and columns. The same image. Isn't that crazy? Einstein says if you do you the same thing over and over again you might as well consider yourself crazy. But what I was really doing was imagining each one of these girls with a completely new and unique identity. They all had their own personality, relationships, and style in a world created purely in my imagination. Now look at today. There's this world of Instagram. Where profiles and pictures of people come by the millions. I don't have to draw up these doodles. Dream up these people. They exist. On a platform of social media technology. The made-up girls in my sketchbooks are now the girls I follow online. Their incredible dream-like lives are clickable and accessible. The rows and columns of pretend people has become this interface of images within a social network. And the obsession I had with creating a picture-perfect reality is

now the way I manifest my own online identity.

I believe people associate feelings and memories with millions of forms of media in the world today. Everything from looking back to an Instagram, sharing memories on Facebook, or YouTube. We use media to create a history of our lives. We also use media to create an archive of shared items that describes exactly who we were at each moment in our lives. Text, pictures, videos, music, and art all have meaning to us. For me, every time I post on social media I feel as though I'm contributing to an online world of communication that lets me be whoever I want to create for myself. Media can connect us to the most innate human nature in us. It can hook our attention, satisfy our needs, and experience a feeling. For me, the feelings I get when I experience media have shaped me into the person and the artist I am today. In *Figure 1.2*, "Van Gogh" you can see me standing in front of one of our greatest murals of art history. I'm in awe by this creation. It fuels me to want to make my own mark on art history. Ever since I can remember, since the day I was born, I've been creating art. It is the most passionate thing about my existence that drives every force of my entire being. So, for someone who is so invested in art I live for that type of media that lets you curate and collect various forms of digital content.

Media is my favorite place to take in inspiration as an artist. There are realistic videos and beautiful artistic photography that dazzle my sight. I can't get enough. I've been attached to photography my whole life. In 5th grade I got my first camera and started keeping a huge collection of photos on my computer that I looked at all the time that represented memories of my life. I would draw or paint

2

anything that was pleasing to my artistic eye. You could say I am obsessed with media. All I do is consume it. I wake up and the first thing I do is check Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, any or all type social media I'm feeling in that moment. It's written in my DNA that social media is something I naturally gravitate towards viewing daily. I'll admit I'm a millennial for looking at my phone 24/7 and am a product of the generation that has the attention span of a thirty-second YouTube clip thanks to the rapid speed at which we consume almost everything. It's absurd how much social media has changed the way I communicate. I hate to admit that it has become an everyday habit, checking social media. But is it really that shocking? Thanks to my iPhone and smart phones in general, this little block of weight is holding our accessibility to the outside world in the very palm of our hands. Since the beginning of Freshman year of college, I wasn't always consumed like this. Or maybe I was? The first type of social media I can remember was using AIM, Instant Messenger, then Myspace, then Facebook, Instagram and so on. So even at the early age of eleven I was addicted to sitting in my dad's office, using the family computer for hours, sending messages to my friends, browsing the internet, and playing games online. As life through the eyes of an artist I studied images in the media to understand the world.

In *Figure 1.3* I am 10 years old, still in my pjs, on the laptop with a intoxicated grin on my face. *Figure 1.4* is my room at age 11 covered in art, images, pictures, etc. *Figure 1.5* is my art pinned up on my wall in preparation for my first art show at age 14. And *Figure 1.6* is my room at one point during this

thesis, covered in paintings, materials, and an assortment of color. Even in the earliest years of adolescence I was surrounding myself with imagery and connections to the outside world. Decorating my environments with social images has been a habit since childhood that has carried on throughout my adulthood, inside and outside the world of social media. I've always done this because the internet is the one place you can see a thousand different corners of the world and never have to leave your seat. This other world that exists inside a technological device has always drawn me in.

I'll never forget when Instagram first came out, it was 2011. I was a freshman in college and had just turned 18 the fall it launched. I could finally have a way to share my creative pictures and drawings with my peers in an open and social platform. Instagram brought out the artsy side in everyone, allowing for filters, and photo editing options. I was good at it. I loved it. I picked out pictures that I favored, posted them, and got feedback from my friends about them. The platform allows for you to be able to easily find other pages with thousands of photos that are connected to other pages with thousands of photos. It's unimaginably huge and I felt like I had to make a statement with my Instagram to be able to stand out among the rest. I had a "normal" account with what felt like a normal number of followers, but I wanted to be bigger. It was the end of my junior year as an undergraduate at URI when I decided to create another, second Instagram dedicated entirely to my art.

I became inherently attached to this form of personal expression. To put it lightly, I became addicted. I flipped my fingers through my new Instagram feed,

liking art pictures, following art pages, complimenting people's art. I slowly

started to gain followers that aligned with the same passion for drawing and

painting that I shared in my posts. I was gaining popularity, more attention, and

positive interactions with people around me. But it all wasn't good enough. I

followed bigger accounts and spent hours liking and commenting. I found cheats

and ways to get followers. I was looking through my entire feed absorbed by

popularity of it all, destined to seek out the easiest ways to gain views. I noticed

that more popular art accounts were drawing images that eluded sex appeal and

highlighted a celebrity lifestyle. Instead of creating the art in my heart I began to

draw pictures of pop images, as you can see in *Figure 1.7*. Famous portraits and

skilled realistic drawings were what started to take over my Instagram. After the

distinct change of content my page quickly started gaining attention and was

promoted on large art pages that boosted my Instagram's popularity and in one

month, I gained 1000 followers. There was an immediate shift of having my art be

viewed by just my close friends and family, to having it viewed by thousands of

strangers. In *Figure 1.8*, "Public Pressure" you can see the audiences crowd. I am

so deeply attached to my art that I lived for every moment when someone

commented that they loved it. The feeling of validation from the random follows

and likes of hundreds of people was intoxicating. Instagram had provided me with

a platform to have a voice and creatively express myself which was something

that I craved as a young artist.

Little did I know; this social media obsession would soon become

unhealthy. It was right around the time my Instagram was created that I had lost

twenty-five pounds over the course of the year before, which made a significant physical change in my appearance. I felt incredible. I spent the next year putting so much effort trying to draw attention my art Instagram by posing in the mirror, perfecting my stance, and judging myself. It was only when I felt extremely accomplished that I'd post a picture of myself, but even then, it didn't feel as beautiful as the girls who were getting thousands of likes. *Figures 1.9 and 1.10*, "Selfies with Art" are examples of photos I never shared because I felt I didn't look my best. With a sudden sense of self-worth and personal standards that could be viewed by the public I felt like I had to act as if I was proud of my body but throughout everyday life, I was still incredibly insecure. I felt like I could still lose more weight and become one of Instagram's most attractive artistic accounts. My Instagram was about my art, but it wasn't me, it didn't come naturally, it felt fake. I was forcing myself to fit into a picture I didn't belong. Instagram's platform focused me to become obsessed with images of beauty, notions of perfection, and a warped idea of popularity. I was drawn to the most unrealistic expectations of who I had to be on this platform, how I was going to "be somebody" with a lot of followers, but with no real message. I used my Instagram to express a false sense of confidence with an incredible judgmental conscious that was hiding beneath every "perfect picture".

This was three years ago. I had just graduated college. I was debating applying to graduate school because I was going through the most exhausting self-identity crisis that destructively controlled my life. I had self-esteem issues, I had body image issues, I had a therapist, I had anxiety, I had depression, and

worst of all, I had an eating disorder. I had stopped drawing and painting with an unexplained confusion as to why I gave up doing the thing I love the most. I felt unhealthy, self-destructive, doubtful, anxious, fearful, powerless, hopeless, depressed, confused, forever failing, and never good enough. I tried so hard to push out these negative thoughts and feelings. I tried so hard to push the negative thoughts out of my head and not care about what I thought of myself. Something was telling me there was more to discover, more to this mental disorder. More to why was I so damn depressed. Why couldn't I stop binge eating? And why could I kill hours on my phone, computer, watching TV, instead of focusing on the things in life that make me truly happy? Clearly something was wrong when I would regret every day I didn't paint, which happened to be every day. I was letting myself fall into what seemed like a bottom-less pit of self-pity and an unshakable laziness. I cared so much about trying to change that I applied to graduate school. My life needed a serious push of effort in the right direction and more knowledge felt like the best answer.

I took communication theory, media and emotions, and interpersonal helping relationships courses in graduate school. The combination of these classes was the hardest first step in starting to analyze myself through theory. When dealing with all my personal stress and the way I felt about myself I constantly related every theory I read in relation to how it could answer some of my own problems. By the time second semester came around I had considered that I had a problem with myself and that I was in the process of fixing, learning, making mistakes, and moving forward. The first communication theory to my research

7

methods class described of something of a life event called a "turning point." The term referred to the more important transitional phases throughout a romantic relationship. I instantly compared it to my life, how is it relatable then? Well if anything this thesis process has taught me is that I've been in a relationship with this damn project, and it was time to make the first turning point in that relationship.

Ever since I can remember, picking up a pencil and drawing felt like a natural ability that I could do without thinking. Yet for the first time in my life I wasn't doing it at all. I wasn't drawing or painting anymore, and I couldn't figure out why. My art gives me life. It is my passion. Without it I feel lost and confused. It has always been a piece of who I am and at that moment in my life it wasn't representing me. I felt an internal disposition within myself and my identity and knew that the only way to commit to changing is to channel my passion into my work. And at this point in the relationship my thesis had unveiled a potential start to a beautiful idea. Make my thesis address the same inquiries I was struggling with about myself and social media. Myself and my art will become my thesis. Reveled and overcome with new theories and new questions about the ways in which I understand the world through communication theory led me to see a change in the way I was using social media and making art. The experience of enveloping myself into an analytic experiment and come out enlightened on the other side. This will be me, My-selfie image.

1B. Grounded Theory & Self Identity

And so our research begins with a simple question. Who am I and why do

I think the way I think? What can I use as a backdrop, to organize every theory

that's influenced me in every interesting way? How do I collect all my theories

about media into an understandable systematic process? This is where grounded

theory lays out a canvas to begin questioning this experience as a methodological

procedure. Through the beginning of grad school, we're taught communication

theory and research methods as tools for the construction of our own cognitions.

Albert Bandura (2009) picks at the human mind through the social cognitive

theory of mass communication. He writes "seen from the socio-cognitive

perspective, human nature is characterized by a vast potentiality that can be

fashioned by direct and observational experience into a variety of forms within

biological limits… These advanced neural systems for processing, retaining, and

using coded information provide the capacity for the very characteristics that are

distinctly human-generative symbolization, forethought, evaluative self-

regulation, reflection self-consciousness, and symbolic communication."

(Bandura, 2009, pg.62) Each of these processes, symbolization, forethought,

evaluative self-regulation, reflection, self-consciousness, and symbolic

communication, this is all the very foundation upon which I make sense of my

world. Yet this information was never laid out explicit for me to realize how

powerful my thought process really is. What is my thought process? How do I go

about forming symbols in my own thinking patterns? What if it is so warped that I

can't find a way to make sense of it? What really are my habits for self-regulating

and reflection? Does that happen? When? How? I had all these crazy ideas

swarming my mind without a basic understanding of how to organize them. This

is where grounded theory comes in handy because it provided a format for theory development in the most lament terms and allowed my malleable mentality to begin to take its composition.

In order to fully grasp the entirety of putting my conceptions into a full blown thesis I needed to study different methods of how theory is conceptualized. Theoretical conceptualization means that grounded theory researchers are interested in patterns of action and interaction between and among various types of social units (Corbin, Strauss 1994, pg.278) Ok so what is that for me? It's a lot of things. A broad, but accurate depiction of my perception of myself on social media? Or maybe it was the amount of time I spent performing different behaviors in relation to the amount of time I had been using media? Maybe it could be through the interactions of the relationships between me and my social network? Grounded theories connect this multiplicity of method with patterns and processes of action/interaction that in turn are linked with carefully specified conditions and consequences. With a general outline for theory methodology I could begin to structure my depression, identity, and most confusing social media theories. People cannot be much influenced by observed events if they do not remember them. (Bandura, 2009) So we learn by observation. Looking around at the instances in our life and taking a mental note on what's going on. One function that governs observational learning concerns cognitive representational processes. How does what we are learning represent itself in our mind? Since so much is happening all around us it's easy to be preoccupied with anything that's happening. Thoughts are thunk. Information is processed. But what memory is

left to stay? Left to be learned and remembered for future reference? Retention

involves an active process of transforming and restructuring information about

events for memory representation in the form of rules and conceptions. (Bandura,

pg.68) As someone in desperate need for answers I required myself to learn what

I could of mine and my peers' interpretations and perspectives of their own

cognitive representational process. So, I began to observe. I began to record. I

began to make my own interpretation of how my problems were really happening.

I started to record similar behaviors of mine, patterns of action and interaction

between a multitude of perspectives on social media. By giving my thesis this

form of methodology I realized that all these thoughts and processes going on in

my head while I navigate my way through my schoolwork have been an example

of my own theory development. Certain general techniques and procedures have

made this grounded theory methodology effective and influential. Including the

constant making of comparisons, the systematic asking of generative and concept-

relating questions, theoretical sampling, systematic coding procedures, suggested

guidelines for attaining conceptual (not merely descriptive) "density," variation,

and conceptual integration. (Corbin, Strauss, 1994)

If this is the case for conceptualizing theory then forming a general

procedure, such as a master's thesis, with a proposal and thesis statement can be

considered a composition of those processes. Grounded theory orchestrates the

development of representational processes with an importance on memory and

retention. When I started to read about social media theory, visual imagery, and

self-cognitive theories it inflicted new paths of thinking about a lot of complicated

puzzle pieces in my head. Complex social media communication theories always found ways of creating perfect examples that were happening in my life. I had to start changing my thoughts, to change my behaviors, and not only remember everything that was happening but make sense of it. What was I going to do? How was I supposed to identify which influences were the driving forces behind my behavior? I started to contemplate how this was going to be possible. I couldn't relate everything I was learning to everything I was doing because my thesis would be never ending! The next step in creating this thesis was then organizing my theoretical conceptualization into a concise applicable methodology. But how? Grounded theory methodology is designed to guide researchers in producing theory that is "conceptually dense"-that is, with many conceptual relationships. These relationships, stated as propositions, are, as in virtually all other qualitative research, presented in discursive form: They are embedded in a thick context of descriptive and conceptual writing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 31- 32; Strauss, I 987, pp. 263-264). (pg.278) Two defining properties of the grounded theory method create the conditions for emergent inquiry: (1) the systematic, active scrutiny of data and (2) the successive development and checking of categories. From the initial stages of research throughout the process, grounded theorists scrutinize their data by asking both action and analytic questions: "What is happening here?" and "What (theoretical category or theory) are these data a study of?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). The first question pushes the researcher to examine the empirical world—in close detail. The second question links this world to theoretical possibilities early on during

12

data collection. Both questions encourage researchers to follow emergent leads systematically. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.161) So I asked myself, "what is happening here?"

Then it hit me. I had my first revelation. I went to work. I started writing. I figured if I couldn't remember how to draw and paint, I needed to do the next simplest form of expression; writing. Through my journals, sketchbooks, notebooks, including the notes in my phone. I continued to jot down perplexing concepts about myself, media, and imagery. This project began to continuously interpret the world around, me in extremely unique and abstract ways. The act of writing my thoughts down made me remember them more, read them reflectively, and compare them to everything. My own interpretations and perspectives then became incorporated into new interpretations or they're own unique conceptual categories.

Grounded theory development allows for a straight forward format of a theory to plant its seed. It lays out the method from forming those first wild thoughts into specific modes of analysis. It's strategies "prompt the researcher to reach beyond pure induction and involves creative problem solving and imaginative interpretation." (Charmaz, pg.156) This thesis quite literally "grounds" itself in grounded theory's flexible and emergent definition for theory development. It was becoming a thought process I aimed to unravel. Once deciding that my thesis was going to establish itself through grounded theory, I knew I needed a simple but challenging method that would reveal how this theory

would emerge. I need to find out what made my perspectives so disturbingly

discursive…

1C. Awareness & Acceptance

In the beginning of my second semester of grad school I took a media

class where my professor asked us a thought-provoking question. Does the media

reflect reality or shape reality? She asked the class to stand on one side of the

room if you thought one way and on the other side if you thought otherwise, and

in the middle if you thought it might be both. I was torn between all sides of

invisible spectrum she laid out for us. There were arguments for every way to

look at it. I remember being so confused in my head because I had this idea that I

was in control of the media I posted to social media and how it created an image

of who I was. But that didn't feel right, I created it and it also created me, and

there were *so* many ways this was happening. From the decision to upload a

certain picture, to the very tweets I read, and the exact music I listen to has

molded me into the person I am today. I thought how I can be in control of how

media creates me when I have no simple understanding of how large of

relationship that can be? What is really happening here? This was the first process

I saw myself go through this idea of media awareness or media literacy. So I

relate it back to our basic human nature or social cognition. In Bandura's research

for social cognition theory of mass communication he looks into the reasons why

people are apt to thinking and communicating in a certain way. He sates "among

the self-referent thoughts that influence human motivation, affect, and action,

none is more central or pervasive that people's judgments of their efficacy to

exert control over their level of functioning and events that affect their lives."
(Bandura, pg. 64) Well I had no control over how engrained my thoughts were
within media. The only control I had was over my self-destructive habits which
included: taking pictures, posting media, taking selfies, binging media, binging
food, judging myself, feeling shitty, and having it all start over again. I would
only post my art to social media when I felt it was beyond exceptional and worthy
of the public's eyes. It was with this piece of research that I could start to see
where my perception of myself and the media I absorbed were functioning at
levels that I could not control. It makes so much sense. From there all self-referent
thoughts, motivations, affect, and actions were affected by this lack of control, or
better yet, lack of awareness. I had this goal to better myself or to fix my eating
disorder or try to exert some type of control over these extreme actions. But how
do you conjugate the ability to produce a desired or intended result when you
have a warped perception of the problem itself? Without becoming first aware of
this thought it's impossible to invoke immediate action or motivation to change it.
This begins the construct or theoretical category of awareness and acceptance.
Without being aware of what kind of problem this thesis presents how can we
begin to define and analyze it?

Bandura also mentions "peoples beliefs in their personal efficacy
influence what courses of action they choose to pursue, how much effort they will
invest in activities, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and
failure experiences, and their resiliency following setbacks" (Bandura, 2009,
pg.64). It seems impossibly overwhelming trying to fix depression, anxiety, and

bulimia, all while learning how to accomplish the innerworkings of completing a master's thesis. I had to organize all my complex cognitions into a form that I would be able to explain to a professor. Scary! But slowly I learned. I was beginning to make connections between communication theories and the way I communicate on social media every day. It forced me to consider how much value I put on these new forms of interactions. I started to become more aware of my attitudes while I was on social media and started to put my most puzzling assumptions about myself into my research. I wanted to think that studying this kind of information would immediately change my habits regarding media. Yet I was met with extreme uncertainty when realizing further researching only brought further questioning, which just created even more anxiety, and blocking this attempt to fix my life. Awareness of a problem only gets you so far. People can be aware they suffer from depression or aware that they have a need for media, but does this awareness suddenly change your behaviors? No. I struggled throughout the entire thesis process and experienced an up and down roller-coaster of a battle. But I had this belief that my personal efficacy would trump my setbacks and having awareness was the crucial first step in that journey. In hopes to figure out what was causing me so much anxiety and depression I was going to have to start asking myself *hard questions*, receive criticism, and open myself up to letting the work *be a part of me*.

CHAPTER 2

The Body of work-Information through a visual lens

This next chapter encases the body of work. Here is where you will really

start to see this complex paper start to take its shape. Similar ideas of grounded

theory development and self/social cognition paint a figurative and literal pathway

to understanding myself through media. This section dissects the large bulk of

varied research that makes this thesis multidisciplinary and attempts to advance

proposed hypotheses and research questions. The body of work outlines this

paper's conceptual instrumentation and artistic techniques that together form a

unique thesis methodology. You will begin to see the patterns of similar thought

processes that were used to analyze such a large proposal as well as start to see a

visual representation of the entire thesis project.

2A. Conceptual Reimagining

This awareness opened up a plethora of new interactions that were defining me, a

clear pattern on what behaviors that I was enacting daily. In *Figure 2.1*, "What?

Why?" I questioned my artistic process while scribbling the same words

repeatedly until it made a bigger picture. Was this method really working? I was

beginning to take notes. What was happening? What was different? How could I

put a definition to the process of being more self-aware? Why was I starting to

feel more content and acting differently? Grounded theory starts with an inductive

logic but moves into abductive reasoning as the researcher seeks to understand

emergent empirical findings. Abductive reasoning is a form of logical inference

which starts with an observation then seeks to find the simplest and most likely explanation. Abductive reasoning aims to account for surprises, anomalies, or puzzles in the collected data. This type of reasoning invokes imaginative interpretations because the researcher imagines all possible theoretical accounts for the observed data and then forms and checks hypotheses until arriving at the most plausible interpretation of the observed data" (Charmaz, 2008, pg.157) As I attempted to construct this thesis I started to understand the simplest most logical reasons for my own personal issues. It needed to be addressed and brought into a new light. I started to find personal bits of art and images that felt like guiding answers, an example would be *Figure 2.2*, "Calming Technique" was an art image that felt therapeutic. It needed to be conceptualized and identified in order to reimagine a new interpretation. Yet the means for finding these definitions were still extremely vast and overwhelming. But it forced me to dive right back into the grounds for which I could develop this thesis. How can I organize legitimate evidence for the hypothesizes I was forming?

Researchers constantly ask themselves "What is happening here?" and "What (theoretical category or theory) are these data a study of?" By interrogating their data repeatedly with these two questions, grounded theorists explicate, expedite, and enhance intuitive strategies that other qualitative researchers often invoke on a descriptive level. These strategies include probing beneath the surface: comparing data, checking hunches, refining emerging ideas, and constructing abstract categories from data analysis. Simultaneously, grounded theory makes these strategies more efficient and analytically effective by

indicating how and when to use them. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.161) I was writing a lot more. I was making lists of the negative things I felt. I was organizing my beliefs and perceptions into hypothesizes and theoretical categories. In *Figure 2.3*, "Sick Reasons" I came up with a purely negative list for the reason why binge eating and purging was harmful. In *Figure 2.4*, "Brainstorm" I started to organize my thoughts into categories and titles. I could see that my self-identity was going through some sort of trippy reimagining. I was creating new and different work all at the same time as experiencing new perceptions of myself. But as I go about dissecting the research and meanwhile posting to Instagram I noticed a pattern happening. It was this constant referral back to my personal narrative story, my everyday life, the recording and analyzation of comparing my life to what I read in communication theory. I came to see how this mindset was taking the very basis of grounded theory to construct information into very specific ways. I would be reading articles, comparing the data, checking my assumptions about media, refining grounded theory through emergent methods, and creating abstract imaginative ways of thinking. Corbin & Strauss say "researchers and theorists are not gods, but men and women living in certain eras, immersed in certain societies, subject to current ideas and ideologies, and so forth. Hence as *conditions change at any level* of the conditional matrix, this affects the validity of theories that is, their relation to contemporary social life (Corbin, Strauss, pg. 279) As I immersed myself into my personal narrative, into grounded theory, into self-identity, the initial thesis proposal, this plan, took a creative developmental turn. It was becoming something dynamically unique in its methodology. It was becoming a

19

process of understanding myself through systematically structuring theories from a perspective of *being an artist.*

2B. Systematically Structuring the Self

I tried to wrap my head around the way I was theorizing and the correlation for why I wasn't producing art. My direction for theory development felt just as scattered brained as me. Yet this theory of grounded theory opened an entirely new perspective for the way I was building my thesis. Tavory and Timmermans (2009) dissect GT(grounded theory) in the pragmatist tradition of sociology with an analytical focus on social processes across time and space, action-oriented analysis, and the open-ended meaning of interaction. Grounded theory and the closely related tradition of analytical induction offer a set of methodological steps to retrieve lived social life.

Analytical induction emphasizes the ongoing double-fitting of emerging theory and empirical phenomena and the ability of the researcher to 'retrodict', that is, to delineate the necessary and sufficient conditions that made a phenomenon happen (Katz, 2001); GT encourages an in-depth familiarity and granular analysis of micro data to produce empirically backed-up, generalizable theoretical claims. (Tavory, Timmerman, 2009, pg.246) Rather than evaluating GT with the philosophical criteria of its standards of theory construction, we start by exploring how Extended Case Method (ECM) *and* grounded theory answer the question of 'the case', as in the generic question of 'what is the study a case of?'.(Tavory, Timmerman, 2009, pg.245) In my mind, the main goal of this project when I first started was to delineate the specific conditions that had caused and

improved the actions of my anxiety and depression. I wanted to offer an analytical system of my methods for understanding a vast and nearly impossible identifiable list of phenomenons. Especially since depression and anxiety is a huge concept that origins can be unknown, hereditary, or vaguely specific. People suffer from depression for a million reasons. I had a million of generalizable theoretical claims about the way I was being affected by depression. But I needed evidence. Empirical phenomena and enough conditions for such claims needed to be defined. Proven. I needed to understand grounded theory's methodological steps as a way of organizing my abstract thoughts. But how would I generate analysis from the clutter of theories floating around in my head?

In an initial attempt to improve upon prevailing structural-functionalism theories but in reality, weakening this paradigm from within, the Manchester School of anthropology introduced the ECM (Extended Case Method) (Gluckman, 2006 [1961]) and 'situational analysis' (van Velsen, 1967). In contrast to the normative societal order predicted by structural-functional theorists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, anthropological fieldworkers of the Manchester School began to document and theorize repeated instances of conflicts at their Zambian field sites. (Tavory, Timmerman, 2009, pg.246) From the onset, both GT and ECM both claimed to provide a more comprehensive theoretical picture of social life, and both privileged ethnography as method of choice.(Tavory Timmerman, 2009) It's purpose is to engage GT and ECM, not to prove the superiority of one over the other, but in order to examine the different sociological epistemics implied and produced by using these approaches to

ethnography. We forego a facile criticism of the rhetoric of 'substantive versus formal theory', 'subjectivist versus objectivist', 'empowerment' and 'intervention' to investigate the sociological pay-off of GT and ECM as ethnographic practices. Gluckman and van Velsen suggested a different methodological approach to incorporate the study of norm-conflicts. Gluckman proposed to study actors empirically through incidents and then link the incidents as constitutive of the processes studied. Social researchers should thus document a series of disputes, ruptures, and norm conflicts and record as much of the total context as possible. Theories could then be built from stringing together similar case reports of conflicts over time." (Tavory, Timmerman, 2009, pg.246)

This norm or a sense of conflict in my life came from my everyday cognitions and actions. I studied the very personal contexts and social situations I encountered. It always felt like a mini intervention in my head. Sometimes it felt like this broader understanding of knowledge always escaping my mind. I was trying to study an inconsistent subject as an inconsistent researcher. I couldn't hold down my emotions. My questions? The internal answers floated away like sparks of inspiration that only came when they felt like it. I'd constantly blow off responsibilities to lay in bed, binge eat, scroll through Instagram, watch Netflix, or sleep the entire day away. In this state of being, I was objecting and subjecting myself to my own undeniable criticism. But such a cautious envelopment put a spotlight on my problems and motor in my motivation. The ethnographic method included writing journal entries, doodling sketches, and continuously processing my thoughts through a platform on which I was creating this thesis.

According to Mitchell, methodologically, a "case" gained relevance only in view of some identified general theoretical principle. This focus on theoretical framing was an answer to the puzzle of a case's generalizability. (Tavory and Timmermans, pg.247) I took this research and began to look at how to strategically rearrange my overall assumptions into concrete understandings. Constantly, after each new impressive article that expanded my knowledge, my perceptions about specific concepts slowly started to change. I re-evaluated my hypotheses and research questions and instead of seeing it as a diverse range of semi-related parts I saw it as a process. Throughout this thesis process I had been documenting my theory development through my art. Each time I had documented my thoughts it was like seeing the internal conflict within myself. There was myself, my thoughts, my problems, my answers, laid out explicitly. It was through the process of writing my personal narrative that started to originally organize my thoughts into larger concepts. It was through grounded theory and self-identity that offered me a bed of research to base my concepts on. So, here's where my general theoretical principle begins to identify itself amongst my thought. Within those initial grid lines, I started to map out my most important pieces of research through the way it unfolded into specific patterns. It was like retelling a story, repeatedly in new and exciting way, each connected to a new bit of research I had read that day.

This increased focus on duration and complexity entailed a redefinition of what was understood as a 'case' and a shift from a theoretical illustration or an empirical exemplar from which one can extract a general rule to 'a stage in an on-

going process of social relations between specific persons and groups in a social system and culture' (Gluckman, 2006 [1961]: 16). (Tavory and Timmermans, pg.247) So how is this thesis a theoretical illustration or empirical exemplar? By extracting a general rule, or a self-identity crisis, to "a stage in an on-going process of social relations between specific persons and groups in a social system." I started to compare how my own personal issues were met head on when I truly looked at how they were not only affecting my motivation and self-esteem, but the way I constructed my art process. There's a drawing method that artists sometimes use to transfer their small thumbnail drawings onto larger canvases. It's called "The Grid method." In a nutshell, the grid method involves drawing a grid over your reference photo, and then drawing a grid of equal ratio on your work surface (paper, canvas, wood etc). Then you draw the image on your canvas, focusing on one square at a time, until the entire image has been transferred. Once you're finished, you simply erase or paint over the grid lines, and start working on your painting, which will be now be in perfect proportion. Usually when I start painting on a large surface, I jump right into drawing the figures in the proportions that I *felt* best represented them. The images always felt, and then in turn, looked unplanned and messy. I'd judge my method and almost give up on trying to fix the proportions, knowing I started off with an impulsive and over simplified idea of how I would go about the painting. For a long time, this was the pattern my art took on. Scattered pictures were scattered-brain thoughts. I thought about how some of these norm conflicts, or patterns of behavior and disputes were a representation of my failed attempts at applying a

24

structured method to my art. It disheartened me. Art is hard and so is writing a thesis. Yet something truly inspiring happened while I was thinking about systematic coding procedures while starring at my painting.

I was studying the first painting in this thesis, *Figure 2.5* "Awareness," and I saw grid lines. It was one of the first attempts I had made at using this method and I did it without thinking about it. This painting was a prime example of how I had taken the larger concepts of what I was trying to identify and put them into a systematic structure**.** The painting itself then began the referent example for how I conceptualize theory, or in my case, my own self-reflective image theory. I analyzed the grid lines, and saw right there, the structure for my thesis format. As I explored and tackled on a vast variety of topics, I saw a pattern in way I was organizing information. I was free-sketching my ideas and stumbled upon *Figure 2.6*, "Structure of a Thought," where each color represents a specific section. I began to organize the more important parts of my research into color coded constructs that were representative in the artwork I had been working on alongside this project. These eight constructs, concepts, or sections literally "ground" themselves through multiple disciplines of theory and exemplify processes of communication theory development and methodology. In *Figure 2.7*, "Starting Titles," I summarize my sections by twelve colors. This grid-like format divides the paper into four chapters that include three sections each. At the end of each chapter there is an underlined transitional phase that I recorded through the exploration of four separate paintings. One painting for each chapter in the thesis. It was through using this information that I came to a major revelation in the way

I would structure this thesis and it happened while I was trying to understand my own cognitive representational process. Through visual imagery. These were the general concepts that started to form as distinct principles, each with its own unique influence on myself and the process. In sociology, Michael Burawoy has elaborated upon the anthropologist's extended case method to expand its temporal and spatial scope and explicitly privilege social structure. (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009, pg.247) Burawoy has argued for a reflexive' science where social researchers move from localized interventions, to a wider analysis and intervention in regimes of power, broader structuring external social forces, and, finally, to reconstructions of existing theory. The chosen social situation is viewed as an anomaly requiring a modification of existing theory." It felt as though I was creating my own process of taking my art and explicitly naming the effects it had on my own self-perception and behavior. Looking at all the work I had done, the narrative, the discipline of grounded theory as a way of developing my own theory, the effort it took to try and descramble my artistic thoughts into a new way of thinking about creating this thesis. It all worked together. It all emphasized the most complicated concepts I had been mulling over for the past four years and it made sense of them. All these words stood out to me. Self, identity, social, media, visual, image, culture, production, process, transformation. They pointed me towards a cohesive structure that organized the research for me. It organized my thought process. It was my own theoretical communication model. And it came to me in a vision from my art.

By homing in on only the parts of my research that had a distinct influence or change in my behavior helped me narrow my focus to the core conceptualization of this thesis project, or now identified as thesis process. These first two chapters and four sections have landed me with a methodology for reconstructing the same, but deeper evaluation of myself and my relationship with media. This is where my thesis takes a visual turn because it is where I discovered that this theoretical composition and thought process has been entirely based upon my perceptions from a visual perspective. It happens sporadically and develops over time, constantly creating cognitions and visualizing the effects in my head this picture represents that process. *Figure 2.8* "The Guide" is an example of how visualizing the process through art in a grid method has led me to conceptualize theory in a pattern of empirical behavior. This behavior represents itself through understanding my narrative, relating it to grounded theory, accepting myself, rearranging the contradictions in my head, and systematically structing the concepts that have emerged through this project.

Burawoy states "We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory we elaborate existing theory*"* (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009, pg.247) He thus supersizes the anthropological extension towards temporal processes to include underlying structural conditions in light of one's theory. (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009, pg.247) *Figure 2.8* outlines my thesis's underlying structural conditions to identity my own "temporal process." What came to my attention was the transitional processes in between each

structural concept, provided a bridge of understanding, and a major impact on my art. The processes are the colored phases that transition each box/section in *Figure 2.8*. They are named; Awareness & Acceptance, Visual Identity, Acknowledgement & Understanding, and Transformational Process. Each of these four transitional phases have a corresponding painting that directly reflects the visual processes and research involved that it took to make them. Since you started reading this, you're probably wondering how any of this connects. Maybe you can start to see it since you saw The Guide. Or maybe you're thinking, this is all a little *too abstract* for me. Well. I understand how you can be hesitant. The hardest part of being an artist is showing someone your work and having them immediately get what you're trying to say with the images. It's giving your audience a piece of you, making your ideas completely exposed and vulnerable. So. It's hard. Getting through this thesis has been the most impactful and challenging piece of work I've ever done in my life. So, I imagine it can be a little hard to explain. Well this next transitional phase should provide for some background knowledge in the application of this process to my actual life and artwork.

2C. Visual Identity

This is the 2nd transitional process of my thesis. If we take this section as a process formed from the four sections before it (personal narrative, grounded theory, conceptual reimaging, and systematic structure), then, the first piece of empirical evidence that should compose this section would be an example of how my personal narrative has changed throughout the process. Well. It's not that

simple. My story is ever changing. It's being recorded in the form of art, journals, and vague experiences happening daily. How it is possible to summarize someone's personal narrative into a theoretical compositional process? To be able to go back into our own personal life story takes memory recall, and concentration. People cannot be much influenced by observed events if they do not remember them. Retention involves an active process of transforming and restructuring information about events for memory representation in the form of rules and conceptions. Before I decided to make this project, I kept a record of everything I've ever created or posted. I journaled my life in a secret but public Tumblr account. Tumblr was sort of the grandfather social media platform of visual images with text, GIFs, icons, with a wide platform for blogging and forum discussion. I had an account since my senior year of high school (2011). So when I started this project I had this achieve of personal messages I blogged to myself. Somewhere in the archieve I found a post from 2016 (my first year of grad school). *Figure 2.9*, "Release of Tension," is a small sample of my online journal that was public on a site called Tumblr. By posting this stress I could verify what I was going through. I came back months later to reflect. Even if I have zero followers (which I secretly hoped for) I would be able to let lose any thought or idea without the pressure of my peers who followed my other social media accounts. This one was special because it was just for me. By continuously going back into these recorded evidences of my story I saw many conflicts that were arising. With a re-reading of my old journal entries or scholarly writing I was being constantly reminded of this reoccurring depressed mindset. It doesn't just

take recalling these shitty events. It took recording them for me to see what was

there. To psychically write, record, and analyze my self-loathing content I started

to see how this pure form of art expression was really helping. Even though my

posts got no views or reaction it felt abnormally satisfying that this tension or

personal event was released off my chest. For my thesis to progress I still had to

trim down what was relevant and what was fluff. In the process, I sought out

grounded theory for advice on my analysis of the work. As this process proceeds,

potential tensions increase between invoking theoretical sensitivity and drawing

on extant theoretical concepts. Glaser has relied on "theoretical codes" to guard

against such tensions. "Theoretical codes" are an ad hoc, loosely integrated

formulation of varied theoretical families of concepts, such as Glaser's well-

known "Six Cs: Causes, Contexts, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances,

and Conditions" (Glaser, 1978, p. 74). Other coding families include those that

invoke major sociological concepts such as "means-goals," "identity-self," and

"consensus codes." (Charmaz, 2008)

If we go by Glaser's Six C's, the cause of this theory would be me and my

depression, my self-image, and my art, in which case provides a person or thing

that gives rise to an action, phenomenon, or condition. The next C or context is

the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea. Okay, well

the context is my life, too vague? Okay, my social life? Too confusing. Okay

social media? Social media. Social media can be considered the context of this

project with its understanding and misunderstandings taking a crucial importance

and emerging form of theory. And from the context of my personal life, my

immediate circle, friends, and family, have all been with me each step of the way adding to the changing circumstances from which this theory grows. What Glaser includes in a given coding family sometimes seems arbitrary and haphazard. The coding families are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and their boundaries are often indistinct. Substantive codes in a specific study may indicate several theoretical codes that cut across different coding families. (Charmaz, 2008) Glaser asserts that theoretical codes provide the conceptual power to integrate substantive codes. His purpose in establishing theoretical codes is to give the substantive analysis new coherence at an abstract level. However, researchers might find these theoretical codes more helpful as possible directions rather than as definitive integrative links. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.159) According to Glaser it may be unnecessary to initiate such theoretical codes into a thesis. And maybe he's right, it felt easy to identify six C's in my life that cause a theory and looked like anyone with a problem could format their life into that code. But theoretical codes point to something further and initiate directions for what's to come. I had a feeling this specific thesis process wasn't just about trying to fix myself, but to identify a larger phenomenon about depression and anxiety within social media. Where Gluckman viewed societal conflicts as expressions of societies, Burawoy saw them as results of pervasive macro-forces. Extended case method, according to Burawoy: applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory. (Burawoy, 1998: 5) Each section felt like a "micro-force" that was adding

31

to this macro effect of depression and anxiety among adolescents on social media. Rather than merely including formal structural summaries of fieldwork data, Van Velsen further argued for providing concrete empirical instances of actual behavior to allow the emergence of 'exceptional' and 'accidental' instances in terms of the general theory used (van Velsen, 1967)." (Tavory and Timmermans, pg.247)

If by using my personal narrative as a stepping stone into analyzing myself through ethnography then some theoretical codes should arise. One code may be considered the identification of this process, but also in the different ways of how I had been analyzing the self and how it relates to more than just my personal story. Since starting my thesis, it had become abundantly clear that this project has become the code for understanding myself. How I accomplish the means for my personal goals. How my identity and self-accounts for all interpersonal interactions in my life and how they make an impact on my own self-image. When I look back at my artwork they all point to specific themes that compose who I am as a person and an artist.

In this thesis I take my collection of art as a form substantive empirical evidence. So this collection, these sketches or journal entries were very abstract and imaginative. They didn't speak like a scholar and they make different sense to a variety of different audiences. What kind of theoretical code can you give to such a complex body of work? This body of work is everything to me. It's all my research, perceptions, and artwork. It has affected the way I think and how I feel. It has changed the way I read, sleep, and even how I consume food into my body.

With a theoretical code so complex I needed a way to conceptualize this thesis as a form of me. And what a better way to represent that through the visual images in my art that reflect my self-identity? It's gotten to be that identity is term that advocates for a multitude of interpretation among a monstrosity amount of people. It's come to be a social phenomenon that's defining me and puzzling me in so many ways.

David Buckingham in his book, Youth, Identity, and Digital Media (2008) revels over this idea of how identity is such a complex item in our society. He states "the fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root idem, meaning "the same," the term nevertheless *implies both similarity and difference*. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. (Buckingham, 2007, pg.1). As Buckingham introduces a digital environment, he emphasizes that identity implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. (Buckingham, 2007) In this structure identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways.

I took to his position on identity immediately. I also seek multiple identifications with others, on the basis of social, cultural, and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories, and interests. On one level, I am the product of my unique personal biography. Yet who I am (or who I think I am) varies

according to who I am with, the social situations in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined. Buckingham (2007) mentions that much of this debate around identity derives from the tensions between two aspects. I may struggle to "be myself" or to "find my true self."

I thought if grounded theory is reflection of how a person develops theory, can it be used to create a template for how I create myself? Be myself? Find my true self? Awareness and acceptance only started to come by elaborating theories of grounded development, social cognition, ethnography, and ultimately looking at the effect this new information had on my self-image and my art. Like each transitional phase of this thesis "Visual identity" relates to the second painting of my thesis. When you look at this painting you can see that it was just like any other Kelly Ahern painting. It was of a woman, floating in space that consisted of pieces of world, swirls of color, and an inner unspoken depth of emotion. *Figure 2.10*, Visual Identity, the second painting in my thesis that represents this section. *Figure 2.11*, "Insta Standard," is a photo from Instagram I used as a reference to create the woman in my painting. Social media and Instagram are where I get most of my references to draw from. Awareness of myself began with looking at the girl I used to paint this image. In *Figure 2.11*, Alexis Rein, is a the typical what-would-call 'social media famous Instagram model' with 12.6 million followers and 490 posts of her traveling the world's most beautiful destinations. While sporting her incredibly thin body in an array of tagged fashion companies. Why is this the girl I chose to paint? Why *her* as my muse? Without an awareness

of the social media influences in my art and my life how can I understand how embedded they are with my identity? It was right there in my painting. A visual representation of how applying structure to my painting helped progress my thesis conceptualization. All of the answers. In a visual form. In the grid pattern. Or the pattern of The Guide. Look at *Figure 2.12*, "Color Map," gives us a perspective of looking into a deeper structural pattern. Proceeding the eye downwards, the painting you can see a sense of how this process is mapped out in a similar symmetrical style. On either side of the face of the Instagram girl we have two sections that consist of columns and clouds. Columns give us a ground to build on. The clouds can be considered my personal story, personal thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors. From there, the background is planted, the world is depicted. What forms next? A systematic structure. When mixed together inside this painting these two concepts emerge a process and visual representation of my self-image and thesis process. An Instagram model astonishingly gorgeous and unobtainable was my reference point, or a sense of "means-goals, and a basis for social standard upon which I formed my self-identity. Through this exploration of creative conceptualization of theory in relation to my personal artistic composition, I gave the substantive theoretical analysis new coherence at an abstract level. This methodology has made it available to identify such a theoretical code that can fit under Glaser's umbrella of "means-goals," "identity-self" in which my own identity or self is directly correspondent to my art process.

The study of identity in the communication discipline is constructed from a vast variety of theory and questions of defining the self, similar to how I have

35

breaking down my own definition of self. Identity has become a magic word in the disciplines of social sciences and humanities due to the impact of globalization, scholars examine the concept from different aspects and encourage people to find, maintain, and negotiate their identity from personal, group, cultural, national and global perspectives. (Chen, 2009, pg.109) Identity is such a complex word to occult for a billion different people living a billion different lives, with a billion different perspectives about the world. Identity is vast. We need some awareness of where our identity derives from in order to truly understand where we come from. On a personal level, I felt a deep emotional connection to my art as a form of my identity. From a group level, I felt a weird, uneasy, anxious and nervous self that could never be as good as the person next to me. And from a cultural perspective, I really had no idea where myself began or ended from the fact that culture is thrown at me from every angle of an online media driven world.

Identity theory treats society as a differentiated but organized system, thus the self is a multifaceted and organized social construct emerging from one's roles in society, and the difference in self-concepts is dependent on the difference of individual's role identities. (Chen, 2009) "It is the self-defining role identities that provide meaning for self, though meanings acquired by role identities are originated from social interaction" (Chen, 2009, pg.109). It was this deeper self-evaluation that led me to think about how this visual self can be stretched to a broader context of one's "role identity" from the perspective of multiple socially constructed spaces. What were mine as an artist? A student? A depressed

millennial? The roles I play throughout society are boundless and overwhelming. How am I influenced by what culture and how multifaceted is this system of perceiving the self? What kinds of identities can be considered once we broaden the idea of culture within a technological space? New forms of cultures through new media and technology have rapidly advanced the way we define ourselves and construct our sense of identity online.

Bolton (1981) review's George Herbert Mead's definition "I" and "me," and conception of the self. He states that the self, then is profoundly social in being a communication process between differentiated, multiple perspectives. The social process becomes seen as a continual interlarding of interpersonal and intrapersonal processes. (Bolton, 1981). It then becomes possible for the individual to be one thing to himself while presenting himself as another thing to others, i.e., false fronting. (Bolton, 1981, pg.251)

This proposes new questions to my identity in search for something more specific about the ways in which I am defining myself through art, or visual images. Because the self is a kind of your own imagined world, what is the significance of each individual's mental picture? In the middle of *Figure 2.10,* Visual Identity, there is a center self (Venus), and an external self, the woman I painted behind Venus. If Buckingham (2007) critiqued this painting, he would probably wonder how both female models relate to each other. What does the presence of one say about the other? Could they be false fronting? Conflicting? Representing different perspectives and cultural backgrounds? Alexis Ren is an Instagram model. Venus is a goddess. They are both woman of many selves,

renderings, and individual perspectives. Yet they exist in different worlds. And there it was. There was this image that was emerging through the art I saw myself painting. It was a visual representation of me. And everything I looked at within media I saw a visual message that influenced the way I interacted with social media.

It was through this sort of conceptualization or interpretation of imagery that glued the information in my mind. Bolton (1981) offers that the full development of the human mind comes only at the level of what Mead refers to as self-consciousness, or sometimes reflexive consciousness. At this level, mind and self-join. The key to self-consciousness is that the individual comes to experience the environment from the perspective of others in his or her social groups, by the same stage from the perspective of the generalized other. The generalized other (and what today we refer to as reference group perspectives) is a complex, organized set of rules for ordering one's experience of the environment and one's place in it (Bolton, 1981, pg. 251) From the many instances that I had recorded throughout this experience, they all had pointed out a direct connection to exploring the self in relation to visual images in the media. At the beginning of this entire project I wanted to be an "Instagram model" and a classical artist. The two selves I decided to paint. I'm internally struggling with this persona of being the artist and person I dream to be, and the artist and person I can mentally and physically handle and be. But there are also various social concepts or other selves floating around me. These artistic pieces of me (or visual images) provided a sense of visual identity and helped identify in what context my self-image

problem derives from. Now as I try to assemble my identity back together, I come to find this piece of the puzzle starring me in the face. Mead's idea of reflexive consciousness forced me to question the environment upon which my true self is created. By understanding our identities inside a specific group or community, (ex. woman, artist, scholar, social media user, etc.) we can begin to understand how these concepts when placed together point to a valuable relationship between the self and the culture in which that self is created. It's a word that binds the self to external world. Culture. Without the context of any socialization or culture an identity has little to build from. Before establishing a sense of my own visual identity, I needed to look at the culture that identity is built from. This transition into Chapter 3 takes the presented social scientific research and looks at it from a visual cultural perspective.

CHAPTER 3

Body Image through Culture

These last two chapters will take you through the second half of my thesis

a little more rapid than the first half. Here, I will attempt to summarize an

understanding of visual culture and the symbolic production processes that

contribute to the formation and assertion of my individual and collective cultural

identity. I will continue to form a repeated process of using emerging grounded

theory in a step-by-step personal conceptualization pattern and self-reflective

analysis. By the end of the chapter I should establish a visual relation to the

changing pictures- visual imagery unpacked. I will attempt to keep using the

process of going through each category of research and continuously relate it to

this creation of a new and improved visual imagery understanding.

3A. Visual Culture

When we think about the many communities and diverse cultures that we take

part of and experience everyday day, sure there's a physical one, as in your

hometown, state, even country. But it's never that simple is it? At least not with

analytical communicators like myself. I feel like my brain is it's own world

sometimes. I feel sometimes I could sit in my bedroom for days and experience a

social culture through the interactions on my phone alone. But even from there,

culture is limited, but also not limited. With today's technology the number of

cultures in which our personalities interact through social media is exponential

and growing fast. "Identity is then encapsulated by the boundary which marks the

beginning and the end of a group or community, and the cultural experience of the group is a bounded symbolic whole covering with a range of meanings for the development of norms and values that in turn provide a collective sense of identity (Chen, 2009 Pg.111) So, what is my cultural experience that arises my identity? This idea brought me back to the awareness and acceptance phase of understanding this thesis. I wanted to introduce this chapter with a general perspective on culture seeing how our identities are so engrained from it. Little did I know the research would make me realize that I had no concrete conception of the culture I defined myself through. So, to even understand we in a new age digital first have to identity the existence of a specific culture. This got me thinking about how I consider myself part of a generation that has grown up with the technology to be able to assimilate our own cultures for ourselves, and not be defined by the psychical culture we are confined to.

Whether you're sending a text to a friend or opening up a news article those systems of communication that were never once available to you in the palm of your hand, now create a world of culture at your fingers tips. Jenkins (2008) suggests that individuals define their roles as being consumers rather than producers, and that we are more like participants within our surrounding culture. He brings up a very relatable context in regard to culture and its relationship with media. "Media can be seen as the key drivers and accelerators of a growing integration between culture and commerce. Brought down to first principles, media mediate – between people, communities, organizations, institutions, and industries. In the classic model, a small number of media companies were

homogenizing culture through their dominance over the means of production and distribution of media content." (Jenkins, 2008, pg.5)

       In middle school, my generation was hooked on AIM or myspace. Then Facebook came out at the end of my eighth-grade year (2004) as a new social platform that dominated media consumption. This start of a monstrosity of homogenizing media culture was that of social media. Media organizations such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Tumblr (to name a few) are all able to create diverse forms of culture. I've always thought of myself as a participant in this reproduction of culture because I've really had no choice on the exposure of popular culture we're faced with everywhere we look. And with an unlimited amount of culture arises new rules and new systems of interactions through every channel imagined. Culture is not so much society wide and virtually unchanging as it is situational and capable of rapid change. (Richard A. Peterson[1] and N. Anand[2], 2004, pg312) I've seen it happen from Myspace to Instagram, the progression of social media as an emerging form of culture. But what does each media platform have in common that links people together? How do Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. all bind together a sense of collective identity? I thought about my social habits throughout my entire experience on social media. While attempting to reconceptualize my understandings about culture I came to notice myself literally trying to visualize what that was. This landed me upon the theory of visual culture. I consume and distribute visual images throughout the media to define my own sense of identity. Social media allows for an organizational system in which symbolic and expressive elements of

visual culture are formed. The shift to visual culture represents a recognition of a vastly changed cultural environment, which includes a new symbiosis between new technologies, new economic arrangements, and changed social formations (Duncum, 2001, pg.103) "Visual culture is immediately apparent that this emerging field is far more inclusive than anything we would want to be involved" (Duncum, 2001, pg.104) The shift towards visual culture is occurring for many reasons, but principal among them is a recognition that, whether economically developed society is seen as "a society of the spectacle" or a society "of surveillance", there is little doubting that the "cultural turn" society has taken is also "a visual turn" (Duncum, 2001, pg.102)

I thought about my own visual culture theory. I see the way my fingers click through a world of visual culture. Where exactly every time you click a link there is a visual turn in the kind of media you're seeing. Something new on every webpage. Something pretty to catch your eye. Something informing to get you wondering. Culture is seen not as something that is high and refined, but, rather, as Williams (1981) says, culture is ordinary. Culture is an everyday experience. Mirzoeff (1998) writes, "In the present intensely visual age, everyday life is visual culture" (p. 125). Visual culture then is not something special, but something we all possess and practice all the time. (Duncum, pg.103, 2001) Even literacy educators, who have long focused on words alone, now refer to multiliteracies where language texts are related to audio, behavioral, and visual modes of making meaning (Duncum, pg.103, 2001)

Throughout the exploration of these visual cultural theories I questioned why I was having a hard time coming up with a mental picture for what I was learning about. Yes. I know it's happening. It's always present. Everyday life is visual culture. Scrolling through my phone, sending pictures to my friends. But how? What makes it visual as a whole? It is not a physical space, or a technological picture but an interconnected web of social images. The presented research provided me with enough evidence to detect that visual culture existed but slacked on providing a concrete understanding of how different visual modes of meaning making are created.

In search for a more specific definition of visual culture we can refer to the production of culture. In surveying this perspective, like most of the other contemporary perspectives in cultural sociology, it views both culture and social structure as elements in an ever-hanging patchwork (Anand, Peterson, Richard, 2004) From this unified idea that culture forms symbolic meaning through various structural systems, it would make sense that visual culture is created by a similar production. How do you show visual culture, when the visual is so vast and the word culture is so diverse? The pictures in my social feed are constant everyday implications of visual culture taking place with no physical world being built, it's as if this culture is formed on an invisible ground floating inside the internet. It's this structure that duplicates every day. Websites, apps, the interworking's of an iPhone have become a mantle for reproduction and emerging forms of social communication where visual culture is continuously creating itself through some sort of invisible multidimensional platform. What does that structure look like?

44

"Following Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) distinction between tree-like structures and a rhizome, he argues that, whereas art education is like a tree with roots, a trunk and branches, visual culture is like a rhizome." (Duncum,2001, pg.103) What is a rhizome? A "rhizome", depicted in *Figure 3.1*, is a modified subterranean stem of a plant that sends out roots from its nodes. They strike new roots out of their nodes, down into the soil. The rhizome also retains the ability to allow new roots that grow upwards, also called creeping rootstalks and rootstocks. Rhizomes develop from axillary buds and grow horizontally. This rhizome activity represents a form of plant reproduction also are used for storing plant nutrients. (Wikipedia) You're probably wondering why I'm talking about plants. Well just coming off of having no structural idea of what visual culture is defined as I looked for a metaphorical framework or systematic structure that I could understand visual culture inside. Rhizomes aren't necessarily just fragmenting of plants that allow for reproduction. The term is also philosophical. Deleuze and Guattari use the terms "rhizome" and "rhizomatic" to describe theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. "As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source of 'things' and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those 'things.' A rhizome, on the other hand, is characterized by 'ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.' (Wikipedia) As I'm picturing visual culture I think about the botanical

structure of a rhizome and while doing so I'm also thinking about the philosophical structure. You have this one seed that grows a plant and then through that plant grows underground roots and through those underground roots grow more roots, and more plants, and it "ceaselessly establishes" connections between an ever-growing patchwork of more plants and more roots. **"Rhizomes also work on the principles of multiplicity and rupture, where a connection might be made to any other thing and, even where a connection is broken, the rhizomatic structure will rebound time and again with new developments along old lines or the creation of new lines." (Duncum,2001,103)**

Figure 3.2, "Culture Roots," came into my hands when I just "googled" rhizome. Wow. That's a intricate pattern of structure. Trippy. Since conceptualizing, the production of culture has given me a broader understanding of how we can identify cultures thus validating the existence of a visual culture. By expanding my perception of how culture is produced I was able to mentally picture how many forms followed this production. It forced me to consider culture from a specifically visual perspective. Picture the canvases and creators that produce culture. Imagine Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook in the middle of an empty field with a seed to plant Facebook. He kneels, digs a hole, buries, covers, and waters his social media construct. Beneath the surface, roots form a structure of connections between organizations of power, visual/semiotic modes of meaning making, and a visual culture relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. The original seed that was Facebook has now grown to an unfathomably large rhizome. I'm left picturing is an unreachable system of

46

multidimensional social media networks. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all roots intertwined within this rhizomatic structure of visual culture. Each new root builds a connected platform of social media and each new social media can sprout more ceaseless systematic structures.

I'm thinking this is all too diverse and very twisted. I had to come here to arrive at this familiar point. Where I need to think smaller. When do cultural values and beliefs become less structural and more like reproductions of a endless rhizome? How did it connect to yourself? What sort of visual identity can be defined while communicating through social media? If we give ourselves an identity from the cultures we live in, then visual culture seemed to be an extension of the foundation upon where my identity is built. Yet this opens a million new ways of thinking about visual culture, visual imagery, and self-identity as they all can all follow many paths of inquiry. When I looked at the platform, I had created for my self-image to exist, it's Social Media. It's Instagram. It's the constant persistence of maintaining a self-image. A collection of content representing you. Boyd (2010) suggests that social networking services have a number of characteristic attributes including persistence (capture and archiving of content), replicability (duplication of content), scalability (broad visibility of content) and searchability (access to content via search). These visual images I see when I'm immersed in this culture persistently catch my eyes. It's through the idealistic value of the images that In our contemporary culture, users are increasingly posting images on image-sharing social media sites. (Ibrahim, 2015) Most social networking sites (SNSs) allow people to share photographs with others (e.g.,

Facebook and Twitter) and some SNSs such as Instagram focus exclusively on sharing photographs. As a social networking service, Instagram is a vehicle for photo distribution and Instagram images an example of Jenkins concept of 'spreadable media', that is, media which is shared by audiences for their own purposes within participatory cultures. (Zappavigna, 2016, pg. 273)

These visual social systems multiplicate structure through the archiving of pictorial content. The amount of communication scaled across this kind of platform becomes infinite in an endless scroll of searchable images. Each time these programs are updated they provide new features. Whether it's changing the design of home's interface or adding a communicative element, these new paths build a rhizome platform. They are rhizomes and they create more rhizomes. More specifically, look at my Instagram's progressive changing pictures through the app's interface. *Figure 3.3* "Interface 1" is a screenshot of some of the first images I shared on my art Instagram. *Figure 3.4* "Interface 2" is a screenshot of that same Instagram last summer. The chronological square snapshots of my life all account for a multitude of visual culture creating identity. Each picture clicked through opens a new line of history from the point where you started (most likely on home) to an unrecognized or familiar face. Instagram's structure doesn't keep a late version of itself as a hanging tree branch on its body. It cuts off that feature and it builds something new. Every single second a new picture is uploaded, it is reconstructing the familiar pathways of aesthetics and design. Every photo is clickable, likable, further investigable. When you make your way through the

platform you can see how it's always refreshing itself with new and more connections.

The popularity of mobile technology and image production have stirred together a culture in which sharing images is the competitive cue. To gain likes and receive followers has exploited the proliferation of apps including Instagram, Snapchat, Flickr and Pinterest. Specifically, Instagram has played an important role that's made a difference in mine and my generation's idea of media. Images are viewed in the broad context of social processes and pressures, and, this being so, the lines are seriously blurred between the study of images and sociology. Instagram has 500 million monthly active users who together share 95 million photographs and videos per day (Instagram, 2016). With such a high level of activity, it is important to understand the psychological impact that sharing photographs can have on people. (S.J.Tobin, P. Chulpaiboon, 2016 pg.303) Never before in human history has imagery been so central to the creation of identity or the gathering and distribution of culture. Never has the aesthetic styling of products been so intense, image production and distribution so obvious, and image technology so easily manipulable or so immersive. Never have images been so self-referential, arguably so seductive, or the manipulation of people through imagery been so important to authority. (Duncum, pg. 102, 2001) It's images create a socially constructed culture that emphasize visual reproductions of communication. But what is it about these images that makes them so central to the creation of our identities?

I now invite you to look at https://www.kellyahernart.com/3a where I've

constructed a visual representation of the many images that contribute to the

creation of my identity. This page is one of many in the structure of this thesis

that is "The Guide."

3B. Instagram Imagery

The mediated world is dominated by images not words (DeLuca and

Peeples 2002). I completely see that. I absolutely love images. I collect them like

little pieces of me that make me smile or laugh. As a person who uses photo-

sharing sites on an hourly basis I see how people are adapting to using visual

imagery as artistic construction of their social identity, and it's through Instagram.

I thought about how the way I perceive and define myself through my social

media Instagram account. It was everything I valued. It was all my interactions

with my peers, my friends, my followers. The amount of time I spent on this app

was the amount of time I immersed myself in visual culture, continuously creating

my idea of self-identity. As Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) indicated, identity

theory originated from the discipline of sociology, it "deals with the structure and

function of people's identity as related to the behavioral roles they play in

society." As such, the visual turn enabled through the convergence of

technologies elongates this trajectory where imaging everyday life becomes an

integral part of our identity construction, communication and sustenance of

relationships today. (Ibrahim, 2015)

While the domestication of photography sought to weave a visual culture

through the domestic setting, image as an anthropological or linguistic construct

remains conflicted. (Ibrahim, 2015) Today photos and videos are an integral part of the social media experience, and according to the Pew Internet Research (Duggan 2013) photos and videos have become a primary form of social currency online with 46% of American adults posting images they have created and 41% re-posting images online. The Pew research categorizes the users of photo- and video-sharing sites as 'creators' and 'curators'; (Ibrahim, 2015) Instagram, according to Zappavigna (2016) is a social photography 'app' designed to run on a smartphone through which the social media user can make visual and textual meanings, and the ambient viewer can interact with those meanings. Apps are 'bundles of meaning and functionality each marked by its own distinctive name and icon' that may be purchased via online stores through a smartphone. (Zappavigna, 2016, pg.272) Instagram affords a number of semiotic modes to the user, such as visual and written modalities, as well as imposing a number of semiotic constraints on the dimensions of the image and the length of the caption. (Zappavigna, pg.272) The service may be thought of as 'neo-retro 'in the way that it nostalgically positions itself in relation to past photographic practices such as Polaroid photography. This description of the design principle underlying Instagram suggests the important role that temporality holds to the value of these images. Despite the potential for 'instant' image publication, it is not the case that most Instagram images are simply rough 'point and shoot' style photos with little regard to design. A user's stream of images is an unfolding construal of identity in which the particular phenomena photographed are a presentation of personal style. The images appear as an unfolding 'feed' of content in reverse

chronological order on their homepage within the site. When the viewer clicks on an image, a larger version of the photograph together with its caption is displayed. Above the caption is the user's chosen icon and username, and a timestamp showing when the image was posted to the service. Below the caption are the names of other users who have 'favorited' the post, indicating positive assessment of the image. There are also comments below the image that have been posted about the image, one by another user, and a reply by the photographer. (Zappavigna pg. 275, 2016)

Instagram images usually make use of a set of post-processing techniques such as filtering, cropping, blurring, etc. – image manipulation functionality that is made available inside the Instagram application. They can be seen to involve a complex interplay of what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as 'artistic' genres, that work in the service of aesthetic function, and 'extra-artistic' genres, that are grounded, often domestic and banal, contexts. This social dimension of 'everyday' photography also ensures that the meanings of the images are in some measure available to everyone, drawing on shared values and systems of thought as well as aesthetic criteria. (Ibrahim, 2015) The sharing of the everyday aestheticizes the banal; commodifying and aestheticizing the non-event, the routine and the perfunctory encoding performance to the familiar. The poetics of the everyday is equally implicated in memory making. As numerous authors have noted photographic images act as an aide memoir or as a 'trigger' to memory. They become the material repositories that allow people to engage in forms of 'memory work' that is both individual and collective, enabling appropriations of both time

and space. (Ibrahim, 2015, pg. 44) This embedding of the mobile phone on the body extends our ability to augment our visual memory with mnemonic devices where these enable both storage and retrieval. The commodification of the everyday into digital objects constitutes banal imaging. There is nothing novel in it like capturing a cup of coffee with a fresh swirl of cream or the cat going about its everyday routine of a daily slouch in front of the window; a scene or object that produces the comfort of the everyday while in some ways ritualizing the everyday through imagery and initiating a perpetual visual contact (Ibrahim, 2015)

In the years since Zappavigna's definitions and outline of Instagram's format was researched, Instagram, and social media in general have exponentially exceled through technology advancements. The communicative constraints that had once held us back from creating messages have been surpassed by new semiotic modes of interactive. People are sharing photos that contain not just one, but multiple threads of pictures, videos, and multimedia configurations made from inside and outside the application. Pictures on Instagram don't refer to or look anything like polaroid's, as they once resembled. Images inside this platform now resemble popular culture, visual culture, social media culture, and provide a network of self-referential photos that represent multiple populations of its users.

Image constructs have bonded with linguistic contexts inside the platform through image construction alone. Individuals can now create images through external photo manipulation apps that cover an extensive list of features and ways to edit a photo. Facetune, Photoshop, Gimp, Afterlight, PhotoDirector, Vosco,

Perfect365, are some of my favorites. Although with the availability of this list, people still opt to using the Instagram's photo editing service as well as others like Facebook and Twitter. Almost every social media app has the ability not only to share photos, but to change them. *Figure 3.6*, "Deconstruction of an Image" is a compilation of four photos of one of my favorite music artists Lana Del Rey. This example shows the effects of using the first picture, or a drawn portrait, as a starting point to show the transformation one photo editing app can have. I even figured out how to transform it into a colorful moving gif. The smartphone has allowed us to be our own curators and creators of what is worthy to be practiced, photographed, communicated and admired. These new applications and social platforms delineate dimensions of basic photography skills. Anyone has the power to edit and transform their phone's camera roll into completely new pictures. Today, this idea of 'banal imaging and capturing the everyday' has exploded to a gross measure. Imaging the everyday has taken on definitions from uploading a picture of your most recent meal to sharing the intimate moments of your own wedding proposal. We've gone from capturing our cat's cute poses to openly documenting and sharing self-idealistic moments that compose an online self-history. And with that, we still capture pics of our cats! We just also do A LOT more now. When I open Instagram, I'm faced with a million pictures of different representations of the world. It's beauty, it's novelty, is embedded in its banality because Instagram images represent the everyday, or at least my every day. And the everyday is ever-changing along with those images. In this particular moment of research, I came to think deeper about the meaning of

commodification and ritualization of the everyday through what Ibrahim coins banal imaging and it made a lot of sense when I thought about the habits I formed from my time on Instagram. "The sharing of the everyday aestheticizes the banal; commodifying and aestheticizing the non-event, the routine and the perfunctory encoding performance to the familiar." So this mode of written and visual communication is almost hypocritical by design isn't it? When aestheticizing the banal means making the reality that looks bland and boring, glamorous and visually pleasing isn't that a contradiction, or rather a specific message of the real-life moment? By continually doing this we give our social media images meaning, to ourselves, and others.

The perfunctory nature of this banal capture means that the self is represented in these everyday images of familiarity in myriad of ways, where capturing and uploading signify rituals to *authenticate the everyday* (Ibrahim, 2015*)* The image itself provides a material tangibility to our ethereal lives while providing a cultural artifact to retain our presence online. There's a pivotal moment that occurs when you post a picture on social media. It's infinite. Anyone can see it. The platform you posted to owns that image. It's been shared. It's not a piece of you hidden inside your camera anymore, it's a public entity that defines you. No matter how much value you put on that image the fact that it's been shared with others creates a message about you. And that's terrifying. That feeling that once I post a picture, it's authenticating my day, it's creating a timeline of my life, it's constantly giving me a snapshot of the memory, the story, or the inspiration that drove me to take the picture. Banal imaging marks the validity of

the everyday through images, where images provide a means to authenticate life and to journal one's experiences, both usual and unusual, through the ritual of capture. (Ibrahim, pg. 44) Taking part in Instagram as a millennial is way of claiming a presence in my young adult community. These images that we're sharing everyday are supposedly signifying and ritualizing our motivations and actions, authenticating our lives, and documenting a visual memory of it all. It's come to be mine, and my generations way of capturing life and communicating between each other. I think it's safe to say we all want to remember our lives for the most part. So what do we do? We post pictures, of our lives, that chronologically follow our everyday. It creates us. It extends us. It is us. The pictures you share and see online, or specifically through social media are people's presented lives.

This is always happening in my life. Wanting to validate the moments through Instagram and if I didn't post every special or boring second of my day to social media it wasn't a well-kept representation of my life. And being an artist makes me want to document it all. What happens when the documentation or authentication of someone's everyday isn't an accurate representation? Is false fronting? Isn't aesthetically pleasing to the eye? *Isn't true?* Does that make them less beautiful? Less memorable? Does it still convey a sense of the self? This evidence of research mattered in the most interesting ways to because it started to highlight how I saw my self-image on Instagram.

Seeing a disconnect between visual and identity. There I was, on Instagram. Sharing representations of myself. You can see these representations in

Figures 3.7 & 3.8. They are pictorially revealing but textually dull. Uploading beautiful pictures with captions that had nothing to do with my current state of being, or my everyday routine, which was   depressed. I kept up with this habit. Of posting images of my art, images of myself. My everyday banal imaging was not authentic. Looking back at it now it may have been an attempt to at least visually aestheticize my every day when really, I felt like a bum, not pretty, not motivating, not inspiring, and not making art. And although I had no idea of this at the worst parts of my depression, I am a knowledge-hungry student seeking motivational change in the actions of her everyday behaviors. I am someone who spends most of her time on her phone or laptop, (an average 7-10+ hours a day.) I am someone who writes novels in her sketchbooks, filled entire rooms with canvases, but shares .5% of that self with her Instagram, and 99.5% of a self that is just her face. And I am someone who suffers from anxiety and depression. It's safe to say I had a problem. Or at least, a problem with "my-selfie."

This behavior of uploading selfies and art to Instagram was causing me so much confusion and internal disposition and yet society and I have a fascination with pictures of ourselves, visual currency, or the "selfie". Warfield (2014) In many ways, much like new media, the selfie can be conceived of as a multimodal convergence of older and newer technologies: the selfie is a mirror, and a camera, and a stage or billboard all at once (Warfield 2014). As such, the selfie becomes a bit of a paradox for research**.** If it comprises multiple technologies of self-reflection*,* then from what ontological standpoint do we address it? If it's a camera, then do we address it from the standpoint of photographic theory or art

57

history? If it is a mirror, then do we address it from the standpoint of perception, cognition, or even psychoanalytic theory? If it is a stage or a billboard then perhaps it is a communicative text…and thus we hear the pitter patter of the excited feet of scholars from media, communication, cultural studies, theatre or film studies. (Warfield, pg.1)

Warfield hits the nail on the head when she inquiries about the selfie. It's almost as if I had been searching for these kinds of questions to ask myself the whole time, I was exploring the many other ontological standpoints for the conception of self. But to do all the background research before coming to these questions was crucial. Because I had no idea that it was from my selfie uploading behavior that was the root of my issue with body image and in a lot of ways it was the root of my anxiety and depression. I am represented in these everyday images. My head in a camera roll. Me and my pictures. Image and self. Image and the selfie. Myself. My self-image? My "selfie" image? It was all starting to connect because I could identify the disconnect. The images I and I uploaded and the things I thought about media were twisted and tangled like knots wrapped around a stubborn tree trunk. These thoughts and feelings I were having were like knots in my stomach. Knots in my mind. Causing me to stress every single day. This brings me to my next point that will transition us into the last chapter. I will take a turn from presenting factual knowledge to how it has affected me overall and personally. To physically see how it truly change me. I know I have talking for a while about how depressed I was and how hard it's been but to be honest, I haven't given you much reason to believe me other than because I've said so. So

that's where this next transitional phase matters the most in that it provides a deeper more personal view into my life. Without acknowledgement of this controversial and mind-altering new information I would have never understood what it takes to turn it around and channel it into this entire thesis process. Awareness and acceptance of myself gave me this kind of therapy that felt helpful and became helpful. After that, this thesis felt like a step by step therapeutic program. Taking from visual identity I can see now that picture did not fit the image and from there I have to acknowledge why, and understand how, so that eventually, I can change.

3C. Acknowledgement & Understanding

Acknowledgement & Understanding has been the hardest piece of the thesis puzzle to conceptualize because it is the hardest thing to do for anyone with any problem. Acknowledging you have a problem and understanding why it occurs. Four years ago, I was suffering from depression bad. The worst it had ever been. I was suffering from my eating disorder multiple times a day. It even got so bad that my stress and lack of sleep was causing my eye to compulsively twitch. I remember frantically driving to campus for class and feeling my eye pulsate in and out of its socket. It was super uncomfortable and off-putting. I wondered why this was happening. So, what does anyone with the internet at their fingertips do when faced with a fairly concerning thought? Google it. I read that eye twitching could be caused from lack of sleep, depression, stress, anxiety, too much caffeine, etc. Wow. Interesting. Ironic. I thought. I already knew that. I thought? I do suffer from lack of sleep, depression, stress, anxiety, too much caffeine. That's a blatant

59

fact. But there it was laid out from WebMD, a common diagnosis, an empirical

fact. It was the first time I recognized that I might have all those symptoms

because there I was reading actual proof that caused me to become aware of what

I was experiencing. Google provided me with the information I needed to read in

order to WAKE UP. You must be aware of these issues because clearly, they are

hindering your life. That helped me become aware of this problem, and that I

might need more help. But does Google physically change your habits? No. You

have to. It was that same first semester when the google search inspired me to

research some basic social media psychological theories. And did that information

immediately fix me? No. But it did something to me. It opened my eyes to factual

knowledge. I saw how I could potentially use this psychological awareness and

perhaps change my own self-destructive behaviors.

Psychologists are beginning to seriously question the psychological

consequences of engaging in social media platforms. Findings reveal that much

needs to be done to further clarify the processes associated with these outcomes.

Social media studies can flexibly propose interesting psychological questions. So,

I had to ask myself, why do I use social media? One of the prominent theories that

explain social and psychological needs that motivate users to adopt the media is

the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Blumler, 1979 and Katz et al., 1973).

The key concept of UGT is that the choice consumers make when consuming

media motivates their desire to gratify a range of needs. (Kamarulzaman,

Zolkepli, 2015) Uses and gratifications theory differs from previous mass media

theories in that it assumes the audience actively selects media to satisfy specific

needs rather than passively receives media. (Gao, Feng. Pg. 869) According to this theory as a media user I actively select media rather than passively select media for specific needs. Although it didn't feel that simple. Do I? How can I tell? It didn't feel as though I was actively scrolling through Instagram and searching out the most beautiful pictures to "like." It didn't feel like I was actively choosing to scroll through an endless feed of pictures for two straight hours. And it sure didn't feel like I was actively picking up my phone and maintaining interpersonal connectivity with my social media community. It wasn't active. It was passive. It felt like second nature. To snap a picture and write a message. To comment on a friend's post. To view beautiful pictures.

UGT assumes that users are goal-directed in their behavior and are aware of their needs. Purposive value, self-discovery, entertainment value, social enhancement and maintaining interpersonal connectivity are the key needs that are widely adopted for online media usage (Cheung et al., 2010). I remember thinking this is wild because I wasn't aware of this behavior until basing my thesis project on it. I know that I tend to sit around my house on my phone and use social media, but I didn't realize that there was empirical evidence for the motivations and uses of this habit that was done through scholarly research. I mean I guessed the information was out there, but sometimes I just didn't feel like knowing it or learning it. I thought it was just a regular bad habit but even my motivations surrounded this media obsession. UGT outlines the ways of classifying media needs, gratifications, and motivations. For instance, media is used to satisfy immediate and deferred gratification, as an informational and

61

educational resource, for fantasy and escapism, and also as a means to connect or disconnect from reality (Kamarulzaman, Zolkepli, 2015, pg. 190) Weiss (1971) classifies them as informational-educational and fantasist-escapist, while McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) suggest diversion, personal relationship, personal identity/individual psychology and surveillance as important dimensions for the development of UGT. (Kamarulzaman, Zolkepli, 2015 pg. 190) These studies show media users and consumers perceive social media as fulfilling multiple entertainment and enjoyment needs. In these contexts, social media offers and allows their users to be active, entertained, flexible, stylish, attractive, excited and unique. Social media also lets consumers feel contented, satisfied, happy and attentive, as well as provide leisure, and a meaningful and rewarding experience. (Kamarulzaman, Zolkepli, pg. 202) I was experiencing all of these needs and uses. I need it do so many things. Yes, I use Instagram for information/ education, fantasist/ escapism, diversion, entertainment, and maintaining social relationships. I use it to look up information on various pop culture topics. I use it to educate myself on content that I find entertaining. I need it for a diversion when I'm in a bad mood and want to escape from my current situation. I need it to communicate with my friends. I need it for my art outlet. I need it to stay connected with the world. And it made me realize something super crucial: The list for the needs, uses and gratifications of media is extensive, individually unique, and sometimes not able to be recognized. My parents made my brother and I extremely conscious of this idea of instant gratification. My mother would drill it into my brain that we are so lucky and

privileged to be part of a generation that has information at the tip of our fingers that we have become blindly reliant on it. The affect it has on our needs, our brain, and our decision making, have all hindered the millennial brain. And it's true. I've become attached to that "I want it now, I need it now" type attitude. Attached to a device that gives me the ability to never be disconnected from my friends and to instantly gratify my wants, needs, and wishes. But when you spend SO much of your time on a social platform, identifying what drives you to use it becomes blurry.

In UGT, the basic human needs that interact with the individual characteristics refer to the psychological setup, social position, life history and society, which include a media structure that produces perceived problems and perceived solutions to the user. (pg.190, 2015) Psychological setup, social position, life history, and society, are different among everyone. Personal, social and situational motivation stimulate social media adoption and are believed to change depending on the cruciality of the needs and the motives of social media usage. The problems and expected solutions are modeled into motives for communication, and lead to media behavior. Such work places media uses and consequences within the larger context of individual everyday social habits and routines. It suggests ways in which the motivations and traits lead to the consumption of the media over other avenues for the fulfilment of individual needs (Kamarulzaman, Zolkepli, 2015, pg.191) Other dimensions that are used to link to media consumption include loneliness, anxiety, creativity and sensation seeking. It has been found that mood and content preference are strong predictors

of selective viewing and thinking. (Kamarulzaman, Zolkepli, 2015, pg.191)

After reading this information I became aware that I was actively choosing to participate in social media as a disconnect from my reality, a reality that consisted of loneliness and depression. Someone like me with psychological issues, should BE AWARE, that this kind of research exists. Psychological issues blend the uses and gratifications of social media in a variety of different ways because for every positive use of this type of media that I could identify there were just as many negative uses. I'll find myself interpreting captions as a source of useful information about my own self-created community. I'd catch myself taking the strangers opinionated posts for trustworthy content. Whether or not I was having a bad I day, I know I could dive into a sea of inspiring images. I'm looking at the pictures in amazement and awe. Inside this application, I could make my life look stylish and attractive regardless of whether it felt true or not. It was my escape. A distraction. It felt more like a past time where I would be passively scrolling through my feed without a care in the world to acknowledge the affect these social pictures had on my self-image, my entire LIFE. But what makes using social media so addictive and second nature? What is it about the application that makes us feel so content, satisfied, and happy? Instagram photos provide us social connection which inspire more opportunity of personally satisfying needs, and an endless scroll of rewarding experiences. Why?

(Chulpaiboon, Pitchaya, 2016) studied the role of social connection in satisfaction with Instagram photos. These researchers sought to understand people's reactions to photographs they had shared on Instagram through the lens

of their need to belong. They asked Instagram users to answer a series of

questions about their recently shared photographs, along with a photograph that

made them feel happy. In their results, they found Instagram photographs that

made people feel happy were more likely to contain a known other than any given

recent photograph. Known others refer to people that the user had a social

connection with. The nominated happy photograph was more likely to contain the

self than the average recent photograph. However, sharing more photographs of

the self was not associated with greater satisfaction. Thus, perhaps only certain

photographs of the self are viewed positively. Photographs of the self would

likely elicit self-awareness and could evoke negative feelings if people felt they

were not meeting their standards (Silvia & Du-val, 2001).

For example, viewing a shared photograph of the self might not be

satisfying if people felt they were not as attractive as they would like to be or

were not behaving in line with their standards in the photograph. However,

content shared on Facebook profiles (which includes photographs) has been found

to be self-affirming (Toma & Hancock, 2013), so there is also the potential for

high levels of satisfaction when viewing photographs of the self.

(Chulpaiboon, Pitchaya, 2016) In our case, it is consistent with the idea that

sharing photographs of known others is one way that people maintain their

relationships and sense of belonging. Photographs of our friendships, families,

and close acquaintances provide a visual reminder of one's relationships, which

should help to satisfy the fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995;

Gardner et al., 2005). (Chulpaiboon, Pitchaya, 2016, pg. 304) Also supporting the

role of social connection, they found that receiving more comments on recent photographs was associated with greater satisfaction looking at and sharing those photographs. Such associations shed light on the motivations that underlie different behaviors. These findings show that we can better understand people's subjective experiences on SNS (social networking sites) by taking a fine-grained look at the content they share. (Chulpaiboon, Pitchaya, 2016, pg. 309) Taking a fine-grained look into the content I share- All pictures of myself, my art, fabulous locations I had traveled. The relationships I had with the photos. The caption I put with them. The stories behind these images all mean a great deal to me. These pictures bind me to a culture, a community, a network of friends. But where was the sense of belonging? The satisfaction came from sharing photos of strictly me when I had rarely met my own idealistic standards.

This last social media theory that affects a psychological view on the self is Social Comparison Theory or Social Comparison Orientation (Yang, 2016). The theory (Festinger, 1954) postulates that people engage in comparison with others to fulfill a basic human need for self-evaluation, in the absence of objective and non-social criteria. These comparisons are cognitive judgments people make about their own attributes against others whom they perceive as ideal goals. Body image is something I've always struggled with. It's hard to admit, let alone be aware, accept, acknowledge, and understand why. When I open Instagram, I see beautiful girls looking to be living their best lives. They are incredibly pretty and have the ideal mediatized figure. They travel, make art, make money and remain gorgeous and happy in all their photos. Is this real? Is this even normal? Is this

really the standard that media projects through visual culture? In today's highly mediatized environment, the majority of adolescents' peers and celebrities have an online presence on SNSs. Platforms serve as a comparison incubator that provides greater affordances for social comparison with the user's peers and celebrities (Ho, Lee, Liao, 2016) Particularly for women, the desire to be thin is the focus as the female body shape in the media has undergone mass involvement toward thinness over time. This contributes to the increase in women's over-adaptive behaviors to conform to contemporary body image ideals; research has shown that exposure to thin images by the media has a small to moderate effect size on BID and eating habits (Ho, Lee, Liao, 2016) BID (or body image dissatisfaction) is a negative assessment of an individual's body with regard to size, shape, weight, or muscularity, and it is a function of the discrepancy between a person's idealized body type and their perceived body image. As for the second concept of interest, adolescents' drive to achieve ideal body types it is defined as the preoccupation to engage in behaviors to actualize one's ideal body. The study applied social comparison theory to examine how social comparison with peers and celebrities via SNSs, as well as celebrity involvement relate to young people's BID and their drive to achieve idealized bodies. (Ho, Lee, Liao, 2016) This study extended the social comparison theory to the context of SNSs and highlighted how the unique affordances as self-presentation manipulation, uninterrupted flow of information, as well as perceived realism facilitate social comparison with friends and celebrities and the consequential effects on adolescents' BID and their drive to achieve an ideal body. (Ho, Lee, Liao, 2016).

67

The technological affordances for interpersonal surveillance and interaction of SNSs happen to facilitate social comparison due to the greater exposure to ideal body postings by peers as well as celebrities—who are often sources of BID. Yang (2016) suggests individuals who engage in social comparison, look to peers upward, or comparing themselves with superior others, to improve themselves; they can also conduct downward social comparison, or comparing themselves with inferior others, to enhance their subjective well-being. (Yang, 2016, pg.704) Different types of SNS content consumption may be more detrimental than beneficial. For instance, SNS surveillance has been found to relate to envy, which leads to higher depression. (Yang, 2016, pg.706) SNS postings can be a channel for support seeking, but such support seeking messages are sometimes vague.33 It is possible that frequent Instagram broadcasters are seeking attention or support through this undirected communication. And yet, if their followers fail to recognize the intention or do not feel motivated to respond, it could make the broadcasters feel unsupported and isolated. (Yang, 2016, pg.706)

Once again I look back at my Instagram as an example for comparison. In *Figure 3.9*, 2015 was the year I took it and posted it to my art Instagram. Instantaneously this set the standard for my perceived body image and self-image. Little did I know that one picture would reciprocate a falling card tower of manipulated selfies. The truth of the matter is that when I did all my research on these topics, they didn't just magically cure my depression. They just made me more aware of it. What triggers it. What I feel like when I binge on food, or when I binge on media. What makes me genuinely happy on Instagram and what

sickens me to see. How idealized images can corrupt young minds and body image is something that ebbs and flows like the changing of seasons.

These theories bring forward a new awareness of how we can begin to study how the self is created and represented throughout social media. Each of these social media theories look at content within a specific lens through their own methodology. Each study resulted in accurate and detailed accounts of the effects social media can have on a person. It inspired me completely. I thought if I can combine some of these techniques to come up with my own methodology then maybe I can understand my own personal issues with social media. The methodology of this thesis became the reconceptualization of each chapter. It's the conceptual reimagining of how I can take this research, be more aware of my habits on social media, and use it to change my behaviors. It's the exploration of Instagram including the identification of its grounding roots within visual imagery. With this research I was *truly aware* of how engrained my self-identity is with the habit to constantly compare myself to what I see on Instagram. It takes understanding how crucial visual imagery is within my own specific experience on social media. This kind of awareness immediately brings forth a self-referent system. SNSs, including Instagram point to this *fundamental need* to belong. A fundamental need to compare ourselves to others. Even a fundamental need to use social media. And what even are those uses if not completely unique to each and every single individual. How are we even *aware* of these uses and gratifications if they fall within so many categories and specific motives? By taking a fined grained look into the content we share, we can better understand people's

subjective experiences on social media. Taking a fine-grained comb into the images of my life and experience with Instagram has led to identify multiple processes in the forming of my self-image. This exemplifies the process of acknowledgement and understanding. Acknowledgement is acceptance of the truth or existence of something. It is an acceptance, recognition, admission, concession, confession or an acknowledgement of the need to take new initiatives. No one likes experiencing anxiety and depression. But if it's always happening why we are so naturally inclined to ignore any solution and let it eat us away? It's surprising how hard it is to admit when you're being irrational but for some reason, we don't, and we self-destruct. Because it takes work identifying the real reasons why you're stressed. Those tiny moments in life when you realize something. About who you are and what defines your happiness. And you feel like you just made the greatest discovery into finding out how to live with happiness. When I think about this incredibly joyful feeling, I can think of an array of memories that connect to this feeling. Why do I forget about this joy when I'm depressed? Am I not able to reach those feelings? Because I'm binging, or stressing, or procrastinating, on anything that creates anxiety. I push the idea of something harder and motivating away. I'd rather passively ignore my problems, rather than identify them, and must deal with the responsibilities. But as I push and push the ideas of what I could be doing I sit there and think, truly think about how I'm effecting myself, my actions, and my mind. I remind myself that anything that's worth while takes a certain amount of work and time. I need patience and understanding before I have solutions. And if I sat there and

pondered this thought. That the ability to change was sitting in the palm of my hands, and once I was aware of my actions, my mind started to change. The work it takes to do something your passion about takes many shapes and forms, directions and solutions, strides and fallbacks. But in the end the feeling of knowing that you can accomplish these things in little steps is uplifting, but most of all, it's inspirational. If my self-presentation is represented throughout my Instagram and the many images of art that I share, then each single painting or drawing can be considered a "selfie" *Figure 3.10,* "Acknowledgement" is my third painting in this project.

CHAPTER 4

An Extension of Self

Profiling, commodifying, and aestheticizing the everyday are a large element of image and content sharing on the everyday. It caters to our abject fascination with the private and banal lives of others while creating conversations and connections through everyday objectification. (Ibrahim, 2015, pg.51) This visual culture turns self into a subject and object where narcissism is manifest in the creation and sharing of profiles. This objectification of self is historically and elementally bound with human need to profile ourselves, to invite public gaze, to immortalize the journey of life through images and to finally leave something of ourselves behind in this mortal world. (Ibrahim, 2015, pg.51) If I am going to objectify myself in this online environment then let it be to demoralize these social media values within imagery. To invite the gaze but punch it in the face with brutal honesty and *personal rhetoric*. To raise awareness to young adult depression in a visual world. To objectify myself in a manner that inspires change. A re-manipulation of the selfie. If my identity can be shaped through social media imagery, can it be changed by it? This last chapter provides an analysis of the entire thesis process after sharing my personal story on Instagram and submitting myself into a social media experiment.

4A. Visual Rhetoric

Every media organization and media outlet create their own visual identity or the implicit boundaries where information is included and excluded for their readers. This identity is created around shared cultural meanings that maximize

the functionality and aesthetic appeal of the product for consumption in a competitive marketplace. Within developed countries, shared meanings often circulate around an ideology of consumption. (Richard A. Peterson1 and N. Anand2, 2004, pg331) This specific *visual* perspective has been successfully applied to a range of quite different situations in which the manipulation of symbols is a product rather than the purpose of the collective activity. We have been subjected to social media's organization whose collective activity that involves profiling people in an attractive aesthetic. Visual imagery is created to sell something, a product, an idea, an organization within a culture that is hyper-aware of consumptive cues that induce a commercial exchange. (Kenix, 2013) Within SNS, pictures are the product. And within Instagram pictures become the essence of someone's crucial identity. It's like we've been forced to communicate on a platform that emphasizes the need to sell yourself. To look perfect and maintain a reputation online. After coming to a serious acknowledgement that research can and will kick me with reality, I noticed my account had a goal of attempting to sell my art. It was my sense of competition among my peers and an image to be offered for an audience of consumers. Providing an image saying, "here's me" "buy my art" "like my lifestyle" "follow my image." I had this Instagram account that was my channel to express creative artwork. And first I really loved it. But then it became work. I remember the effort it took to stay up all night meticulously copying the details of celebrity portraits because that was what got the most likes on Instagram. You can see the art on the left *Figure 4.1*, Celebrities. I challenged myself to study trends on the social app, and pictures of

known others, your face, your selfie, and your body, typically receive the most

attention. I even remember uploading my first Facebook profile picture when I

was 14 years old. I can remember taking a fine-grained look at all the photos I had

of myself and exclusively judging each picture. There were even steps I took to

search, edit, crop, and transform the photo to showcase the *best* version of myself.

I thought if I didn't look perfect, I wouldn't be considered friend-request worthy.

As a girl I grew up with this adolescent idea that your face, and your body, needs

to be shared on apps like Facebook and Instagram or you'd be considered an

outcast, anti-social, even characteristically unfavorable as a person. But maybe

that was just the way I was seeing it. Visual communication can transcend textual

limitations and instantly convey complex emotions in addition to factual

evidence. Visual communicators exist within a mutually inter-supported nexus

that simultaneously reflects and perpetuates social contexts. As such, visual

imagery must not be understood as purely evidentiary. Visual frames need be

contextualized within an ideological position. (Kenix, 2013 pg.837)

There are sociological, political, and cultural cues embedded within visual

messages that all coalesce to expose the ideological constituency of those who

created the media message. Visual images are central to how we make meaning

and communicate in the world around us. "Given that images are often the first

items scanned within a mediated message, they also generally form the longest-

lasting impressions on memory" (Kenix, 2013, pg.837). While the center of

linguistic communication is based upon words, the center of visual

communication creates the symbolic convergence of meaning through photo

sharing sites like Instagram. There seems to be cultural ideology that media exposes us to an insane number of images as well as an photographic standard. Recognizing faces and sharing photos of our community provides us with belonging and a self-presentation through visual imagery. It reveals the pull towards the visual in our human makeup and conception of the self; the role of the visual in memory and recall, as well as its vital role in representing the real or in authenticating and chronicling events in our everyday lives, in forming connections with others, offering an indexicality for conversations and equally its role in self-representation and self-expression. (Ibrahim, 2015)

We've become so obsessed with ourselves and making our mark on the world that it really messes with our actual behaviors. It's given me an ongoing internal struggle between myself, my art, and the images I see that I'm subconsciously drawn to within social media. Most researchers agree that at the most fundamental core, social media images have, at least historically, aimed to disrupt traditional methods of communicating. I see the way my fingers click through a world of visual culture. I see how images trigger my memory and refresh my brain. I see how the collection of pictures in my phone are structured and I think of each one of these pictures as social piece of me, waiting to be understood by the masses. It's a social phenomenon that I've come to conceive and start to recognize in others. We are our pictures. And what our pictures say, says something about us.

According to Charmaz (2008) the most recent version of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory retains the original focus on emergence but does so

in relation to the conditions of the research and the standpoints and interactions of the researchers. Thus, the research product includes more than what the researcher learns in the field. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.160) Whether or not researchers are conscious of what they bring to the study or of the conditions under which they conduct it, constructivists contend that all become part of the research process and product. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.160)

Throughout this entire paper grounded theory has paved me a pathway into understanding theory development. I've used this initial research to guide my process with exploring myself and the many concepts that created this project. I would consider myself a constructivist in this project since every piece of the project has a huge weight on me as a product of the research. I consider ALL of it valuable. Since it has changed me, I've been recording it through this thesis. The constructivist position views research as an emergent product of current times, social conditions, and interactional situations. Constructivists argue that researchers' perspectives will direct their attention but not determine their research (see also Clarke, 2005, 2006). Unlike the view held by Glaser that researchers can and should remove themselves from the influences of their disciplines and the conditions of their research, constructivists aim to make these influences explicit. Here researchers view themselves as embedded in the research process rather than as distanced observers of empirical phenomena. Thus, constructivists attend to the conditions and relations of research, considering them part of the knowledge gained from the investigation. (Charmaz, 2008, pg.160) When looking back into my own archive of visual images and comparing my

experiences with the new information I was absorbing, my perception of self, took a challenging stance. Rejecting and submersing myself into Instagram made for a complicated relationship with self-image and body image. At beginning start of this self-exploration, back when this thesis was in its early development, I found it interesting that I took a considerable break from scrolling through my Instagram feed. I stopped posting selfies. I stopped posting regularly. I felt awaken by knowledge but betrayed by my fundamental instinct to share. I wanted to still post selfies and communicate online, but I didn't want to jeopardize portraying an idealized self. At this point I knew I had problems with my self-image and social media, but I still felt this need to belong to the Instagram community. So, this thesis became the game plan for creating a balanced perception of self. In an initial first few weeks of thesis beginnings I immediately jumped into my ambitious proposal plan. It was to be an analysis of the posts I would make about my thesis while creating mini projects and writing a Literature Review. Well it was through those first few weeks of social media experimentation, research, and writing all elaborately unfolded in extremely interesting ways. I downloaded Iconosquare. A social media application that lets you track your Instagram analytics and statistics daily. *Figure 4.3* shows a screenshot of the like growth my account received in the thesis time period. *Figure 4.2* is a screenshot of the follower growth I received from the beginning "thesis posts," to my current status now. As you can see my audience had increased over the course of this project. I went about making an Instagram template which mapped out in a document dates and planned posts. I wanted to make about 25-30 posts, sharing everything I

77

learned about my thesis while I was going about writing it. I was participating on. Instagram regularly, following, liking, posting. Well, my excitement got the best of me, and yet again, I became consumed. Then a self-revelation happened after three weeks of creating and posting new Instagram posts. I had spent so much time trying to wrap my artistic dysfunctional brain around these enormous communication theories, all while conducting experiments through social media and hand it in as an answer to my anxiety and depression. And again, I got wrapped up in the endorphins, the popularity of it all, I AGAIN got swarmed into the pressure. How could I not see this coming?

In *Figure 4.4 & 4.5* we have my most commented and most liked post throughout this whole thesis project. My face and my body grabbed the most attention. I could have guessed that. Although, according to Figure 4.2, or Inconosquare's analytics of my "like history" showed that the number of *average* likes varied dramatically. Regardless of the content, this up and down like scale coincidently reminded me of my ever-changing relationship with how I feel about sharing myself on Instagram. This contingency on enveloping myself into a social media experiment stuck out as a constructivist position on developing theory. I had no idea going into this project how much it would change me until it did. I thought I could handle creating experimental posts but the need to constantly scroll, check, update, and excessively use Instagram made my brain hurt. The more comments I received directly affected my happiness towards the photo I posted. The more posts I was creating allowed for more avenues of interactions to be aware of, more conversations to arise, more attention to be cautious of. I

needed a break. To find my thesis a structure that was workable and organized. Not some artsy girl trying to make an impression. This problem isn't just about my posts, it's about how I think. It's about how I reflect on my life. It's about how I interpret information. I remembered something said in my thesis proposal meeting that stuck out. There was a concern for what type of messages I was going to be creating in my initial proposal and how they would influence the audience I was communicating to. I thought about this. I remembered my major professor's comment. That it wasn't going to be about the relationship between me and this external population of my fellow social media users. It was to be focused on myself and the relationship I had within this platform. This made me realize embedding myself in the research process becomes overbearing and risky.

Warfield (2014) identifies three different formats of the selfie. She recognizes the digital subjectivities that young women experience through the phenomenon of selfies parallel the multimodal format of the selfie itself. She proposes if the selfie is a camera, a mirror, and a stage, then through the image making phenomenon, young women experience themselves at once as if they were 1. on a stage (a self-conscious thespian); 2. in a photo (as a model); 3. on a mirror (as the #realme). Many young women contemplate the ethics self-presentation in online spaces. She finds for many plugged-in young women, digital subjectivity should rather be digital subjectivities because subjectivity is experienced as multi-layered and multi-modal, which is why it can at once be disembodied, and body-focused, while at the same time felt, emotional, and subjectively embodied. This reflective, dialogic, and qualitative approach could

be expanded to explore the layered digital subjectivities of any number of diverse social groups. Through social media, young women experienced themselves as photographic subjects. Most of the young women Warfield studied both presented themselves photographically, by adopting conventions in their self-presentation, and assessed the quality of their self-images through photographic standards of aesthetics. Many young women would assess and adjust lighting/exposure, locations/composition, post/ posture/ expression, and hair/makeup. The women searched for "good backgrounds" and judged the physical space they were in from a perceived audience. They viewed themselves differently being, "good and sexy" or "chastised and blurry." Other women critiqued their smiles, hair, skin. Many young women described how, in the process of reflecting on, deleting, and seeking the right image, they would feel happy and validated if they could find a good one but felt "defeated" and "sad" if they couldn't produce a good image.   (Warfield, pg. 1-4)

The step-by-step process young women use to produce a selfie is a highly emotional one. Several young women said that the process made them happy but equal to this were young women who said the process made them feel "ashamed", "silly", "vulnerable", "exposed", and "embarrassed". In this search for the right image, most young women said they sought an image that they felt was "authentic", "real", "not fake" and "not forced". Some women only post the best pictures of themselves. This statement illustrates well the multi-subjectivity of the image producer as she mediates between the photographic self and what she proclaims to be the "authentic" self." Young women experience various

subjectivities in the production of the selfie and these subjectivities are framed by the dominant subjectivities propagated by the converged technologies that make up the selfie: the photograph, the mirror, and the stage.

As much as I look at the selfie as Warfield does, I am reminded this is my subjective selfie-making process. Seeing myself on a stage puts too much pressure on myself as someone who goes through a lot of emotional roller-coaster being mentally fragile. Seeing myself as a model basically feels unnatural for someone who has judged and felt ashamed of the physical/aesthetic appearances of my self-image. Seeing myself as a mirror, or the real me, has forced me to accept that I have these psychological dispositions. Warfield (2014) mentions that alongside the dominant subjectivities of these three technologies, an important subjectivity that is experienced by many of the young women is an embodied subjectivity influenced by body, space, place, and feelings. If this is my subjective selfie-making process, then seeing myself on a stage has brought clarity to the presence of a digital subjective-self. Seeing myself as model provides a platform for which I can show these dramatic findings as methods for inspiration and more honest communication. And seeing myself as mirror has given me a range of formats of the self that I had never known existed.

Earlier in the thesis I highlighted this concept of a visual identity. The connect was inspired by the many channels the word identity can cling to. I'm conceptualizing my identity in a million different ways through a million different perspectives and processes. Through intense self-reflection, multiple communication methods, and most importantly, an analysis of my own art making

process, I've found myself. Warfield's (2014) research reveals that through the material, spatially located, embodied offline subject is felt, experienced and connected to the subject of the image in the often-online selfie. Whether that "felt" connection is a transcendental connection to a pure sense of self, whether the 'felt' connection to the image is one's psychic connection to an imagined or symbolic self, whether the connection to the self is the recognition that the image of the self-aligns with the aesthetic tropes, it regiments motives through conventions and standards of beauty established by social photographs and more broadly mass media. (Warfield, 2014)

Myself, my self-image, or my "selfie-image" is the subject of which my online selfie is created. At the same time, I want to contribute to society online, I want to remain unbiased from its manipulative visual nature. But that only seems impossible considering the value I put on my self-image and artistic brain. Looking back now I can see my multimodal format of this selfie project can be a trip. After all, it's an art piece. An art collection. A composition of the increasingly large rhetoric on self-image research. It's personal and complex, while being culturally assigned and relative. It's textual and it's visual. It's an incredibly intricate paradox among self-image and visual imagery within the media. Warfield's discourse presumes that selfies are primarily visual texts to be read. And if this is the case, then when a selfie exhibits the body of a woman, the female body in the image becomes textual, flattened and reduced to a 2-dimensional disembodied deflated site of power relations. This "reading" process entirely neglects or ignores the subjectivity of the women in the image, her

82

intended uses of the image work, and the embodied and felt experiences of the image producer. By exploring the person producing the image, the place of production, as well as the potential emotional and bodily relationships users had to these new digitally-circulated images as a connected whole process, the discussion became not just one of what the images say to various readers, but rather what the relationship is between the producer and the image in the process of image-making and how does that relationship provide insight into the emerging digital subjectivities for this group of plugged-in young women? Is it possible to extend the materiality of phenomenology to the non-material space of the Internet and social media? (Warfield,2014)

The relationship between the producer (me) and the image in the process of image-making is imagined through my perception of that experience. These internal forms of representations I thought of as my selfies, or self-images were spread over the across not only my modeled self (or Instagram images) but my perceptual processing of the self. My entire collection of art. My incredibly large library of digital photos. Perception is a process of information reduction whereby a welter of sensations is reduced into a simpler and more organized form. These organizational processes result in our perceptions being structured into units corresponding to objects and properties of objects. It is these larger units that will be stored and later be assembled into images that are experienced as quasi-pictorial, spatial entities resembling those evoked during perception itself (Kosslyn, Pomerantz, 1977, pg.57) We can think of the "mind's eye" as a processor that interprets perceptual representations (or an underlying perceptual

experience) in terms of "conceptual" categories. When these interpretative processes are applied to remembered perceptual information instead of information that comes from the senses, an image rather than a percept will be experienced. (Kosslyn, Pomerantz, 1977) Ultimately I perceive my self-image through a vague definition of visual culture that highlights the usage of visual communication in a public world of social media. The "selfie" or self-image making process reinforces an intersubjective nature of consciousness. These image-making processes become that of a visual rhetoric that comes from using visual communication for creating symbolic meaning. Selfies are visual texts to be read. They provide a visual phenomenology of an interplay between text and imagery. Imagery and seeing. Seeing and *experiencing*. While pictures are concrete objects that exist in the world, on the platform, images are ethereal entities that occur in the mind. The experience of an image resembles the experience of seeing the referent of the image. Similar internal representations are posited to underlie all forms of visual experience (whether perceptual or imaginal), and these representations may be activated by information from the sensory periphery (when one is viewing a scene or picture), or by information from long-term memory. (Kosslyn, Pomerantz, 1977, pg.58) My selfies are not just the pictures I share on Instagram but also it's the way my mind organizes certain knowledge into conceptual categories about myself. The same happens with the way I process visual imagery within the media, everyday pictures from my camera-roll, and especially artistic imagery that inspires new perspectives. These images give me material ground to access the self upon. The images create

84

a physical and metaphorical body of work that is me and my art. Regardless of whether they are sensory or imaginal in origin, internal representations may be processed in ways appropriate to the processing of sensory data. At some point in the data-processing stream, images and percepts have a common format, which differs from the format of representations of other sorts of information. (Kosslyn, Pomerantz, 1977, pg.58) It's through this self and art making process that I can reduce my complex cognitions into a simpler and more organized form. I was looking deeper into the images, consciously painting, placing, and analyzing each concept or category into visual representations that helped me understand myself. Always coming to the same conclusion that I am my art. Taking a psychoanalytical re-conceptualization of the self and organizing them into an applicable, sensible, and understandable methods I've found what makes this entire thesis, a form of therapeutic art.

4B. Therapeutic Art

I'm a collector of photos. In my mind, but more specifically on my phone, in my hands. A visual representation of life itself. In the palm of your hands. What's in your camera roll? What does it say about you? As an artist and visual learner, I love looking at pictures. Beautiful ones. Amazing locations. Snapshots of my best lived moments. Now take that moment and share it with the world, what are we truly experiencing in that moment? Who do you become? Does that image now reflect an physical piece of you? This generation spends so much time liking other people's photos we forget to like our own. I'm tired of hiding my art because I'm scared to show my true colors. Well here I am saying here this is me,

and this is what I choose to create. In *Figure 4.6,* "Documenting Inner Peace,"
I'm structuring my world around my need to document a moment with an image
and text. Even when it's just a little note to myself it creates my narrative. But
what happens when that special documented moment is shared for everyone?
Narratives in GT and ECM ethnography open a fruitful pathway to theorize
oneself. Narratives can be defined loosely as "constellations of relationships"
(connected parts) embedded in time and place. However, the form of these
constellations and their relation to the empirical world is far from simple. In a
reflection on the nature of narrativity, Hayden White (1987) has argued that in
contrast to other forms of writing (such as the chronology) the narrative adds a
sense of closure to the structure of the world. While in the 'actual' social world,
event follows event in an ever-continuing succession, the narrative artificially
binds time and space. Thus, narrativity presents both the writer and the reader
with an ultimately fictitious sense of closure. (Tavory, Timmermans, pg. 249)

Figure 4.7, "Empowering Disclosure," was the first post I shared where I
opened up about my depression and anxiety as a major indication of my
relationship with social media. I wanted to share my story with my followers
because it felt like it would help me change into a better person. A more honest
self. But it turned into something more than that. Everyone's life is like a story.
Happening all in our head at once. whatever you imagine it's your own imagined
story, your perception of reality. It's every little bit, every moment, its teaching
you about you, every chapter defining a new sense of being, existing in our lives.
Imagining having this collection of archived memories at your fingertips. The

entire history of you in your very own phone or social media profile. This is what I posted:

"Instagram, I need to express something, something I've kept bottled inside out of fear of being judged. The truth is, I've been deceiving you all. 4 years ago, I created this account to share my art. Little did I know a few thousand followers would influence me to showcase my body. The first photo set a precedent for a f**ked-up idea of perfection. I spent hours posing in the mirror, countless efforts editing the shit out of my pictures, and continuously shaping myself into someone I didn't recognize. Someone who judged herself in the face of a thousand strangers. This platform makes everyone's lives look so damn glamorous, and its fake, or it's real, or it's whatever you think it is because images are ambiguous, and misleading, and impacting us on an emotional level that's beyond our basic understanding of the app. And. Well. I'm fucking over it. I'm over hiding behind a pretty picture or trying to fit into an ideal that society has created. For the past 3 years I've suffered from depression, anxiety, and a horrible eating disorder that took control of my entire life. When you look at these pictures you see a beautiful girl. But what you don't see is the churning empty stomach, the bags of puke hidden in my closet, or the constant pain of never feeling perfect enough to be truly happy. I'm sharing all of this not for pity, but for self-EMPOWERMENT, and to move forward. Because if it wasn't for this entire experience, I wouldn't be strong enough to sit here and admit my faults in hopes to inspire others. To show the effects of social media, to express who I really am, and to finally share how to overcome your shit-self and be better than you were

yesterday, because it's exactly what's happened to me. So, in the words of Oprah "what I know for sure, is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have."

Figure 4.8, "The Time is Now" is a neon light installation by Tracey Emin, a known artist for her experimentation with the self. This piece of art is just an example of imagery that's inspired me. Soothed me. Moved me along in my journey. From the beginning thoughts of this thesis I had a mental image about how it was being built. I told my therapist that if I could describe it to someone, I told them it would be like growing a spine. Fixing a brain. Reassembling organs. Trying to build bones. Missing a heart. Missing blood. Missing parts of the brain. But it's in the middle of the body that the heart grows and pumps blood. My thesis would be nothing without a definition of the connections between myself, visual images, and social connections. That was my *real self.* These visual images or forms of art. Learning how to methodically create it in a way that I could understand the process. It visually represented my identity. If I went back into my passions about art and life, I finally found structure, balance.

4C. Transformative Process

From the beginning this was always a plan to be a completely observational experience with myself as the researcher and the social experiment. Grounded theory and communication theory all go through processes of symbolization, forethought, evaluative, self-regulation, self-reflection, self-consciousness, and symbolic communication. From day one of graduate school and even in my senior year of college I was always contemplating what my mind

was going through with my relationship to social media. Questioning why it affected me and how I behave. Understanding theory development and self-cognition I started to see how my brain was justifying what I repeated to do. By putting myself a product of social media I was again hooked into a culture of self-judging and constant comparison of my peers. Everything is influence by an algorithm or your ability to capture the attention of a community. It's an insane amount of public pressure on a network like Instagram's, that is firmly encrypted on the beauty of a square picture with an assigned value. My aunt recently told me how when she's feeling lonely or sad, she will pull out one of her scrapbooks. This woman is infamous in our family for trying to stop every kodak moment. She will always get everyone to pose for EVERY family holiday or life event. She'll even sneakily snap a shot of the happening moment without anyone's knowledge. Hannah describes her beloved habit with having the ability to "hold onto those memories" and keep them like "screenshots of her life." I instantly related. I almost felt at ease knowing where some of obsessive photography interests had stemmed from. I thought of her way of capturing those special life moments was done for exact same reason why I loved looking at my Instagram profile. With all the pretty pictures and gorgeous scenes. Then I thought to myself. Did I look at these pictures in remembrance of a wonderful memory like my aunt does? Or did I look at them with the judgment of a thousand eyes? Are these perfect photos even an actual representation of my life? The pictures I post on my Instagram are always on display. They are public documentations of my life. They remind me that once we post something, there's no going back and

changing it. It's been shared, it's out there for good. It is forever a representation of us at a fixed moment in time. Yet it is progressively changing.

Looking at emergence as a concept helps one to clarify its progressive use in grounded theory. The concept of emergence assumes epistemological understandings and a theory of time. Researchers would agree that emergence means movement, process, and change. This concept of ever occurring event takes into account that the unexpected may occur. The past shapes the present and future but does not make either wholly predictable. (Charmaz, 2008) I've been drawing, doodling and journaling in a collection of 45+ sketchbooks throughout my life. I have folders upon folders of digital pictures since I was in fifth grade. I've taken and saved over 75,000 pictures throughout my entire life. I've tried every kind of medium of art and hold my paintings and drawings quite close to my heart. To become aware and accept where and how my identity it took looking at my art, which is wholly my archive of documented pictures since age ten. To understand where that person comes from takes looking into past, present, and future acts of that individual. I can't even begin to describe how different I feel from sharing this experience. This thesis is the most important writing creating and self-analyzing that I've ever done so far in my life. It's driven me completely crazy. And through these realizations I've come to change the way I think about myself. I've gone through thousands of speeches, blurbs, rants, thoughts, crazy abstract compositions of ideas repeated over and over in my head. Images hold a sense of value in our society. That when combined with a personality complex of a current millennial may cause images or "selfies" to become incredibly valuable

and distinct in a sense of personal individuality. As an artist I hold pictures dear and true to my heart. They speak to me on another level. They make sense of complex structural systems such as color codes, symmetry, composition, and perspective. In *Figures 4.10* "Thesis Origin" you can see the actual notes of my first meeting with Renee, my major professor, four years ago. Even in the beginning we were breaking it down to a grid like structure, with sections, ideas, bubbles of thought for each new branch of understanding. This became the answer key for solving the bulk of my self-imagery issues. It became like a Those mantras in my head and way to template my thoughts into an ongoing process of self-discovery. I repeated the chapters in my mind, mantras like awareness, acceptance, acknowledgement, understanding. It became this "cut and paste" methodology that you can visually see and understand in the art. With a constant forward motion and life driven process of not just knowing yourself bettering yourself but asking the question of how can this improve or help society? After all, none of this would be relevant or existing without our constant an ever-transforming society.

Selfies are so intertwined with our identities in today's culture that it's unfathomable how exponential technology allows that perception to be stretched. Where I don't just have my physical self as an indication of my self-image but now, I have multiple platforms and pictures for myself to exist and communication on. It's complicated and unique but at the same time it points out a lot of similarities through the same types of messages I've seen throughout every media network. And it's almost as the answers were sitting in front of me

the entire time. And to be completely blunt, it's difficult to identify conclusions when the topic of interest is myself and many patterns through which my brain makes sense of imagery and social media. I just had never acknowledged that they were what I needed. That it didn't just take knowing that tools exist to fix my problems. It took seeing them, researching them, applying them, and understanding them.

Figure 4.11 shows my fourth painting named "Transformation" in its earliest stage around Fall 2016. *Figure 4.12* is a Instagram post I shared about six months later. The post consisted of *Figure 4.12 and 4.13* to show the progression of my understanding of color in relation to the body. What's perplexing about this last painting is that I started it first, before any initial notes or research questions. I subconsciously started to transform my painting process. Before I even had a clue what to write for my thesis, I started this painting as an exploration of colors as emotions. It's significant that it was the first started painting in the collection because it sums up of the entire point of this thesis. That there's a never-ending process happening between people, their identities, and the way we see and understand ourselves in relation to everyday media. The chapters of visual identity, visual culture, social media imagery, acknowledgement and understanding, visual rhetoric, therapeutic art, and transformative process are all a part of my conceptualization of self. Since the first day I picked up a pencil to my latest Instagram post something has been happening to me. Since the first day I made myself throw up to the latest eye-opening therapy session something has been happening to me. Since the first day of graduate school when I was just

92

struggling to get out of bed. Sleeping at hysterical hours of the day and night. Trying so hard to understand what was wrong with me. Since that first day of graduate school something has been happening to me. I finally learned. I finally saw. I finally applied myself. And I finally understood who I am and how I change. And at the end of this chapter I can truthfully admit that with some minor fallbacks my eating disorder has significantly dissipated since controlling my life 3 years ago. It's truly incredible that the work I put into this thesis actually saved my mental health and even my physical health. In the past three years I went through weight gain and weight loss. Happy times and depressive episodes, but one thing remained the same. It was this constant re-creation of self. Building the body. Transforming the brain. Understanding my anxiety and depression. It never stops. It never feels over. That's why its taken me forever because my identity changes with each new day. I grow, I age, I mature like fine wine with a pinch of wisdom. I always have to remember though that with every new day comes a new opportunity to be a better self than yesterday.

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