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## The Digital Hood: Social Media Use among Youth in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

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### Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in the lives of youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Feminist Standpoint theory, which privileges the voices of marginalized communities in understanding social phenomena, suggests that youth at the margins have specific knowledge that helps us understand social media more broadly. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 females and 30 males aged 13 to 24 about their social worlds and neighborhoods, both on- and offline. The findings reveal a dynamic and somewhat concerning interplay between the geographic neighborhood and the digital neighborhood, whereby negative social interactions in the geographic neighborhood are reproduced and amplified on social media.

### Keywords

Social media; African American; Latino/a; Neighborhood disadvantage; Facebook; digital neighborhood; sexual health; Internet

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There is a growing body of research on the role of social media in the lives of young people (boyd, 2014; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). Researchers have examined the relationship between real and online friendships, the presentation of self online, and the maintenance and building of social capital through online networks (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Watkins, 2009). There has also been investigation into the potential negative effects of social media, particularly in terms of cyber-bullying (Li, 2007; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). However, Zhang and Leung's (2014) review of the area

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revealed that most studies on social media used university samples and white populations. Less attention has been paid to use among youth living in high poverty areas, or to diverse racial and ethnic groups. Since youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods often opt to remain indoors or at home to avoid outside dangers (Holt, Cunningham, Shen, Spence, Newton, & Ball, 2009; Jarrett, 2003), the digital world may be an important and particularly salient place for youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods to connect with their peers. However, this supposition has yet to be fully tested in the published literature.

Similar to Oldenburg's analysis in *The Good Great Place* (1989), urban youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods experience a particular "problem of place." For Oldenburg, the problem of place was created by consumer culture and patterns of residential development. In poor urban communities, the driving factors that create a problem of place are systematic disinvestment in cities, high concentrations of poverty, and the erosion of employment opportunities (Wacquant, 2010). As a result, many urban youth live in neighborhoods typified by violence and drug activity, lacking safe gathering places. Oldenburg argues for the importance of such "third places," like coffee shops or community centers, which can provide refuge, connection, and community revitalization. In the absence of physical third places in disadvantaged neighborhoods, social media sites could serve as digital third spaces for youth.

Soukup (2006) adapted the concept of third places for the computer-mediated environment, introducing the term, "digital third spaces." These digital third spaces share some of the core characteristics of Oldenburg's original concept but transcend space and time (Kendall, 1998; Schuler, 1996; Soukup, 2006). Digital third spaces provide both personal and social good, contributing to individual connectedness and a sense of refuge while promoting civic responsibility, community maintenance, and revitalization (Soukup, 2006). These spaces are still clearly located within an existing geographic community and are easily accessible. Ideally, these online spaces are welcoming and allow participants to feel immersed in such a way that the computer-mediated environment feels secondary. Previous research suggests that digital third spaces can replicate the characteristics of physical third spaces (Kendall, 1998; Soukup, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). The questions then are how do urban youth use these digital third spaces, and, what benefits and threats might these spaces produce?

## Background

The youth who participated in this study live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Ross and Mirowsky (2001) define disadvantage as a condition or circumstance unfavorable to success. When disadvantage is concentrated in a geographic area, the neighborhood itself becomes characteristically disadvantaged (Massey, 1996, 2013). Disadvantage at the neighborhood level is typified by high levels of crime and violence and has been empirically indicated by a high prevalence of female-headed households, poverty, high unemployment, dilapidated buildings, limited public resources, and elevated levels of violent crime (Ross & Mirowsky, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush, 2008). Although individual and familial factors can mediate the negative effects of residing in a disadvantaged neighborhood, environment remains a powerful factor in determining success

and health among youth (Elliott et al., 1996; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Wilson, 1996).

It is also important to consider how shifts in internet access may be influencing urban youth. Historically, low-income and minority communities were more likely to be on the wrong side of the digital divide (Attewell, 2001; Hampton, 2010). However, by 2013, 92% of African American teens, 88% of Hispanic teens, and 89% of teens living in low-income households reported having internet access (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). There is also a second-level digital divide, whereby use of, not access to, the internet differs by environment and socioeconomic status (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). For example, youth who come from higher socioeconomic status use the internet to access financial, health, and educational information more than their poorer counterparts (Hassani, 2006). While the digital divide appears to be narrowing, findings suggest that just being connected and having access does not automatically grant equality in the digital age.

## Social Media

Social media sites are among the most popular online sites used by adolescents (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Sites including Facebook and Twitter provide individuals with the opportunity to display personal information, expand and maintain social networks, and communicate with others (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). Recent estimates state that 81% of online teenagers use social media sites, with 94% of teen social media users having a Facebook account (Madden et al., 2013). Overall, the widespread adoption of social media has led to investigations of the effects of social media use on social relationships. Several studies have shown that social media is commonly used to sustain and intensify, rather than displace, offline relationships (Ralph, Berglas, Schwartz, & Brindis, 2011; Watkins, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). More specifically, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that social media was strongly positively associated with social capital, especially the maintenance of loose social ties and large social networks. Further, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found that intensity of Facebook use was positively related to social trust, political participation, and civic engagement among college students. While the accumulated knowledge suggests social media is a tool to enhance social capital, the generalizability of the results is limited based on the lack of diversity in the study samples (Zhang and Leung, 2014).

Despite the noted benefits of social media, anxieties abound concerning the potential risks. Online bullying is a particularly pressing concern as 15% of adolescents report being bullied online in the past month (Lenhart et al, 2010). Further, 88% of adolescents reported being a witness to online cruelty, with 21% of those reporting participating in the bullying (Lenhart et al., 2010). However, little is known about how urban youth's offline and online worlds interact, especially in the case of bullying and other behaviors that could have negative physical and emotional consequences.

In light of the potential risks and benefits associated with social media, there is a need for further research, particularly as youth from lower-income families are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to use social media (Lenhart et al., 2010). Questions include whether

the explosive growth of social media use increases social connection and information sharing in ways that ultimately benefit low income youth. Conversely, are youth experiencing additional adverse interactions via social media, making the digital space an additional space of risk and disadvantage?

Feminist Standpoint Theory, which privileges the voices of youth in understanding their respective phenomena, is the lens through which we investigate their social media use (Harding, 2004). This approach helps us to illuminate the lives and narratives of youth who have been silenced and marginalized (Hekman, 1997) and call attention to experiences that have not been visible with other theories. The theory provides a framework for respecting the authority of marginalized populations as valuable sources of knowledge and argues that knowledge is subject to the social context of the individual providing the information, also termed the “individual’s standpoint.” One’s standpoint is a function of one’s location in society, in terms of racial, gender, age and socioeconomic context, and this standpoint informs how individuals view the world. The theory also argues that less powerful members of society can offer a more robust perspective of the environment. Unlike the dominant culture, who may be unaware of other’s lived experiences and perspectives, less powerful members of society are attentive to multiple perspectives (Swigonski, 1994). Marginalized groups also have less to lose by maintaining the status quo, so their perspective is often conducive to providing insightful critiques about the current social structure. We are able to understand social media more broadly by bringing attention to the knowledge at the margins. Without the perspective provided by this knowledge, our understanding will remain limited in scope (Harding, 2004).

The literature on social media in the U.S. has focused on samples of white youth and/or college students, and in the absence of voices that imbue racial, gender, age and socioeconomic diversity, our current knowledge base does not reflect the lived experiences of the broader population. We address this gap by examining social media in light of the intersectionality of youth’s identities across these socio-demographic levels. This approach can reveal youth interactions with social media that may not have been exposed in previous studies. We do not seek to disentangle findings by intersecting identities or to provide comparative analyses, but rather to elevate the voices of youth of color living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, who are uniquely positioned to point out behaviors and patterns that are difficult for those who focus solely on the dominate culture to identify.

## Methodology

This study took place in a predominately African American (48%) and Hispanic (47%) northeastern city with an estimated population of 77,000 in 2011. In 2010, the median household income was approximately \$27,000 with 36.1% of the population living below the poverty line. This city has a high childhood poverty rate (19%), a high unemployment rate (11%), and a low graduation rate (66%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, this city ranks second to last in the nation for safety with 2,448 violent crimes for every 100,000 residents in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The study followed human subjects protection procedures approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Youth were recruited from various locations in the city including local schools, parks, community agencies, and after school programs. Study fliers were displayed in parks, corner stores, schools, community organizations, and complementary establishments frequented by the target population. To participate, youth had to be between 13 and 24 years old, English speaking, living in the study city, and self-identified as African American and/or Latino/a. We obtained parental consent and youth assent from participants 17 years of age and under. Youth were compensated \$25 for study participation.

## Interviews

Trained interviewers conducted interviews at locations that were both private and convenient throughout the city, including the university campus, parks and youth serving agencies. To control for potential biases, gender and race were considered in matching interviewers and interviewees, using demographic information from the eligibility screener.

A number of steps were taken to ensure that information was collected in ways that would ensure confidentiality, data trustworthiness, and establish rapport. Prior to the interview, the goals of the study were explained. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym and were encouraged to use false names of people and places discussed during the interview. We assured all participants that their interviews would remain secure and confidential.

Additionally, we informed them that their participation in the interview was voluntary, that they did not have to respond to any question that made them feel uncomfortable, and that they could withdraw their interview participation at any time. Participants also completed a brief questionnaire asking basic demographic questions prior to the interview. The semi-structured interview guide was designed so that the questions were sufficiently broad to allow for deviation, facilitating more in-depth recollection and participant discussion of related concepts. Participants were asked about their social media usage and attitudes towards various social media platforms. When participants reporting using a particular platform, they were asked to describe their experiences and perceptions of that site. They were also asked about their neighborhood characteristics, family relationships, sexual activity, alcohol, and marijuana use. All of the interviews were audio-recorded. Table 1 includes a sample of the interview questions.

## Data Analyses

The study relied on interview transcripts and notes prepared after the interviews. Data analysis was guided by procedures described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and LaRossa (2005). The principal investigator and two trained graduate students used Atlas.ti coding software to elucidate connections between themes and across interviews. Coders were instructed to identify concepts (words, phrases, or statements) that addressed any aspect of social media use. Similar concepts concerning use, avoidance, and drama were extrapolated from the interviews, analyzed, and identified as superordinate categories. Once the superordinate categories were established, we created subcategories to extract, analyze, and reconnect the data. From this process emerged an opportunity to connect both the superordinate categories (e.g., The Drama of Facebook) and the subcategories (e.g.,

Facebook comes to life) under the core theme of situational contexts underlying youth social media use.

To establish inter-coder reliability, the coders worked independently, coding a subsample of the same transcripts and discussing their findings with the entire coding team. During this iterative process, the lead researcher resolved coding discrepancies. Once 90% simple agreement across coders utilizing 10% of the interview sample was achieved, coders independently coded the remaining interviews. Once this process was complete, coders and the lead researcher worked together to digest the identified patterns and identify meanings for dissemination, being careful to avoid excluding minority accounts which challenged our conclusions or overemphasized particularly dramatic accounts (Sandelowski, 2001). Pseudonyms are used to report the findings from the interviews. Participants' quotes are unedited unless otherwise noted. The quantitative data from the brief pre-interview questionnaire was analyzed using Stata v.12 to provide descriptive statistics. We tested differences in social media use by gender and age using Chi Square tests.

## Findings

This sample consists of 60 youth—30 females and 30 males—ranging in age from 13 to 20 with a mean age of 17. Study participants self-identified as African American ( $n = 26$ , 43.3%), Latino (of Dominican or Puerto Rican descent;  $n = 26$ , 43.3%), and African American and Latino mixed ethnicity ( $n = 8$ , 13.3%). All the interviewees were either in high school or community college at the time of the interview.

When we asked the youth to describe their neighborhoods, we received varied responses. However, descriptions of the lack of neighborhood safety and violence arose regularly. Nineteen-year-old Jamal explained,

To me, it's a dangerous area but it's also, like, a safe environment. A fun, family type of environment out there. It's a dangerous environment because of all the drugs and violence in the city. Like, everywhere you walk, it's drugs. At nighttime you gotta really be careful because of the gun violence that goes on. Robberies and everything. Even during the day now you gotta worry about being gunned down or anything, or being in the way of violence like that.

Other youth in the study often highlighted some positive aspects of their neighborhood as well as negative perceptions of violence and crime.

The second most common neighborhood theme was the lack of places for youth to hang out in the city. Most youth reported not feeling safe in public spaces such as parks, with only approximately 9% of the sample frequenting parks and basketball courts. They most commonly reported socializing at their homes, their friends' homes, or at a local mall outside of the city. As Shali, 14, explained when asked about hanging out in the neighborhood, "No, if we do, we just be inside the houses. We don't be outside."



## Social Media Use

As shown in Table 2, the participants reported frequent use of Facebook (63%), Instagram (37%) and Twitter (27%). There were no statistically significant differences in social media site usage by gender or age. Similar to the survey responses, of all the social media sites, Facebook was the most frequently discussed in interviews. About 70% of the sample reported currently using Facebook. Youth, regardless of use, had an opinion about Facebook. As such, this paper will center largely on Facebook, focusing on use and abuse, as well as the interplay of online and offline social worlds.

Youth held varying perspectives on the utility of social media. Almost a third (31.6%) of participants shared benefits of social media, stating the ability to connect with friends and family as the primary benefit. Other stated benefits were the ability to post and view pictures, and plan “get togethers” and parties. Conversely, 61.6% described social media in negative terms citing the propensity for “drama”. These negative features were exclusively associated with Facebook. While the majority of youth reported witnessing others behave badly on Facebook, only one youth reported posting inappropriate pictures of himself. The remaining youth did not assign any evaluation to social media or did not use the platforms.

Facebook was noted as an important source of information. Fifteen-year-old Amijah explained, “I think Facebook is like a ghetto news center for like, who’s died, who’s pregnant, find out everything is bad in the world but nothing’s good.” Lou, 19, also described Facebook as a source for local information:

And that’s the way a death get around fast. Like, if someone die, they’ll post all pictures, rest in peace, make groups. You can make a group. People can join and help. You can do everything on Facebook. That’s how parties get around. Someone having a party, they can make a group, everyone join, say they’re gonna attend and you know who gonna be at that party. That’s how you know who, you can set up a fight that way. ... People can do anything on Facebook. You can’t do none of that on the other networks.

Several youth spoke of Facebook with ambivalence, however. Jannine, 16, said:

I mean, I guess, I don’t know. People do use it in a wrong way, but obviously I don’t but, I wouldn’t put my whole business on there but I’ll put ‘laying down’ [as a status update], like chillin’ or something, but other people do abuse Facebook . . . they have inappropriate stuff on Facebook. It’s like really bad. It’s like websites and it’s like exposing people and stuff.

These descriptions detail the many ways Facebook is used to share information and connect with other youth. In addition to these useful functions, a number of youth expressed negative attitudes toward the site. Like Jannine, several youth reported that they continued to use Facebook even though they felt people often posted inappropriate material. A minority of youth, however, felt that the abuses on Facebook outweighed the benefits and migrated away from the site.

## The Drama of Facebook

In the discussions of drama on Facebook, we identified several reoccurring themes: the negative interplay between online and offline social worlds, incentivizing sexual and violent behavior and sexual bullying.

### Facebook Comes to Life

Youth described the interplay between conflict online and offline, particularly how interpersonal conflict could begin and escalate on Facebook. They routinely shared that disagreements online escalate and spill over into future social interactions, resulting in things like physical fights. When asked about the drama on Facebook, Jannine, 16, said, “It’s a lotta arguments. So it’s like, why are all them arguing online, this is interesting. And it’s a lot of pictures people put up. People comment on them like that’s harsh, but then again its true.” When asked further about the impact of Facebook on face-to-face interactions, she offered this story: “In school one time, a girl was arguing with another girl on Facebook. I guess she said something about her picture, and she brought it to her attention at school and they ended up fighting, and it was really crazy.” Jannine added that this type of incident happened often and, “That’s why people usually try not to argue on Facebook, ‘cause it can come to life. But I try not to.”

The iterative nature of offline/online aggression is described in detail by Blanca, age 14: A lot of drama. A lot of people talk behind people’s backs, a lot of people. Recently I was just reading some argument that two boys was just having on Facebook about how they wanted to go to [the park] and fight. Personally, I don’t like drama. I don’t like being mean to people, but a lot of drama happens on Facebook . . . they were arguing with each other. Like, saying, some boy was saying he don’t like this other boy. And then he commented and then the other boy commented and then a lot of people got into it and started liking the comments. But that’s not the first fight. Like, I’ve saw so many incidents. Like, I even saw a bunch of videos of people fighting.

Kwame, 19, focused on gender differences in Facebook use:

Facebook? It’s like for women, it’s like to hear about a lot of stuff. ‘Cuz, alright in my community, that’s how they use Facebook, like for gossipin’ . . . You hear stuff. I seen a lot of fights from Facebook . . . like fist fights.

He was the only youth who expressed a gendered opinion of Facebook. Youth across the sample talked about other people posting videos of fights between other youth in the community. Ramon, 15, described Facebook in both negative and positive terms; “It’s a good way to talk to friends, but it’s also a good way to start conflict with other people” He explained that he limited his use because he witnessed conflicts that arose with his friends as a result of Facebook. “Like they would sometimes say certain things about each other, and then they would find out about it. So, and then, so soon after it would be arguing or fighting in school.” Luz, age 15, also said that she has reduced her Facebook activity and recounted one incident:



And, like, there was another one where this guy got really mad and, like, he was posting, like, 'Oh, I'm a get him. I have a strap.' Like, he has a gun so he's like gonna shoot him or something. I'm like, 'Oh my gosh. That's, like, really serious.'

Other youth also described how online conflict resulted in conflict in school, but also how offline conflict was reproduced online. However, no youth reported being initiates of or participants in drama, presenting themselves only as witnesses.

### Popularizing Sex and Violence

In their description of Facebook, youth repeatedly referenced the activities within the online platform that were used as explicit and implicit modes of communication. We term these activities "the currency of social media": likes, comments, and posts that are used both supportively and aggressively, with varied intensity. They also spoke of more problematic extensions that included activities such as creating fake new inflammatory pages of other youth and posting videos of fights between youth in the neighborhood. These varied activities are woven throughout the participants' descriptions of use. Aquilah, 14, provided an insightful description of likes as currency and the relationship between likes online and popularity offline.

It's a lot of girls who be posting pictures in their bikinis... just for 'likes.' Because girls, some girls, on their profile picture that I know at my school, they be getting like, 200 likes at a time . . . Because they want attention. They want likes. On Facebook, if you upload a status or get a picture, if you don't get that much likes, if you only get about 10 likes you have no buzz [popularity] . . . So a lot of people upload stuff and they want a lot of, they get a lot of likes. Like, if you get, like, what? about 200 to 500 or beyond likes on your folder, you got a lot of buzz. Or even 100 likes.

In discussing pressures to have sex, Shali, 14, explained that people subtly pressured other people to have sex by using Facebook tags.

A lot of people on Facebook put 'teen virgin' or some guys put up, 'oh me and this girl.' And then they probably tag their name in it and she'll probably comment on it and she'll probably laugh it off on Facebook, but in person she's probably like, wow, he put my business out there. And that's really like, that's scary. It's like if you have that relationship with a guy and he puts your business out there, it's really . . .

When asked whether other youth believed what they saw on Facebook, Shali said:

I think some guys are lying, like maybe it was going to get that far but never got that far and I guess she probably told him to stop and he was like 'oh, I'm gonna say it anyway.' And no one's gonna believe the girl before the guy because, I think that's messed up because, who's gonna believe her over what he's saying, and if he is saying this happened, maybe it's true, maybe it's not. It's just a whole mess.

For four of the older participants, Facebook figured prominently into the development of sexual relationships and romantic partners. Two males explained that Facebook helped them connect with females. A third male explained that he stayed off Facebook because he was in

romantic relationships with multiple women and felt his behavior could be exposed on Facebook. Pete, 19, explained “[Facebook] gets you in trouble with the girls. Because I got more than one girl. Yeah. So I don’t want the other one to know and need to put my picture up saying I’m her boyfriend when I’m not.” Bebe, age 19, offered a female perspective, explaining how people reached out to her on Facebook to request sex:

“And I didn’t know until Facebook. I swear. So many people inbox me and ask me to have sex with them and, and, you know what I mean, do shit. And I’m just like, ‘Whatever.’ Like, if I, if I want to, I want to. If I don’t, it’s not gonna happen. That’s just pretty much it. Like, I can make my mind up for myself. Like, if I wanna have sex with you and you’re asking then let’s go for it. But if I feel uncomfortable or something then that just it. Like, it’s not gonna happen.”

### Exposure and Sexual Bullying

Youth also discussed “hood pages” and “exposing pages.” Exposing pages are temporary pages created by someone who posts pictures of people to expose them to the social community as “sluts” or “whores.” In essence, it involves creating an entirely new profile of another person, revealing true or false private information or images, and encouraging other youth to comment. They are also known as “exposing sluts” or “exposing whores” pages. These pages are typically temporary. Amhir, 19, described each:

The boy will be like, ‘Send me a picture of you naked!’ And she’ll send it and next thing you know, it’ll be on that, it’ll be on whores, it be on, a whore page . . . They put it up. . . to warn you, stay away from that person because she’s a whore. Then it’s a [City] hood page where it’s though they got people from [City] and they expose them. They tell ‘em what kind of person they are, what they after, what are their goals. But it’s all negative stuff. It’s never nothing positive. It’s like, ‘I’m a put this person down. This person right here, she’s a gold digger. She’s a this, she’s a that. Him right here, all he do is mess with little kids. He’s 19 year old but he mess with 13 year olds and 15 year olds, like.’ Stuff like that . . . And these are people you know, you’ll see them every day and be like, the negative stuff, it be right on point, though. It be, it’ll be on point!

Ahmir, also described the use of comments on “whore pages” and his reluctance to comment: “So somebody else will put up a page about some girl. And it’ll have her name and her picture, and then people will post. I just glance. I don’t even like it because I don’t wanna be affiliated with that type of stuff because then it comes back on me.” He also provided insight into the temporality of these pages:

There’s a [City] hood page. But usually, you have to go actually looking. You can’t be directed to it. You have to go, like, searching for one. Because as soon as it goes up, it might be like a couple hours and then somebody takes it down.

In addition to dedicated exposing pages, participants described the act of exposing someone on a typical profile page. When asked to explain the practice of exposing, Javon 19 responded, “Yea, exposing and, and, and there’s some graphic videos on Facebook that I just can’t believe are on Facebook . . . like a guy and girl be doing something, and the guy will record it and throw it up on Facebook.” Javon further explained the girls’ responses to

being exposed, “Yea, I think that they like, try to report it as fast as they can, but I mean it goes up there and you know there’s no way really people can block that. Yea it, it’s drama, that’s why I try to stay away from Facebook as much as possible.” Kesha, 15, described a similar account of sexual bullying:

“I think what happened like maybe on the weekend or whatever this boy told this girl he wanted to have sex with her so then he gets her over there and then they start, and he told his boys before she got over there to bust in the room and take a picture of her and then they put it on Facebook. Like ... it’s just dumb.”

Facebook misuse also influences sexual decision making for some participants. Youth talked about delaying sex because of fears of their sexual practices being exposed and “spreading all over the internet.” Kesha, 15, cited Facebook as one reason she was reluctant to become sexually active:

Just being worried about stuff like getting exposed on Facebook and stuff like that, and how people like, people not even truthful. Like if you know you didn’t do anything with someone, why would you go around and lie and say you did? Just don’t make no sense.

## Facebook Avoidance

There is also a segment of our sample that did not use social media. Michael, 20, opined; Things like Facebook, I really think is, in my opinion, I think it’s really stupid, ya know? You get caught up in this, this notion of who you wanna be, and who you wanna portray yourself as, and you actually lose touch of reality. Some people really, like they sit on Facebook for 6 or 7 hours. Me, personally, I like going outside, playing around, running into people, meeting people, meeting groups of people, just introducing myself, and you know just going around the hood, just being me.

Michael was also one of many who juxtaposed Facebook interactions with real world activity, but he was unique in framing online activity as the negative alternative to offline socialization and engagement.

This study revealed a additional category of non-users: drama avoiders. Across interviews, Facebook was repeatedly associated with “drama.” Drama holds a variety of meanings and forms, but ultimately it is the manifestation of some level of conflict between people online, and sometimes offline. As such, some youth avoided Facebook because they sought to avoid being associated with drama. Jamal, age 19, explained:

I think it’s really, like, a drama site. People get a little too carried away. They use it for the wrong intentions. Instead of seeing it for what’s, really going on in the neighborhood, they use it, like, nonsense. Like, being nosy or wanna start fights or expose someone.

Several youth attribute their migration to other social media sites to the high levels of drama on Facebook. For example, Lou, 19, a heavy social media user, assessed each site beginning with an explanation of why he used Facebook less than other platforms:

You can read everybody business on Facebook. Instagram, you can't see nothing but someone's picture. That's it. And Facebook, you can see if someone arguing, if people put on a show for people as entertainment. I get on there the least.

He also felt that the drama on Facebook was increasing:

It's way worse. In the beginning we were all just fresh in high school. Everyone just go on there to get in contact with people if you don't have their number. Now, everybody out. They use it to meet up somewhere, to fight somewhere, everything. Post videos of fights. You can do anything on Facebook . . . But on Twitter and stuff, you can't do none of that. So Facebook is like that main.

When asked about drama on Twitter, Lou explained, "I mean, it could be, but, not really. Not really. Because you could block someone from Twitter way faster than Facebook can." Chuck, 16, deactivated his Facebook account and described the lure of Facebook in part because of the inability to completely delete one's account:

Facebook, like, you can delete every other website but Facebook you can't never delete your Facebook. You only can deactivate it. It will never go away. Ever. I don't know why they made it like that . . . When you get bored, like, "Lemme reactivate it. Lemme see who just fought. Lemme see this latest video of them fighting." That's the only thing people go on Facebook to see, really. It's embarrassing.

Some drama avoiders stopped using Facebook altogether, but more commonly youth reported limiting their frequency of use and posting on the site.

## Discussion

Social media has the potential to help youth overcome social disconnection that can result from neighborhood disorder. However, our findings suggest that rather than addressing the problem of place for youth, the current social media environment appears to amplify it.

Our findings partially support Soukup's hypothesis (2006) revealing that social media use in this community satisfied many of the characteristics of digital third spaces. Sites like Facebook were popular (Lenhart et al., 2010), based in the local environment, and often blurred the offline and online worlds (boyd, 2014; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). While these occurrences are not particular to disadvantaged neighborhoods, the blurring of these worlds may exacerbate threats and problems for some youth. For example, hood and whore pages (albeit fleeting) often mirrored the harsh social realities of their communities. In fact, there was little evidence that Facebook was viewed as a place of refuge or supported positive community mobilization (Ellison et al., 2007; Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011).

Facebook was the site associated with drama and negativity. boyd (2014, p. 137) defines this drama as "performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active engaged audience, often on social media". Drama is a common component of the youth social media environment and youth consider the drama a part of the normal social process (boyd, 2014). Unlike face-to-face bullying or aggression, youth cannot easily avoid drama online. These digital altercations can occur at any time, inhabiting previously safe spaces, and are

witnessed in front of a larger audience of both peers and strangers. The drama youth actively avoid in their geographic neighborhood has migrated to the safe spaces of their home computer or mobile phone. A second concern, which may be more acute in disadvantaged neighborhoods, is that the drama online can escalate into physical violence. In this community, online aggressions moved beyond emotional damage to physical altercations—including fistfights and gun violence.

Viewed through the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory, we ascertain that social media broadens inner-city youth experiences and provides them with a voice that transcends their immediate environment. However, the presence of sexual bullying through content creation like ‘exposing’ practices disadvantages youth, particularly females. Exposing pages can be viewed as one of the most aggressive acts on Facebook. However the ‘exposing’ practice on Facebook profoundly disadvantages African American and Latina females. It increases their vulnerability through sexual bullying practices and further marginalizes them by limiting their opportunities for legal or social recourse if sexually exposed on social media. The fleeting nature of the page also gives the “exposed” little recourse to refute or report the aggression. As a response, some youth engaged in protective strategies including abandoning Facebook and/or migrating to other more controlled platforms like Instagram and Twitter. However, complete avoidance can also result in exclusion from any positive benefits of social media. For African American and Latino males, the ability to use and control the bodies and images of their female peers is potentially empowering since it can increase their status among male peers (Jones, 2009; Miller, 2008) in their immediate environment and through their extended social network online. This elevated status can be of importance to them since it contradicts the actual political power that they experience in their environments. Therefore, youth lived experiences inform us that there is a constant interplay between their immediate and social media environments. Additionally, Facebook (in particular) is used by male youth to amplify their sexual status among peers, although it victimizes and marginalizes female youth.

One benefit of social media is that it serves as an accessible communications channel to transfer information (Ellison et al., 2007) and could be used to reduce communication inequalities (Livingstone, 2008). However, the shared information was often negative. Facebook as the “ghetto news center” is, in part, a reflection of occurrences in the real community. If there were no violent crimes, shootings, or premature deaths, there would be no resulting Facebook posts. Facebook not only mirrors the challenges and dangers of life in a disadvantaged community, but also amplifies the most negative aspects of the community. In this role, Facebook becomes a digital ‘hood’ that highlights the most negative aspects of the real neighborhood. In addition, youth have greater and faster access to negative social news and events, which may make a neighborhood feel more dangerous or problematic.

By employing Feminist Standpoint Theory, we add to the accumulating knowledge about the utility of social media in the lives of youth. For African American and Latino/a youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, social media did partially address the problem of place by providing a digital third space in an environment that is plagued by high crime, violence, and poverty. Youth used social media to augment their offline relationships and share community news. We also found that this shared information did not always bolster social capital and

potentially diminished it. Social media became an avenue for some individuals to instigate aggression, violence and sexual harassment. We hypothesize that sites like Facebook that do not limit user activities further marginalized youth, exacerbating a second digital divide by broadcasting a higher concentration of negative content. One positive consequence of the emergence of the digital hood is that youth adopted strategies in their on- and offline behaviors to protect themselves from online drama.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The sample is not representative of the population and the findings cannot be generalized to all racial and ethnic minority youth. Although participants' race, gender, and age varied, we are unable to disentangle how race and ethnicity operate independently in their presentations of self and social media use. Their narratives did not center on these intersections, nor did we discern any thematic differences by racial or ethnic affiliation. A significant minority of participants failed to complete the social media use item on the pre-interview survey. This resulted in significant missing data related to Instagram use and as a result, we cannot ascertain use patterns among those who skipped the question item.

Although there is potential to view social media as a digital third space (Oldenburg, 1989), the evidence from this community of youth does not resonate with previous research that suggested social capital could be created through online community integration (Ellison et al., 2007; Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011). Rather, Facebook primarily operates as a digital community where social problems are magnified. While the amplification of social problems occurs in other communities (boyd, 2014), in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the stakes can be higher with violent consequences. As such, providing disadvantaged communities greater access to social media alone is not a sufficient strategy to ensure equal access to the benefits of being networked.

It is important for social media developers, researchers, and practitioners to consider ways to leverage benefits of social media, specifically as a tool for social connection and community building, while minimizing misuse. This misuse of platforms can prove detrimental, leaving youth at the margins with another closed avenue to building community. We see that youth are strategically migrating to social media sites with more restrictions as a way to limit their exposure to drama. If social media developers consider potential misuse at the platform design level, they can engineer their sites in ways that make abuse difficult and potentially incentivize positive user behavior. The potential payoff is a decreased need for misconduct surveillance and potentially increased popularity as youth strategically look for social media that allows them to stay connected while minimizing their exposure to drama. Researchers should examine the differences in the quality and content of social media sites across diverse groups of youth to fully grasp the utility of these platforms. Finally, practitioners working with youth can view social media as a site of engagement and intervention. Without special attention, the social media lives of youth can be largely invisible to adults. Social media platforms will change, use and practices will evolve, but, for better or worse, the digital neighborhood will likely remain a vibrant space of youth connection for the foreseeable future.



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**Table 1**

## Interview Questions

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Interview Question Samples</b>
Neighborhood	Can you tell me about your neighborhood? What is it like to live there? Where do you go for fun?
Social Media	What do you think of Facebook? Twitter? Instagram? What other social media do you use? Probes: Do you use them? How often? Probe: Tell me more about that.

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**Table 2**

Reported Social Media Use (n=60)

<b>Social Media Use</b>	<b>% Facebook Use</b>	<b>% Instagram</b>	<b>% Twitter Use</b>
Never/Rarely	16.67% (10)	26.7% (16)	55% (33)
Sometimes	18.33% (11)	10% (6)	13.3% (8)
Frequently	63.33% (38)	36.67% (22)	26.7% (16)
Missing	1.67% (1)	26.67% (16)	5% (3)

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