

VOICES UNVEILED: EXPLORING AMERICANS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA  
CENSORSHIP AND ADVOCACY FOR REFORM THROUGH A QUALITATIVE LENS

by

Vail Ann Forbeck

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication

School of Communication and the Arts

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explored social media users' perceived experience of censorship on social media communication platforms to better understand the effects of censorship on users. The study relied on a qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions to collect initial data from 115 participants in the United States. Of the questionnaire respondents, 12 participated in an in-depth interview. The questionnaires and interview answers gathered information about users' perceived experiences of censorship on social media platforms to determine whether there is a need for changes in current social media practices and policies. The study found that Black males between the ages of 25 and 34 years believe that they are unjustly targeted by social media platforms with censorship and advocate for reform. The phenomenological and sociocultural communication traditions and the muted group and spiral of silence theories were used to evaluate the information gathered and answer the research questions.

*Keywords:* social media, subjective experience, social media platforms, censorship, social media censorship, government censorship, corporate censorship, phenomenological, sociocultural, muted group, spiral of silence, black males.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The following qualitative study centers on individuals' perceived experiences of censorship on social media platforms. It unearths valuable information on the current views of United States citizens who experienced censorship of their posted content. Further, the findings are used to improve censorship tactics by highlighting what users liked about social media platforms' current practices and the methods that users believed should be modified. The study contains five chapters that lay out the study's structure, the literature used, the study's execution, and its findings.

Chapter One introduces the study (Kornuta & Germaine, 2019, p. 4). The purpose is to inform the reader and make a case for the significance of the study problem (Bloomberg, 2022, p. 10). This first chapter provides the conceptual framework and the justification for conducting the study (Varpio et al., 2020, p. 990). Communication traditions and theories used in the study (namely, phenomenological, sociocultural, muted group, and spiral of silence) are also outlined. Finally, the chapter elaborates on the research context and foundations, including the study's background, research problems, purpose, and significance as well as the research questions used in the qualitative questionnaire and interviews.

### Background

The study focuses on the question of whether United States citizens whose content was censored believe that it was justified or necessary and what social media companies should change about the censorship process. Social media can influence behavior and access to information worldwide and is one of many ways people in the United States can exercise their freedom of speech. Feedback from those who think they experienced censorship can provide



valuable feedback on what is good and what methods must be modified. This will help protect social media users and their freedom of expression, which is considered a human right by the United States government. The goal of the study is to use shared experiences to understand whether and how these users' subjective experiences changed their views on social media censorship.

### **The History of Social Media Censorship in the United States**

The United States First Amendment, adopted on December 15, 1791, declares that the United States values and upholds freedom of speech:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Const. amend. I.)

Although the First Amendment upholds freedom of speech, there are limitations as censorship is not a foreign concept in the United States.

Censorship has occurred in the United States in all mass communication media throughout its history, dating back to its founding. Censorship was utilized during the Civil War to control information and influence the South with propaganda via northern newspapers (Fowler, 1861). The utilization of censorship by the United States government comes primarily from a place of concern for national security and an attempt to establish order. The Radio Act of 1927 was an effort by the United States government to establish order and guidelines for the ownership of radio waves (Hazlett, 2020, p. 17). Today, the United States is making attempts to monitor social media with the RESTRICT Act (Wong et al., 2023) and the DATA Act (H.R.1153, 2023) to protect national security.

The United States government is not the only enforcer of censorship on mass communication. Social media platforms censor content and enforce new rules as it develops. These actions have caused a public outcry. While some call for stricter regulations of social media content, others call for the end of censorship on social media (Petrescu & Krishen, 2020, p. 187). The movement of speech on private platforms is not covered by the Constitution and is not subject to First Amendment laws, which has caused controversy (Patty, 2019, p. 100). There is a push to regulate the regulator, that is, to begin regulating what social media platforms can censor due to the influence that these companies hold over society (Persily & Tucker, 2020, p. 16).

### **The Influence and Social Impact of Social Media**

Online mass communication has dramatically changed how individuals communicate (Wong et al., 2021, p. 255), and society is influenced by social media. It is important to understand exactly what this means and the extent of its influence. Scholarly research demonstrates that social media has a strong and constant influence on society, primarily because of its mass outreach, which continues to grow rapidly (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 71).

The reach of social media is tremendous. From 2005 to 2019, the percentage of United States adults who use social media increased from 5% to 79% (Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). As of January 2023, 72.5% of the total population in the United States uses social media (Kemp, 2023). With a presence in United States society since the 1990s (Winder, 2007, p. 1), trends have emerged from studies on its effects on society. Published studies have found that social media is linked to changes in behaviors among its users.

Social media is used to control behavior as there are campaigns to promote healthy behavioral change (Bonnievie et al., 2020, p. 1). Marketers take advantage of its influence for

financial gain, with studies showing that the internet and social media change consumer behavior and business marketing tactics (Dwivedi, 2021, p. 1). Influencers—micro-celebrities with large followings on social media platforms who make a living from connections on social media (Delbaere, 2020, p. 101)—can influence public opinion and incite behavioral change (Hudders et al., 2021, p. 327).

### **Advocacy for Social Media Censorship**

Now that the reach and power of social media are established, it is essential to look at the dangers of this capability. In 2023, the Pew Research Center published a study that found that the number of United States adults who say that the federal government should restrict false information increased from 39% in 2018 to 55% in 2023 (Aubin & Liedke, 2023). Many young adults use social media for leisure, but it significantly impacts their behavior and mental health.

Social media use is linked to internet addiction (Kato et al., 2020, p. 270). It profoundly affects users' mental health, self-perception, mood, and especially social relationships (Sharma et al., 2020, p. 467). The adverse effects of social media on users, such as the prevalence of cyberbullying, are linked to self-harm (Brennan et al., 2022, p. 5729), suicidal behavior (Alao et al., 2006, p. 489), and even suicide in some cases (Twenge, 2020, p. 19).

The free circulation of inaccurate information online is also one of the primary concerns for social media censorship (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). False information is created and spread through social media platforms, with a real-world impact and the power to affect even reputed news organizations (Kumar & Shah, 2018, p. 19). Such information is so common that it has been termed “fake news” (Lazer et al., 2020, p. 1094).

Online false information perceived to be accurate by many users has harmful consequences. It is believed to have affected presidential elections in the United States (Kelly &

Samuels, 2019) and can lead people to make dangerous health decisions (Shao et al., 2017, p. 1). Online false information is proven to incite violence and facilitate radical extremism (Yatid, 2019, p. 203).

### **A Stand Against Mass Communication Censorship**

Americans are divided on whether free speech or feeling safe online is more critical (Vogels, 2020). The dangers of social media and the reasons for censorship of social media content are established. Nonetheless, the other side of the debate leads to why there are United States citizens who take a strong stance against social media censorship. Governments sometimes spend excessive resources and time manipulating public opinion on media platforms (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 23) to shape the outcomes of elections, disrupt diplomatic efforts, and undermine peacebuilding efforts (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 29). Social media platforms have been accused of implementing censorship for self-gain and profit at the expense of truth (Johnson, p. 1285, 2018).

The Founding Fathers believed in defending the freedom of the press (Tocia, 2018, p. 206). According to a survey by the Siena College Research Institute, 84% of Americans fear exercising freedom of speech. Another study found that 60% of surveyed American college students reported feeling uncomfortable expressing their views on campus, especially if they are in the political minority (Ekins, 2020, p. 1). Refraining from expressing opinions online is often termed “self-censorship” (Powers, 2019, p. 3630).

### **Past Research on Social Media Censorship**

Studies on social media censorship and its effects on users are not new. Many studies have explored different aspects of the problem. A 2018 study titled “Censored, suspended, shadow banned: User Interpretations of content moderation on social media platforms” surveyed

users who have experienced what the researcher called “content moderation,” another term for censorship (Myers West, 2018, p. 4366). The study examined how social media platforms censor content and how this affects the platform views and their view of social media platforms.

A 2023 study surveyed 984 United States adult social media users about their preferences for platform moderation versus user-controlled and personalized moderation tools (Jhaver & Zhang, 2023, p. 1). The topics were divided into hate speech, sexually explicit, and violent content. The study revealed that given a choice, users would opt to set their own censorship preferences. It also showed that people who advocated for free speech wished to personalize their moderation of specific content (Jhaver & Zhang, 2023, pp. 17-18)

A study of Canadian Internet users from different regions looked at cultural differences in psychological reactions to the threat of social media censorship (Kermani & Lalonde, 2021, p. 2804). The study found that people who experienced restrictions to information access tended to react strongly to social media censorship, especially when these restrictions came from a powerful source. The study also observed a difference in psychological opposition to censorship depending on culture (Kermani & Lalonde, 2021, p. 2910).

Research on algorithmic censorship found it to be a beneficial means of censorship. The study also concluded that censorship is not necessarily negative (Cobbe, 2021, p. 761). A researcher conducted in-depth interviews about censorship tactics on the topic of COVID-19 during the pandemic (Shir-Raz, 2022, p. 1). The study showed that some participants experienced censorship of their content on social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Google, and LinkedIn. Interviewees claimed that a platform removed their posts, tweets, and videos. In some cases, their accounts were suspended or indefinitely banned: “My YouTube videos were being taken down. Facebook put me in jail ‘Facebook Jail.’ And I

found that I was being de-platformed everywhere,” said an interviewee. Another participant explained: “I got terminated from TikTok... Suddenly, I was permanently banned because, presumably, I had a community violation” (Shir-Raz, 2022, p. 9).

However, the aforementioned studies only begin to scratch the surface of the causes and effects of social media censorship on users. From what is already known, one can conclude that there is an effect on the users, but its extent is unknown, especially regarding censorship. Further, very few studies have examined the implementation of censorship practices by media platforms. The studies conducted on platforms' censorship practices are now outdated because of constant changes in performance and how social media platforms are structured.

Social media users are the primary beneficiaries of research on the effects of social media censorship and the possible need to reform it. As some studies claim, social media platforms may censor based on biased preferences, such as regarding politics. In this case, the research primarily benefits minority groups who currently experience or could in the future face suppression on social media platforms.

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Recent history and existing studies demonstrate that the problem of mass communication censorship, and now social media censorship, is prevalent in society (Sasser & Patterson, 2022, p. 607). Some argue that social media platforms allow the circulation of misinformation (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2021, p. 18). The spread of misinformation has led platforms to implement various methods to check information as there may be a moral duty to censor misinformation online—for instance, on vaccines (Kennedy, J., & Leask, J., 2020, p. 76)—to protect users.

Scholars have voiced concern that social media platforms have too much control over freedom of speech and could enforce discriminatory practices, which may lead to the abuse of

social media censorship (Johnson, 2018, p. 1285) and governing powers (Pan, 2017, p. 182).

Aswad wrote about this concern in 2018:

American social media platforms, also known as tech giants, could greatly and positively influence the future of freedom of expression online. They should acknowledge their roles as powerful co-regulators of speech and hold themselves to the same protections for freedom of expression that apply to state actors. We should encourage companies to respect international human rights in our brave neo-medieval world or face a future in which their speech codes are untethered to speech-protective norms. (p. 68)

Aswad is not the only scholar concerned about social media platforms' power over the next generation. Information warfare through social media platforms aimed at influencing populations is becoming a growing security concern in various countries (Prier, 2017, p. 50).

### **Problem Statement**

Social media censorship may have adverse effects on platform users, and the possibly biased implementation of censorship practices by social media platforms requires reform. Only 5% of social media users trust the information that reaches them via these platforms "a lot" (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017, p. 38). As of January 2023, 72.5% of the total population of the United States uses social media (Kemp, 2023). Recent research finds that three-quarters of United States adults believe that it is very likely (37%) or likely (36%) that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable (Vogels et al., 2020, p. 3).

The present study aims to explore current views on social media censorship in the United States and determine whether current censorship practices amount to discriminatory methods in

pursuit of a biased end goal or protect the truth by preventing the spread of misinformation. Protect impressionable users and safeguard their mental health. Studying social media censorship is necessary because of the number of people social media influences; it is also beneficial because it aims to protect users. Moreover, these research problems deserve researchers' time and attention because answers can expose injustices in censorship practices seen as discriminatory and that go against the values of the United States.

Current research quickly becomes outdated as practices change constantly. Additionally, although studies have identified problems with censorship practices, solutions often need to be offered. More research is necessary to strengthen previous studies. New research can further investigate the impact of social media platforms on media users. Research has shown that there is a possible bias in censorship practices. This may come in many forms, such as political bias and ethnic bias (racism). It is essential to continue to investigate any biased practices by social media platforms and protect minorities from discrimination.

### **Purpose Statement**

This qualitative study aims to uncover whether any participants experienced what they perceived as unjust censorship practices by social media platforms and harvest their views on how to improve current policies. The study covers research gaps to refine existing social media censorship practices based on the feedback of individuals who identified as experiencing social media censorship. The goal of this study is to understand the effects of social media censorship through the existing literature, a qualitative questionnaire, and interviews documenting the subjective experiences of individuals.



### **Significance of the Study**

The study of social media censorship and its effects on United States adults is significant because of the number of people who use social media. Young adults aged 18 to 29 years are the most likely social media users, and 90% of young adults used social media in 2015 (Perrin, 2015, p. 4). Among United States adults, 84% of those aged 18–29 years, 81% of those aged 30–49 years, 73% of those aged 60–64 years, and 45% of those aged 65 years and above are active social media users (Auxier & Anderson, 2021, p. 5).

The possibility of discrimination against minorities justifies the present research. While women and men use social media at similar rates, there are notable differences among racial or ethnic groups: 65% of White, 65% of Hispanic, and only 56% of Black people use social media, according to a 2015 study (Auxier & Anderson, 2021, p. 7). Despite the lower proportion of Black people using social media compared to other ethnic groups, a 2020 study shows that Black users still stand out on social media when it comes to social activism. According to the survey, 48% of Black social media users reported posting a picture to support a cause in the past month. Further, Black adults who use social media are more likely than other races to encourage others to act on issues important to them (Auxier, 2020, p. 5).

Although the study does not include teenagers in the research pool, it is essential to look at the statistics of teenage use to show the true scope of social media, further underlining the study's significance. For example, 97% of teens in the United States use the Internet daily, and 46% say that their Internet use is almost constant (Vogels et al., 2022, p. 8). Not only is the use of social media high, but Internet addiction is becoming a significant concern among young adults (Kato et al., 2020, p. 270). Teenagers in the United States also display internet addiction symptoms, with 54% stating that it would be difficult for them to leave social media (Kato et al.,

2020, p. 17). Additionally, 36% of United States teenagers say they spend too much time on social media (Kato et al., 2020, p. 15). The top platform used by United States teenagers in 2022 was YouTube (95%; Kato et al., 2020, p. 10). Even in 2018, media use was high among teenagers: on average, teenagers in the United States spend about 9 hours using media for enjoyment (Cimino, 2018, p. 1).

The present study is unique in that examines United States citizens' subjective experiences with censorship of their posted social media content. The answers to the research questions provide valuable insights that can reveal perceived unjust practices or policies that curtail free speech in the United States. The study benefits a large population because it aims to protect the rights of social media users from potential harm. Further, the study aims to differentiate conditions when censorship could bring social media user protection through public policies from the governing entities.

Since the participants' views are subjective, this study is not intended to prove or disprove a violation of the law. However, examining peoples' stories may bring a greater understanding of how they are affected. The study adds to scholarly research and provides insights into the issue by giving a voice to individuals who otherwise may not share their experiences and views.

The study intends to improve social media censorship practices as it fills research gaps. Overall, the information discovered is useful for future studies that may reveal outdated or unwarranted practices and policies by the companies that own social media platforms. The study highlights the changes that need to occur and, by doing so, provides valuable insights for scholars, media experts, and policymakers around the world to make the best decisions in the future.

### Research Questions

Research questions provide the foundation for a study, and a well-defined and specific research question guides the research (Haynes, 2006, p. 59). Conversely, a poorly devised research question may affect a study's outcome and fail to determine anything of clinical significance, affecting the potential for publication (Farrugia et al., 2010, p. 279). In a qualitative study, inquirers formulate research questions, not objectives or hypotheses. These research questions assume two forms: a central question and associated sub-questions (Creswell et al., 2018, p. 192). The primary question is broad and seeks to explore a significant phenomenon, whereas the sub-questions narrow the focus of the study (Creswell et al., 2018, p. 192). The research questions for this study and their rationale are presented below.

**RQ1:** What are the experiences of those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms?

Experiences have value and guide behavior (Cleeremans, & Tallon-Baudry, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider how the experience of being censored affects a person's use of social media.

**RQ2:** Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms think that censorship is ever justified or necessary?

It is necessary to evaluate the relationship between the subject matter (content) of an action and the circumstances in which it is performed (Mon, 2015, p. 86).

**RQ3:** Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms change their views on censorship?

There is clear evidence that sustained experiences may affect both brain structure and function (Park & Huang, 2010, p. 391). Therefore, it is important to encompass subjective experiences with media censorship in an individual's overall outlook on censorship.

**RQ4:** Should social media companies change their current social media censorship practices?

Policies, laws, and regulations are often needed to drive environmental and social changes (Swinburn, 2008, p. 1). If changes in censorship policies are currently needed, individuals who have experienced censorship can bring this to light.

### **Definition of Terms**

Censorship: The changing, suppression, or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good (Anastaplo, 2020). Censorship is also defined as a regulatory system for vetting, editing, and prohibiting forms of public expression (Moore, 2016, p. 2). Governments have adopted a vast range of technologies to censor information on the Internet (Roberts, 2020, p. 403).

Social media: Forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personalized messages, and other content (e.g., videos; Edosomwan et al, 2011, p. 79). "Social media" is an umbrella term that describes a variety of online platforms, including blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, and virtual worlds (Aichner & Jacob, 2015, p. 257).

Internet: The Internet is at once a worldwide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location (Leiner et al., 1997, p. 2). The

Internet is also defined as the system architecture that has revolutionized communications and commerce methods by allowing various computer networks around the world to interconnect. The Internet emerged in the United States in the 1970s and became visible to the public in the early 1990s (Dennis et al, 2023).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC): CMC encompasses one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many exchanges of messages of varying modalities through networked computers, either synchronous or asynchronous (Lee, 2020, p. 60).

Fake news: Fake news is fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent (Lazer et al., 2020, p. 1094). Articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

### **Summary**

Because responsibly exercising free speech is valued and constitutionally protected in the United States and communication via social media platforms is ubiquitous, ongoing research on these topics is necessary to educate governing entities and protect society. The rapid proliferation of social media has stretched the understanding and possibilities of personal expression. Companies running social media platforms must maintain policies enabling such communication; however, users sometimes have differing views on the course of action.

The present qualitative study reports the stories of individuals who believe that they have been censored by social media platforms. Further, it seeks to understand social media companies' possible misuse of such censorship capabilities. Chapter One provided context as to why the topic is worthy of exploration using scholarly literature and providing logically sound arguments; Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature in greater detail and elaborates on the

communication traditions and theories that form the lens through which the researcher examines the research findings.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The first chapter described the context for the intended research and explained its importance. Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature that influenced the interpretation of the study's findings regarding the research questions. This includes a broad overview of the history of communication, previous studies conducted on similar research topics, and recent events tied to social media censorship. Chapter Two also presents the study's theoretical framework by examining the communication theories and traditions chosen for the research and their historical context. The chapter serves as a guide for the rest of the study, assisting with interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions discussed in later chapters. It serves as the foundation for what is known about communication and censorship.

### Situation to Communication Tradition

A theoretical framework is a conceptual structure or a set of interconnected concepts, theories, and ideas that provide a foundation for understanding and analyzing a specific phenomenon or problem (Camp, 2001, p. 4). It serves as a guiding framework for researchers to make sense of complex topics and develop hypotheses, models, or explanations (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). The theoretical framework for a study encompasses all communication traditions and theories used for this study as it logically develops and connects concepts and premises from one or more theories (Varpio et al., 2020, p. 990). Finally, it determines the lens through which the study is best viewed and articulates the examined information to bridge research gaps (Littlejohn & Foss, 2016, p. 34).

A communication tradition is a broad and overarching approach or perspective within communication studies. A communication tradition provides a framework for analyzing

communication theories and concepts, and different traditions reflect different philosophical, methodological, and theoretical orientations (Craig, 1999, p. 119). Craig (2007) categorized communication theories into seven traditions: semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, critical, and rhetorical traditions (p. 34). Communication theories are specific frameworks or models that attempt to explain various aspects of communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021, p. 27). They systematically explain how communication works, why people communicate, and how communication affects individuals and societies (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2017, p. 441). Although various communication traditions and theories can relate to social media censorship, the researcher determines what traditions and theories best serve the study's purpose.

Communication traditions provide overarching perspectives within communication studies, guiding researchers' general approaches and orientations. Communication theories, for their part, offer specific explanations and models for understanding different aspects of communication phenomena. The researcher found that the communication traditions and theories best suited for the study are the phenomenological and sociocultural traditions as well as the muted group theory. The researcher determined that these traditions and theories contribute best to finding answers to the research questions grounded in human communication.

### **The Phenomenological Tradition**

The phenomenological tradition is a philosophical and methodological approach that focuses on the study of human consciousness and subjective experience (Olivares et al., 2015, p. 673). This tradition considers the individual to be the critical component in the communication process. Its primary objective is to understand phenomena as they are consciously experienced by individuals, free from preconceived assumptions or interpretations (Spiegelberg, 2022).



Theories within the phenomenological tradition assume that people actively interpret what happens around them and come to an understanding of the world (Littlejohn and Foss, 2011, p. 62). This tradition significantly influenced various fields, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, and qualitative research (Howitt & Cramer, 2010, p. 15).

### ***The Founder of the Phenomenological Tradition***

The “breakthrough” to phenomenology achieved by logical investigations may be traced back to Edmund Husserl’s early mathematical-philosophical studies, in which he wrote about experiences, their effect on an individual, and how they build off of each other (Farber, 2017, p. 26). Husserl was a trained mathematician attracted to philosophy (Spiegelberg, 2022); his major work is *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). In the phenomenological tradition, Husserl broadened modern science concepts and methods, which included the study of consciousness, profoundly influencing philosophy, other humanities, and the social sciences (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). Husserl developed the method of “phenomenological reduction” or “epoché,” which involves suspending preconceived beliefs and interpretations to closely examine the structures of conscious experience (Zahavi, 2021, p. 261). Husserl wrote in detail about human “experience” in 1997:

Every experience has its horizon. Every experience has its core of actual and determinate cognition; it is the content of immediate determinations which give themselves. However, beyond this core of determinate quiddity, of the truth given as “itself here,” it has its horizon. That implies that every experience refers to the possibility of obtaining, little by little as experience continues, new determinations of the same thing. Moreover, this horizon, in its indeterminateness, is co-present from the beginning as a realm (Spielraum)

of possibilities, as the prescription of the path to a more precise determination, in which only experience itself decides in favor of the determinate possibility it realizes as opposed to others. (Husserl, 1997, p. 32)

From his works, it is evident that Husserl stands by the phenomenological tradition and the phenomena of subjective experience.

### ***The Phenomenological Tradition Applied to Studies***

Several studies, especially qualitative studies, have followed the phenomenological tradition. One study examined Asian Canadian therapists' experiences with racial microaggressions and their coping responses in clinical practice and professional settings using a qualitative approach based on interviews with nine Asian therapists on Microsoft Teams. Data was then analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, and it was found that participants' experiences with different forms of microaggressions create varying long-lasting impacts on participants (Chang, 2022, p. 4). Another study using the tradition explored the lived experiences of nine Christian mental health practitioners (Trammel, 2018, p. 199). Each practitioner talked about their experience in an interview (Trammel, 2018, p. 204). The phenomenological study revealed that all Christian practitioners found ways of integrating mindfulness with concepts from their faith through their experience of the divine presence of God (p. 221).

Another study examined why some Ethiopian women give birth at home after antenatal care, conducting interviews and focus group discussions with women who gave birth in the preceding 12 months without skilled attendance after receiving antenatal care (Adinew, 2018, p. 1). The study used the interpretative phenomenological method to examine various behaviors and

beliefs of respondents. It found that poor counseling during antenatal care is deterring women from seeking skilled attendance at birth (Adinew, 2018, p. 1).

### ***The Socio-Cultural Tradition***

The socio-cultural tradition is the second tradition chosen to analyze the present study's findings. Socio-cultural communication represents the "discovery" of communication (Craig, 1999, p. 144). In the socio-cultural tradition, communication involves social structures, identities, norms, rituals, and collective belief systems (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 365). The communication tradition also assumes that social action has unintended effects (Craig, 1999, p. 133). According to Littlejohn and Foss (2011, p. 55), this tradition addresses how our understandings, meanings, norms, roles, and rules are worked out interactively and focuses on patterns of interactions between people and individual mental models. Whereas the psychosocial tradition focuses on individual characteristics, the socio-cultural tradition is more interested in patterns of interactions between people.

The socio-cultural movement in psychology has gained prominence over the last few decades (Chirkov, 2020, p. 120) as social interactional processes play a crucial role in learning and development (Nasir, 2006, pp. 458–459). The socio-cultural tradition attempts to theorize and provide methodological tools for investigating higher cognitive processes (Daniels, 2001, p. 1). Socio-cultural theory shows how communication makes human society possible, while critical theorists have unmasked the ideologies and power structures that distort communication and envisioned the possibility of more genuinely democratic forms of social life (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 11).

### ***The Founders of the Socio-Cultural Tradition***

The socio-cultural tradition developed through the collective contributions of various scholars. Two well-known developers of the tradition are Vygotsky and Carey.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was a Soviet psychologist during the 1920s (Anh & Marginson, 2010, p. 1). Although not directly a founder of the tradition, his ideas profoundly impacted it as Vygotsky emphasized the dominant role of social experience in human development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 22). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions, cultural context, and language in shaping cognitive development. He aimed to explain the role of dialogue in structuring recognition and viewed cognitive functions as a product of social interaction (Topçiu & Myftiu, 2015). His work stresses that cognitive growth is not solely an individual process given that social interactions and cultural practices heavily influence it.

Vygotsky expanded on the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) in his 1934 work *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 2012) and his 1978 book *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The ZPD refers to the centralized importance of potential development by measuring or testing what a child could perform and is a tool for observing developmental change as a dialectical product of society and material life. Social structures and the dynamic material world significantly shape children's development (Vu Huy Tran et al., 2022, p. 791). Vygotsky's ZPD investigates how teachers can provide appropriate support and guidance to young learners to help them reach their cognitive potential (Moalosi, 2013, p. 39). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by "independent problem solving and the level of

potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or collaboration with more capable others” (p. 86).

James W. Carey (1934–2006) was a prominent communication scholar whose work significantly impacted the field of communication studies, particularly in shaping the cultural approach within the communication tradition (Pooley, 2020, p. 9). His seminal essays collected in *Communication as Culture* (1989) are said to have helped transform media studies in the United States (Thorburn, 2009, p. 287). Carey is considered one of the key figures in shaping this tradition, which focuses on how cultural, social, and historical contexts shape communication practices and meanings.

### ***The Socio-Cultural Tradition Applied to Studies***

Like the phenomenological tradition, the socio-cultural tradition is used in scholarly studies to help the researcher understand the findings better (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 37). One study that followed this tradition explored the socio-cultural factors that influence exclusive breastfeeding among rural mothers by conducting semi-structured interviews with the mothers (Joseph & Earland, 2019, p. 1). The study uncovered significant themes, such as a mother’s determinant of how soon to initiate breastfeeding from outside influences, including traditional newborn care practices, the birth attendant, and the place of delivery. The mother’s husband, the grandmother, the traditional birth attendant, and health workers also influenced the decision-making about infant feeding (Joseph & Earland, 2019, p. 1).

Another study utilized a developmental–socio-cultural framework to examine the role of social media in adolescent girls’ body image concerns, resulting in depressive symptoms and disordered eating (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022, p. 681). The study found supporting evidence that adolescent girls’ body image concerns come about through a focus on other people’s

physical appearance based on exposure to idealized images on social media. Further, girls focus on their own appearance-related social media consciousness through exposure to idealized self-image and peer approval of photos and videos on social media (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022, p. 681).

These studies following the socio-cultural tradition are only two out of many. They vary from research examining digital media's influence on school students' development in a school setting (Dezuanni, 2015, p. 416) to socio-cultural influences on the sociopolitical development of African American youth (Anyiwo, 2018, p. 165). This tradition is valuable in communication studies, and notably in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Communication theory provides an abstract understanding of the communication process and a lens through which to view the world. As an abstract explanation, communication theory moves beyond describing a single event by giving a means for comprehending such events (Dainton et al., 2004, p. 3). The present study utilized the spiral of silence theory and the muted group theory.

#### ***The Spiral of Silence Theory***

A significant insight into human behavior from pre-internet communication studies is that people tend not to speak up about policy issues in public when they believe that their point of view is not widely shared. This tendency is called the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43). The spiral of silence theory studies human communication and public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43). It explores how public opinion forms and how individuals perceive and respond to societal norms and beliefs. It is particularly relevant in research on mass media, public discourse, and the fear of isolation or social exclusion.

The theory explains how majority opinions become dominant over time and minority opinions weaken (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003, p. 1393). It concerns people's willingness to express their opinions on controversial public issues (Peterson, 2019). In addition, the theory examines how interpersonal communication and media operate together to develop public opinion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2016, p. 169).

A vital element of the spiral of silence theory that is especially relevant here is the role of the media, which includes mass media such as newspapers, television, and social media, in public opinion. The theory emphasizes the significant role each medium plays in shaping public opinion. Media can influence the perception of the majority opinion, thus affecting people's willingness to speak out or remain silent on a particular issue (Scheufle, 2000, p. 11).

The spiral of silence theory's weakness is its assumptions. With any assumption comes uncertainty and, at times, error. Kennamer (1990) points out that the spiral of silence theory assumes that individuals constantly strive to determine the risks associated with exposing their beliefs and opinions in public (p. 393). He adds that this assumption should be more consistent with other research that showed that people could be more accurate perceivers of the opinions of others.

### ***The Founder of the Spiral of Silence Theory***

The founder of the spiral of silence theory was a German political scientist, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Noelle-Neumann is one of the most influential recent theorists of public opinion formation (Kennamer, 1990, p. 393). Her most significant contribution to communication theory is the spiral of silence theory, which she developed in 1974. The theory had a lasting impact on the study of public opinion and how individuals conform to or deviate from prevailing societal norms (Kennamer, 1990, p. 393).

Noelle formulated the spiral of silence theory while conducting an election in 1965 during the German federal election campaign (Petersen, 2019). Noelle-Neumann wrote that the media accelerates the muting of the minority in a spiral of silence (Griffin, 1980, p. 374). Direct observation gives us only a small proportion of the information we use, while print and electronic media provide most human knowledge about the world (Griffin, 1980, p. 374).

Noelle-Neumann's book *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin* was published in 1974. The book was written in German and is the primary source in which she introduced and expounded on her theory. The spiral of silence theory is primarily situated in the social-psychological tradition but can also fall under the socio-cultural tradition.

### ***The Spiral of Silence Theory Applied to Studies***

The spiral of silence theory is utilized frequently in communication research. The Pew Research Center conducted a study using the theory, titled “Social Media and the ‘spiral of silence’,” which surveyed 1,801 adults. It focused on one important public issue: Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations of widespread government surveillance of Americans' phone and e-mail records (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 3). The survey found that people were more willing to discuss their views in person or on social media if they thought their audience agreed.

Additionally, people were more willing to talk about their views in person than to post about them on social media (Hampton et al., 2014, p. 3).

One study focused on the discursive practices of Facebook users who use the platform to express racist views. The researchers analyzed 51,991 public comments to 119 news stories about race, racism, or ethnicity on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News Facebook page. The research found that users who held racist viewpoints (the vocal minority) were less likely to



express views that go against the majority view for fear of social isolation, which is a side effect of the spiral of silence theory (Chaudhry & Gruzd, 2020, p. 88).

An additional example of the application of the spiral of silence theory to a study showed why high school students do not post anything controversial and are more likely to hop on trends as they occur to fit in (Nicolini & Filak, 2020, p. 2). Another study observed that student journalists and advisers who faced censorship felt isolated and unsupported by the university and tended to self-censor (Moreno, 2019, p. 47). These examples only scratch the surface of the research using the spiral of silence theory.

### ***Muted Group Theory***

The muted group theory focuses on how certain groups within a society, especially women and minorities, struggle to express themselves effectively due to the limitations of language and communication systems dominated by more powerful or mainstream groups (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 884). Muted groups are often marginalized or less powerful and are politically and repressively kept out of public view by the dominant group, gatekeepers of communication who restrict their voices. It is essential to understand that in this theory, “muted” does not simply refer to silence but rather to whether an individual can say what they want to say (Wall & Gannon-Leary, 1999, p. 22).

The idea that an individual's ability to communicate reflects the perspectives, values, and experiences of the dominant groups within a society is deeply rooted in the muted group theory. Further, the theory holds that the result is the suppression or “muting” of the voices of less dominant groups. Matzke-Fawcett (2021, pp. 2–3) writes that communication with muted groups is problematic because, by definition, the authentic voices of members of muted groups (their

agency) are silenced by an outside power. Silencing can occur through various means, such as exclusion, ridicule, and misinterpretation.

The muted group theory argues that a dominant group will silence a subordinate group. However, it goes beyond this, delving into how communication is not merely about conveying information but also about power dynamics and representation within a society. Integral to the muted group theory is the belief that not all speakers are equally served by their language since not all speakers are equal contributors to formulating the language (Sas & Turner, 1992, p. 21). Edwin Ardener (1975) points out that the high-status groups of a culture largely determine the communication system of that culture, which results in “inarticulate” subordinate groups in the society (Ardener, 1975, pp. 21–22). Overall, the muted group theory reminds people to be more sensitive to the voices of marginalized groups.

### ***The Founders of the Muted Group Theory***

Communication scholar Edwin Ardener originally developed the muted group communication theory in the 1970s (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 668). Shirley Ardener, Edwin Ardener’s wife, is another well-known contributor to the theory. Edwin Ardener’s book *Perceiving Women* (1975) elaborates on the muted group theory in the first chapter, “Belief and the Problem of Women.” The idea greatly appealed to feminist groups at the time (Wall & Gannon-Leary, 1999, p. 21).

In *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* (2020), Shirley Ardener provides evidence from various studies to support the muted group theory (Wall & Gannon-Leary, 1999, p. 23). A significant excerpt of the book states that instead of ignoring the dominant group or merely tolerating its demands, members of muted groups may sometimes develop and maintain a

“policing” system to ensure their rights to express themselves without suppression are protected. However, this can appear as a disadvantage for them to onlookers (Ardener, 2020, p. 14).

### ***The Muted Group Theory Applied to Studies***

The muted group theory focuses on suppressed or marginalized groups. A recent 2023 study investigated online racism and sexism that led to a muted group of Nigerian women who use social media. After conducting online interviews with Nigerian women on Facebook to examine the manifestations, effects of, and strategies for navigating online misogyny, the study found that feminism quickly became a central motivating factor for online misogyny (Alichie, 2023, p. 1409). Consequently, women’s increasing online engagements were sparking incidents of misogyny that consciously served to limit women’s online voices and visibility (Alichie, 2023, p. 1409).

One study used the muted group theory to explore the muting of both male and female athletes, focusing on experiences of not reporting concussions sustained during athletic competitions. The researcher administered an online open-ended questionnaire and obtained information from 365 women and 247 men, examining their reasons for not reporting a concussion (Sanderson et al., 2017, p. 267). The study found that male athletes were likelier to continue to play through and not report a concussion than female athletes. The study also revealed that injuries were not reported because of a perceived lack of resources, perceived lack of severity, and conformance to sports cultural norms, which resulted in muted athletes not advocating for their health (Sanderson et al., 2017, p. 267).

A study of sexism in the workplace researched whether and how the feminine voice is muted in e-mails in organizations. The study utilized the approach and arguments of the muted group theory and reported that in e-mails, women’s voices are not merely marginalized but mute.

The study advised that women should use strategies to “unmute” themselves (Kissack, 2010, p. 539).

Muted groups are understood to also stem from cultural differences. One study examined mistreatment from the perspectives of employees with different cultural backgrounds and positions to better understand how some voices are muted while others are dominant (Meares et al., 2004, p. 4). A narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews with employees of an extensive research and development organization revealed that three types of muted narratives respond to mistreatment: muted but engaged, angrily disengaged, and resigned (Meares et al., 2004, p. 4).

The muted group theory covers racism, sexism, and suppression in sports. It continues to be a prevalent method of research in communication. Several studies not discussed in-depth in this study also used the muted group theory, for instance examining sex-trafficked victims and their barriers to effective communication and muted tendencies (Matzke-Fawcett, 2021, p. 2). The theory is especially relevant in studying the suppression of social media users by social media platforms through censorship.

### **Related Literature**

The following section reviews literature relevant to the historical development of human communication and technologies. The literature ensures that the research covers all historical shifts in communication technology. Moreover, it shows how and why social media got to where it is today and provides context for the answers given to the study's research questions.

### **Foundational Models of Human Communication**

Human communication, while complex, is often broken down into simplified models by scholars. These models of human communication break down the communication process and

create a broad understanding of how communication occurs between the sender and the receiver. Lasswell's and Shannon and Weaver's models of human communication are relevant to the study because each considers the medium used to communicate information.

### ***Lasswell's Model of Human Communication***

Harold Dwight Lasswell is known as one of the most influential political scientists of the 20th century (Weible et al., 2022, p. 212). Lasswell published his theory in *The Structure and The Shannon & Weaver Model*, a communication model developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949 (Ma, 2015, p. 393). The model thoroughly examines the information transmission process from a source to a receiver and the importance of reducing noise; it also proposes the concept of channel mediating information (Kubota, 2019, p. 55). Shannon's model describes an information source selecting a desired message from a set of possible messages that form a signal. The communication channel sends the signal to a receiver then transforms it back into a message relayed to its destination (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1963, p. 7).

Lasswell's model contains five elements ordered linearly: an information source, a transmitter, a channel of transmission, a receiver, and a destination. The model asks the "five Ws" of who is speaking, what the speaker is saying, what communication channel is utilized, who is receiving the message, and what the result is (Botirova, 2023, pp. 76–77). Overall, Lasswell's model provides context for the communication process on social media platforms. It is also essential to remember that while Lasswell's model of human communication offers a basic framework for understanding the core components of communication, it is a simplified and linear representation of a much more complex process.

### ***The Shannon-Weaver Model of Human Communication***

The Shannon-Weaver model of communication was developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949 (Ma, 2015, p. 393). The model thoroughly examines the information transmission process from a source to a receiver. The model is unique in reducing noise and proposing a channel mediating the proposed information (Kubota, 2019, p. 55).

Shannon's model discusses how an information source selects a desired message from a set of possible messages that form a signal. The signal is sent over the communication channel to a receiver, which then transforms it back into a message relayed to its destination (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1963, p. 7). The model describes signal processing as the transmitter "transforms" the message. The receiver then "transforms" the signal into a message (Al-Fedaghi, 2012, p. 55). Overall, the model can explain how online communication works on social media platforms and instant messaging, which is relevant to the present study on social media censorship.

### **The History of Human Communication Media**

Communication is a defining human characteristic (Calvó-Armengol et al., 2015, p. 649). Human communication is a means by which humans articulate ideas, thoughts, and feelings using communication channels (Regenbogen et al., 2012, p. 2346). A thorough grasp of the modern world's communication technology requires examining scholarly works that discuss its origin and history. Human communication is constantly developing because of the motive of the technique. A technique is a complex standardized means for attaining a predetermined result, and it is the motive, force, and foundation of the economy (Ellul et al., 1967, p. 149). Communication technology exists primarily to solve urgent societal problems (Postman, 2011, p. 24) because society has various needs that technological tools can solve.

### ***The Beginning of Written Communication***

Written communication did not begin with words but with symbols. Historians have found primeval Chinese images used to communicate information. Animal skins, bones, and palm leaves were also ancient artifacts that preserved writing and recorded information (Fang, 1997, p. 3). Today, anti-tech radicalism describes people who are against modern technological advancements (Fleming, 2022, p. 218). Much like the small rebellion among people skeptical of modern technology today, some tribes rebelled against writing because the tribal members saw it as a threat to the foundation of a culture built on oral literature (Fang, 1997, p. 11). However, others see the fruits of modernity and how society has benefited from it (McLuhan, 1999, p. 54).

### ***Verbal and Non-Verbal Forms of Communication***

Verbal and non-verbal communication are ways humans have communicated since the beginning of time. Verbal communication involves spoken words, either in person or using a communication device such as a phone or a radio. Non-verbal communication uses body language, such as facial expressions and eye contact (Kornilova et al., 2020, p. 21).

Verbal communication, also called “oral literature” by scholars, is the rawest and most straightforward means of communication. Ong refers to spoken words as the “primary orality” as it came before present-day technology, known as the “second orality” (Ong, 2002, p. 11). Both forms communicate a message to the receiver to convey meaning. While many find beauty and meaning in spoken words, and some scholars claim that it is the elite means of communicating (Ong, 2002, p. 100), the development of other modes of communication has provided new opportunities for humanity.

### ***Written Forms of Communication***

Written forms of communication include social media posts, digital newspapers, magazines, books, historical documents, and much more. Written communication creates possibilities not available through oral communication alone as it allows one to organize thoughts and communicate clearly and satisfies the need to retain valuable information (Fang, 1997, p. 1). Writing paved the way for further innovation (Fang, 1997, p. 1) and has improved society overall. For example, written documentation facilitates the implementation of the medication reconciliation process (Silvestre et al., 2017, p. 985).

### ***The Printing Press and the Preservation of Literature***

The printing press had an immense impact on social and institutional life and became the first mass medium in Europe (Kernan, 2021, p. 48). History shows that the Chinese used wooden blocks for presses beginning around 600 C.E. In 1446, Gutenberg invented the mobile metal-type printing press (Baran, 2014, p. 19). The printing press affected societies' knowledge of religion, making sacred scripture mass-produced and accessible (Soetaert & Soen, 2020, p. 141). The printing press preserved many great works, including the Bible and "Paradise Lost," and many great thinkers would not have been able to produce what they did without it (Kernan, 2021, p. 52).

### ***Television as a Cultural Force***

Digital forms of communication represent some of the most significant technological breakthroughs in communication media as the goal is to reach absolute efficiency in every field of human activity (Fasching, 1981, p. 5). Communication via social media is becoming the primary means of staying in contact with people one does not see frequently (Saud et al., 2020, p. 1). Digital communication has significantly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic affected



the United States. People who did not previously use digital communication had to adapt to work and stay in touch with friends and family (Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 5).

### ***The Telegraph Leads to Remote Communication***

“Telegraphy” is an ancient Greek word for “remote writing” (Garlinska et al., 2020, p. 2). The telegraph was invented in the 1840s and was made practical by Samuel Morse. Samuel Morse experimented with using electricity to communicate and improved upon the Chappe telegraph (Rady, M., 2022, p. 4). He sent the first message by telegraph in the United States on May 24, 1844, from Baltimore to Maryland (Miller, 2020, p. 470). The telegraph’s impact on society is similar to that of the printing press as they both increased the availability of knowledge and gave more people access to more information.

### ***Radio’s Early Influence and Propaganda***

In recounting the history of communication is complete, a mention of the social impact of radio, television, and broadcasting is necessary. Radio was and remains a powerful influence capable of creating societal changes and commercial profits (Mollgaard, 2011, p. 4). Radio has had such a strong influence over society that Nazi Germany used as part of its military tactics and strategy the promotion of radio propaganda as an integral element to influence the population and gain its support (Salata, 2020, p. 42).

### ***Television as a Cultural Force***

Television, a major cultural and economic force, consists of the electronic delivery of moving images and sound from a source to a receiver and came about in the middle of the 20th century (Fisher et al., 2023). Television presents the world from a different perspective and displays different worldviews in its content (Koleva, 2014, p. 828). Television has only grown in popularity since its release to the public in the United States. In 2018, studies showed that nearly

80% of the United States population watched TV every day, and it was considered a popular choice of leisure by many Americans (Krantz-Kent, R., 2018, p. 1).

Television has many positive influences, such as separating scientists and society (LaFollette, 2019, p. 219). However, early television programs also contributed to the war on racism. The show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* took an early and clear anti-racist stance in 1969 after it emerged that segregation was taking place at public swimming pools. In response, Mr. Rogers aired an episode where he invited his friend Mr. Clemmons, a Black man who played the neighborhood police officer, to his backyard and shared a wading pool with him (Serriere, 2019, p. 140). Television is a platform where many different worldviews are shared and often addresses controversial topics in its programs.

### **Scholars' Skepticism of Technological Advancement**

Scholars and philosophers warn against some of the negative consequences of technological advancement, especially if ethical issues surrounding it are dismissed. In his 2016 book *Presence in the Modern World: A New Translation*, Jacques Ellul called for society to stop technological development simply for the sake of improvement. He stated that a dangerous cycle forms when technology develops to keep current technology in check as it only creates a broken cycle when another solution is found (Ellul, 2016, p. 429). It is worth examining various worldviews by scholars on technology and the possible dangers it poses to society because this topic ties into the causes and effects of technology, including social media.

### ***Ong and Primary Orality***

In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong (2013, p. 11) argued that anything that is not raw oral communication (i.e., "primary orality") corresponds to secondary orality as the purest form of communication is lost. Even written communication is seen by Ong as a technological

advancement that regresses society. However, Ong acknowledges that written words allow one to organize thoughts and communicate effectively (Ong & Hartley, 2013, p. 40). Marshall McLuhan expressed a similar idea, stating that the written word (print aside) is a destabilizing force (McLuhan, 1999, p. 42). To summarize, philosophers view technological advancement as the beginning of a regression of society.

### ***Neil Postman on the Loss of Tradition in Culture***

Neil Postman discussed the dangers of free-rein technology and insightfully criticized technology's impact on culture and life. According to Postman, morality is affected when technological advancements go unchecked (Postman, 2011, p. 303). He wrote about "technocracy," which he defined as a society that is only loosely controlled by social custom and religious tradition and driven by the impulse to invent—an "unseen hand" that will eliminate the incompetent and reward those who produce cheaply and well the goods that people want (Postman, 2011, p. 41). He expands on the effects of modernism, which removes God from society and replaces it with technology, on mental health and argues that today's mental health issues are proven by cultural studies (Postman, 2011, p. 52).

### ***Marshall McLuhan on the Inward Turn of Man***

Marshall McLuhan also wrote about technological advancement and the effects of modern technology on individuals and society. He notably pondered the pros and cons of instant messaging (McLuhan, 1997, p. 54). For example, he sees the ability to evangelize using instant communication as a positive because this is the first time in history that the entire population of the planet can instantly and simultaneously have access to the Christian faith (McLuhan, 1997, p. 209). Still, McLuhan warns that modern technologies have caused people to turn inward (McLuhan, 1997, p. 208).

### ***Jacques Ellul and the End Goal of Technology***

Jacques Ellul's concern with technology focuses on the lack of moral assessment that comes with technological advancement. He argues that in the modern era, man develops technology without an end goal and that this is dangerous as there is no counterbalance to technology (Ellul, 2016, p. 303). According to Ellul, technology without restriction and moral assessment is unethical and dangerous to those within society (Ellul, 2016, p. 303).

### **The Beginning of the Internet and the World Wide Web**

The Internet is the foundational facilitator for online communication. The Internet is still a relatively new communication method as it emerged in the United States in the 1970s but only became available to the public in the early 1990s (Dennis et al., 2023). It has revolutionized communications and commerce methods, allowing users to connect around the world by removing the boundaries of location (Dennis et al., 2023).

The Internet has three primary capabilities: it can provide worldwide broadcasting; it is a mechanism for information dissemination; and it is a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers (Leiner et al., 1997, p. 2). Tim Berners-Lee, a British scientist, was a prime contributor to the Internet. Lee created a simple system of designated tags that determined how a document's content appears, called hypertext markup language (HTML). He also created the uniform resource locators (URL; Ashton, 2020, p. 597).

In addition, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989, profoundly impacting the Internet. Lee linked the CERN computer to the first WWW server and web browser, which went public in 1993 (Solanki, 2021, p. 258). The WWW is an information system in which documents, images, and other resources are identified with URLs and are accessible over the Internet through the hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP). Information

published on the WWW is accessed through software applications (web browsers) and published by other software applications (web servers; Ida, 2022, p. 87).

### **The Purpose of Social Media Platforms**

Social media is a popular method of instant online communication and a core mass communication tool, so much so that it is beginning to become the primary means by which United States adults follow the news. Indeed, beyond entertainment, social media platforms are also a communication tool for sharing information. Tarlton Gillespie describes social media platforms as a mediator rather than an intermediary because they shape the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). Social media platforms are distinct in that they have different designs and are used to facilitate different types of communication.

Social media is a popular method of instant online communication and a core mass communication tool, so much so that it is beginning to become the primary means by which United States adults follow the news. Approximately 53% of United States adults get their news from social media “often” or “sometimes,” and this use is spread out across several different sites (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021, p. 4). Other research shows that the number of United States citizens who use social media as their primary source of news increased from 27% in 2013 to 42% in 2021 (Newman et al, 2021, p. 112).

Journalists also use social media to source and verify news stories (Shearer & Grieco, 2019, p. 1193). However, some scholars argue that the use of social media for news is closely linked to the increase in news mistrust (Park et al., 2020, p. 83). It is therefore essential to consider social media as more than socializing with friends and family online; it is also a means through which people learn about the world around them.

### ***Social Media Platforms from 2010 to 2019***

Today's staple social media platforms emerged between 2010 and 2019. Each platform puts a new twist on what users can do. Notable media platforms that gained popularity are Instagram and Pinterest (2010; Andreeva, 2021, p. 6), Snapchat (2011), and TikTok (2017). A new feature that made Instagram unique is photo and video sharing (Okunev, 2022, p. 33). On TikTok, the short video posts changed how social media platforms function in society. Society found that it had to adapt to modern technology to facilitate users' creative abilities and followers' wishes (Hillyer, 2020).

### ***Social Media Platforms from 2020 to 2023***

#### **Virtual Reality and Facebook's Metaverse**

Social media functions have evolved, and their appeal to young adults has only grown. The degree to which social media has changed in a short period is astounding. Social media users can now experience virtual and augmented reality, such as with Facebook's "Metaverse." "Meta" refers to beyond, transcendence, or virtuality, and "verse" to a universe or world that denotes a virtual reality space (Iwanaga et al., 2023, p. 77). Virtual reality (VR) and other immersive media, such as augmented reality (AR), generate unique illusions that are not possible with other media (Slater, 2022, p. 2).

Facebook's Metaverse is a set of virtual spaces where users can interact with others in a different physical space (Bosworth, 2021). This experience is unique because VR provides an experience that imitates the real world, or some aspects of it, using specialized software and hardware (Cavusoglu et al., 2019, p. 680). VR can also incorporate gaming systems that offer challenges and goal-oriented interaction to participants (pp. 680–681).

### **The Emergence of Artificial Intelligence**

Artificial intelligence (AI) has attracted attention from governments, industries, and academia (Zhang & Lu, 2021, p. 1). People use AI for knowledge processing, pattern recognition, machine learning, and natural language processing. AI requires logical thinking and imitation; however, studies have found that emotion is also an indispensable part of AI, creating fear that its abilities will surpass those of humans (Zhang & Lu, 2021, p. 7).

Social media platforms now use AI for customer service automation, content generation, chatbots, sentiment analysis, and data collection (Biswas, 2023, p. 1). ChatGPT is one example of a social media platform that utilizes powerful AI technology. ChatGPT employs social bots that mimic human behavior on social media platforms (Ferrara, 2023, p. 2). ChatGPT is trained on hundreds of billions of words and can imitate humans to create human-aligned responses that fit a topic of conversation (Ferrara, 2023, p. 2).

AI is still a new concept; many are only discovering the power of this technology. Approximately six in 10 United States adults (58%) are familiar with ChatGPT, though relatively few have tried it; young adults are also more likely to have tried it than older ones (Vogels, 2023). AI is becoming a growing concern in education. Many teachers find that students use software like ChatGPT to write their essays, resulting in plagiarism (Khalil & Er, 2023, p. 1).

### **Parler and Truth Social Take a Stand Against Censorship**

There is a tremendous social movement due to the politically fueled debate about censorship on social media platforms. This debate and the vigorous enforcement of censorship procedures by specific platforms have led to the emergence of new media platforms. These platforms advocate for freedom of speech and stand against censorship on social media

platforms. Parler and Truth Social are two social media platforms that appeared to give people online the freedom to post content without fear of censorship.

Parler is one of several new platforms presenting as an alternative to more established platforms (Blazina & Stocking, 2023). Parler began in 2018 and gained popularity in January 2021 when it was the most downloaded app in the News category of the App Store. Parler presented itself as a solution to problems that surfaced due to changes in Big Tech companies' policies due to various special interest groups. The platform claims to value respect for privacy and personal data, free speech, free markets, and an ethical and transparent corporate policy (Parler, 2023).

According to others, Parler is an extreme right-wing social media platform that gained popularity due to President Trump's presidency (Newhous, 2021). However, following the storming of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, Amazon, Google, and Apple withdrew the platform's web hosting services and banned the application from their stores (2021). After Parler made a handful of changes to comply with Apple and Google apps, it became available again (Parler, 2022).

Truth Social is a recent social media platform launched in February 2022 by former United States president Donald Trump. The platform was called the "right-wing echo chamber" by Tesla's chief operating officer (CEO) Elon Musk (Akhtar, 2022). Donald Trump's motive for starting the platform is believed to relate to Facebook and Twitter (Forman-Katz & Stocking, 2023). Truth Social states that it encourages an open, accessible, and honest global conversation without discrimination based on political ideology (Truth Social, 2023).



### **Twitter's Change of Ownership**

People of high status and power are beginning to experience censorship, causing them to react. On October 27, 2022, Elon Musk purchased Twitter, becoming its new CEO and firing many top executives in the process. Some of the changes made included fewer restrictions on content moderation and the removal of spam bots, among his goals for the platform (Hickey et al., 2023, p. 1133). A few changes of note are the reinstatement of banned accounts of other people of high social status and wealth, including former president Donald Trump, the rapper Kanye West, and influencer Andrew Tate. Musk also changed the Twitter verification process and laid off half of Twitter's staff (Kleinman, 2023). The departure of so many employees raised questions about how the platform could enforce its policies against harmful misinformation, hate speech, and threats of violence (Matt O'Brien, 2022).

### ***Social Media Use in the United States Today***

Dentzel (2013, p. 240) argues that the Internet is now the preferred medium of everyday communication and that it has a strong influence on an entire generation. Dentzel's work titled *Internet Has Changed Everyday Life* emphasizes this point:

Out of all the plethora of communication opportunities that the Internet has opened, I would highlight the emergence of social media and the way it has intricately melded into our daily lives. Social media have changed our personal space, altering the way we interact with our loved ones, our friends, and our sexual partners; they have forced us to rethink even basic daily processes like studying and shopping; they have affected the economy by nurturing the business startup culture and electronic commerce; they have even given us new ways to form broad-based political movements. (Dentzel, 2013, p. 243)

Detzel believes that the effects of the Internet are almost inescapable for the average person in the world today.

The use of social media also evolved as it became a primary means for United States adults to follow the news. Adults under 30 years old in the United States now trust information from social media almost as much as national news outlets (Liedke, 2022). Scholars even argue that the use of social media for news is closely linked to the increase in news mistrust (Park et al., 2020, p. 83). According to the Pew Research Center, in 2021, most United States adults got their news from social media. Approximately 31% of United States adults obtain their news from Facebook, and a quarter regularly get news from YouTube (Matsa & Liedke, 2022). As Journalists also use social media to source and verify news stories (Shearer et al., 2019, p. 1193), it is crucial to consider that social media is now more than online social platforms: it is also a means by which people learn about the world around them.

Internet use has skyrocketed over the last few years, and recent statistics are staggering. Research has shown that social media has a strong and constant influence on society, primarily because of its mass outreach given that online mass communication is now an essential aspect of everyday life. It has also drastically changed how individuals communicate over the last three decades (Wong et al., 2021, p. 255). Even careers are heavily reliant on technology today. Civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century relies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) to perform essential duties in everyday life. More than mere entertainment, communication technology is necessary for travel, work, and education. In addition, long-distance communication between friends, family, co-workers, and even strangers is possible thanks to CMC (Soto Herrera, 2018, p. 4).

In January 2022, 92% of the United States population used the Internet, representing 307.2 million Internet users (Kemp, 2022). A 2023 study reported 311.3 million Internet users in the United States and 246.0 million social media users in January 2023. These numbers amount to 72.5% of the total population of the United States (Kemp, 2023). Additionally, most Americans use YouTube and Facebook, and adults under 30 years old are more inclined to use Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Auxier, 2021, p. 1).

Concerns continue to rise with growing Internet use among teenagers. A 2023 study shows that more than half of United States teenagers say that it would be difficult for them to give up social media. Further, over 36% of teenagers admit to spending too much time on social media. These numbers may not be surprising, considering a 2022 study that revealed that 95% of teenagers from 13 to 17 years of age had used YouTube before (Vogels et al., 2023).

### **The Influence of Modern Technology on Humans**

The influence of modern technology is significant and is frequently mentioned by modern scholars. Dentzel (2013) argues that the Internet now impacts entire generations as it is the preferred medium of everyday communication. He emphasizes that the Internet has completely transformed how humans communicate and has rewired society to rely on it daily (p. 243).

### **The Effect of Instant Communication on Culture**

The youth of today has only experienced a world with modern technology and instant communication (Kucirkova, 2021, p. 1). People use technology for work, school, dating, and day-to-day tasks such as traveling. Technology allows humans to influence and communicate (Abroms, 2008, p. 219). The Internet has revolutionized communication, and modern technology shapes today's society (Allen, 2014, p. 323). Experiences define each generation, and shared experience defines viewpoints and shared values (Duffy, 2013, p. 3). Technology allows humans

to influence others and communicate at a rate beyond what was ever thought possible (Abroms, 2008, p. 219). Social media plays a significant part in influencing the viewpoints and shared values of the next generation of leaders. Thus, mass communication can promote beneficial behavior changes among populations; social media is sometimes used as a tool for outreach because it provides the ability to communicate information to a target audience.

Social media is sometimes used for outreach because it communicates information to a target audience (Smolak Lozano et al., 2020, p. 176). Media platforms constantly influence how users view the world, and online marketing affects brand preferences (Badaoui et al., 2012, p. 2). Ads on social media stimulate the process of ordering something online that one would not have ordered otherwise (Deshwal, 2016, p. 200). Marketing is just one example of people using the influence of technology to their advantage. Further, public relations strategies that utilize mass communication are proven to have greater success because of social media's mass outreach (Smolak Lozano et al., 2020, p. 176).

### ***The Negative Consequences of Social Media***

Online communication is widely perceived by the public as a societal boon due to its contributions to social connectivity, active participation, information acquisition, and entertainment (Khan, 2014, p. 606). However, a contrasting viewpoint contends that online communication poses threats to society in terms of social risks, time consumption, psychological impact, and privacy issues (p. 606). The escalating influence of social media has catalyzed numerous transformations, inevitably accompanied by challenges. A notable challenge is the struggle to establish consensus on what constitutes acceptable content on platforms and who should oversee this determination: the government, platform creators, or the users themselves (Hooker, 2019, p. 36).

### ***Online Sexual Content and Pornography***

As the media evolves, pornography has become increasingly popular, with effects on society. New forms of digital communication have made it easier to share explicit images and bypass consent. Half of parents in the United States worry about their children's exposure to sexual content—with good reason given that one-quarter of teens say they have received unwanted explicit images, and 7% claim that someone has shared explicit images of them without their consent (Anderson, 2018, p. 3).

### ***Behavioral Health Concerns Linked to the Internet***

It is useful to consider how people are affected by what they see and hear online due to the mass outreach of social media platforms that continue to grow as social media influences exposure and outcomes (Rubin & Perse, 2020, p. 37). Although the Internet has immense potential in psychiatric education, clinical care, and research, its impact on social issues should not be underestimated (Lloyd et al., 2014, p. 340). Mental health is one of the many concerns linked to social media use (Arrazy, 2021, p. 12). Petitions for greater regulation of online content stem from incidents of self-harm and suicide believed to be due to social media influence (Brennan et al., 2022, p. 1746).

Studies show that the Internet may encourage suicidal behavior (Alao et al., 2006, p. 489). Further, nine in 10 Americans say that online harassment or bullying is a problem, and many Americans have had their own experience with being a target online (Vogels, 2021). Cyberbullying and addictive behavior are examples of the negative impact of social media use that can lead to suicidal thoughts (Arrazy, 2021, p. 7). According to the findings of a report by Arrazy (2021, p. 12), there is a connection between cyberbullying and Internet addiction and an increased risk of suicide or suicidal behavior among teenagers due to social media access.

### **The Link Between Social Media Use and Depression and Suicide**

Reports show that in 2021, suicide was the 11<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the United States. Further, between 2001 and 2021, suicide rates increased most years for males and females (Garnett & Curtin, 2023, p. 1). Some link the rise in suicide to social media use (Twenge, 2020, p. 19). There are calls for greater regulation of online content related to self-harm and suicide, particularly that which is user-generated (Brennan et al., 2022, p. 5729).

Studies that look at social media's influence on humans regarding suicide tend to also focus on suicide prevention efforts. Since the Internet is understood to be influential, especially among young adults and children, prevention measures are not taking place online, and studies show that online programs provide an effective means to improve engagement in suicide prevention programs (Black et al., 2023, p. 769). Research found that many suicide survivors use social media as an outlet to address their grief and pain publicly. Therefore, suicide prevention measures can target individuals who display suicide ideation online (Perusse, 2021, p. 2). Online screening machines predict that people who post specific online struggle with mental health (Jacobson et al., 2020, p. 276). These tools can predict future suicidal behaviors based on past content (Jacobson et al., 2020, p. 280).

### **The Rise in Internet Addiction**

The influence of social media on brain structure and functioning remains a central topic of investigation. Some studies even go so far as to claim that the Internet changes cognition (Firth, 2019, p. 119) and is linked with decreased verbal intelligence at follow-up, along with impeded maturation of both grey and white matter regions of the brain (Firth, 2019, p. 126). Overall, research shows that digitalization in society has generated a moderate-high addiction to social networks among the young adult population (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2022, p. 8).

Those who suffer from Internet addiction exhibit increased levels of depression and anxiety (Morrison & Gore, 2010, p. 121). Researchers studied pathological and uncontrolled Internet use and later mental health problems in 1,041 teenage students in China and found that young people who use the Internet pathologically are the most at risk for mental problems and develop depression if they continue the behavior (Lam & Peng, 2010, p. 906).

Greenfield recently conducted studies proving that social media companies that exploit human psychological weaknesses cause Internet addiction. A study published in 2022 reviews etiologic and neurobiological antecedents to Internet and video game addiction (Greenfield, 2022, p. 99). The author writes that addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory, and related circuitry and that dysfunction in these circuits reflects an individual pathologically pursuing reward and relief by substance use and other behaviors, including video games (Greenfield, 2022, p. 100).

A documentary released on Netflix in 2020 titled *The Social Dilemma* provides insight into social media companies creating internet addiction among users for profit (Orlowski, 2020). The documentary crew interviewed executives and programmers who left social media sites such as Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Their reasons vary, but all stem from ethical concerns. Some programmers speak about how social media companies create Internet abdication algorithms for profit (McDavid, 2020, p. 1).

Muller wrote his thesis on technology addiction. His paper titled *A Creative Multimodality Approach to Technology Addiction Treatments* identifies the cause of Internet addiction as intentional manipulation by greedy social media companies:

In the short history of interactive technology design, companies have studied human behavior, creating platforms and games that cater to users' creativity and exploit their

psychological vulnerabilities. Essential to the treatment of technology addiction is how the Internet offers the traumatized or fragmented person a dissociative space in which to live through a virtual persona or avatar in the attempt to avoid pain, consequence, or stress in following but failing to fulfill the inherent human desire to for embodied connection with others. (Muller, p. 50, 2021)

The adverse effects of nonregulated social media occur organically; however, companies purposefully design social media functions for profit with little regard for users' well-being.

### ***Social Media Utilized for Social Change Campaigns***

Public campaigns often utilize social media ads to promote positive behavioral changes, such as modifying how people view the flu vaccine (Bonnevie et al., 2020, p. 1). "The Truth," a campaign funded by the National Public Health Organization, provides facts about smoking, vaping, opioids, and tobacco to discourage product use (The Truth, 2022). The *Journal of Adolescent Health* published a study showing the success of these campaigns as teens and young adults who saw the ads strengthened their anti-smoking attitudes and increased their support for the social movement (Hair et al., 2018, p. 1).

A movement in Montana that used social media as the medium for its message is another example of a successful online campaign to promote positive behaviors and eradicate damaging ones. The campaign utilized social media to correct normative misperceptions and reduce the prevalence of drinking and driving. The study's target audience was 21- to 34-year-olds (Perkins et al., 2010, p. 866). The study found that the social norms media campaign successfully exposed the targeted population to social norms messages in the counties of the intervention region (Perkins et al., 2010, p. 866). The overall outreach effectively changed drinking-related behaviors among the target audience.



Mass communication promotes beneficial changes in behavior among the population, and public relations strategies in social media seem to have a high degree of effectiveness (Smolak Lozano et al., 2020, p. 176). Some public campaigns use social media ads to promote positive behavioral changes. For example, the “Truth” campaign provides facts on smoking, vaping, opioids, and tobacco to discourage product use. The National Public Health Organization funds these campaigns (The Truth, 2022). In addition, the *Journal of Adolescent Health* published a study of successful campaigns, which found that teens and young adults who viewed the ads strengthened their anti-smoking attitudes and increased their support for the social movement (Hair et al., 2018, p. 1).

### **The Start of Cancel Culture**

In recent history, cancel culture has gained wind in the United States. Some argue that cancel culture grew out of “online shaming” (Laidlaw, 2017, p. 3), driven by the “calling out” of those deemed to have acted or spoken in a controversial manner (Bromwich, 2018, p. 28). It applies political correctness or self-policing of “wrong, oppressive, or inappropriate” opinions (Lee, 2017, p. 60). One interpretation of cancel culture is that it celebrates minority voices while constraining conservatives with what liberal voices consider politically incorrect discourse (Duque et al., 2021, p. 11). A Pew Research Center study from July 2021 shows that about two-thirds of United States adults believe that “people being too easily offended” is a problem in the country today, while 53% say that “people saying offensive things to others” is a problem (Doherty et al., 2021, p. 86).

Cancel culture is described as a fluid, shapeshifting, diverse ethos that grew out of “online shaming” and is driven by the “calling out” or “boycott” movement (Duque et al., 2021, p. 11). Cancel culture calls out behaviors and actions of individuals and corporations that convey

opinions or feelings that are objectively questionable or inappropriate from a public perspective, and engaging in cancel culture typically requires a series of hashtags that proclaim that an individual is being canceled online (Meesala, 2020). It is believed that cancel culture came about initially to target celebrities who acted or spoke questionably or controversially (Bromwich, 2018).

Cancel culture is essentially online public shaming (Pearson, 2021, p. 2), also referred to as “call-out culture,” which is an increased social tendency for public denunciations of a person’s character, acts, or behaviors (Pearson, 2021, p. 11). Those who have shown disapproval for cancel culture express concern for its tendency to increase “justified” online bullying. It is also believed to incite violence and threats that are arguably more severe than the original offense, which is counterintuitive (Duque et al., 2021, pp. 12–13).

### **History of the Censorship of Mass Communications**

Censorship existed before online communication and even before the popularization of written documents. An example of verbal censorship in history is the execution of Socrates, a philosopher who lived in Athens between 469 and 399 BC (Socrates, 1996). According to many, Socrates’s execution had a significant impact on Western culture (Wilson, 2007, p. 1). Socrates was put to death because his beliefs contradicted those of the Greco-Romans (Wilson, 2007, p. 1). His executioners justified the sentence by his refusal to honor Athenian gods and his corrupting the young. However, this was not the true motive of his execution, which was more political. It was found that Socrates made enemies and was condemned based on his philosophy and teachings as he refused to stop teaching the youth how to challenge their beliefs and the laws of Athens (Bowles, 2007, p. 25).

Socrates challenged cultural philosophies and practices and encouraged the Greeks to think for themselves. He is known for his Socratic teaching method, which involved conveying knowledge and asking questions after clarifying questions until his students understood (Socrates, 1996) and answered questions based on the responses (Bowles, 2007, p. 20). Socrates's execution is one of the earlier recorded instances of forced censorship by a government.

Books are not immune to censorship either, as even the term *libricide* is used to describe the destruction and burning of books (Duthie, 2010, p. 91). The Council of Trent marked the first attempt by the Catholic Church to censor books. The council formulated rules for printing, selling, and censoring books. The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1564) lists the books that have been forbidden by the Catholic Church (Lenard, 2006, p. 313) because of the danger they posed to the faith or morals of Roman Catholics. However, the publication of the list ceased in 1966 (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, 1998).

Scholarly studies attempt to identify social media threats to prevent the consequences of media censorship. For example, Bradshaw and Howard (2018, p. 23) wrote in the "Global Organization of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns" that governments and political parties spend excessive resources and time manipulating public opinion on media platforms. They added that the intent is to generate content, direct public attention, and manipulate the opinion of foreign and domestic audiences (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 24), which will shape the outcomes of elections, disrupt diplomatic efforts, and undermine peacebuilding efforts (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 29). Media censorship is seen as harmful to society because it can strip citizens of their innate human right to freedom of speech.

Social media is not the first mass communication medium censored by the United States government. One of the first such instances was during the Civil War, in 1861, when Postmaster General Blair ordered all postal business to halt in the Confederate states to influence the South with propaganda via northern newspapers (Fowler, 1861). Later, the government made a “public interest” mandate with the Radio Act of 1927 (Hazlett, 2020, p. 17), enforced by the United States Supreme Court, and the Federal Communications Act of 1934 (Shepperd, 2020, p. 244) helped establish orders and guidelines. Government participation in mass communication is familiar in the United States, as proven by history.

### **Laws on Mass Communication Censorship Around the World**

Governments around the world have censored mass communication content throughout history. Governments have also adopted a vast range of technologies to censor information on the Internet (Roberts, 2020, p. 403). Scholars recount that throughout history, governing entities have purposely distorted or censored different forms of communication because doing so would protect individuals within society (Zannettou et al., 2019, pp. 1–2). Countries continue to engage in government regulation of social media platforms worldwide, and each applies different rules regarding social media censorship. While Japan has little involvement with internet censorship, as materials containing extreme violence and even child pornography, for instance, appear relatively easy to access in the country (Zhong, p. 697-711, 2020), other countries like China take a more extreme approach. Overall, the spectrum of government involvement with social media censorship varies.

#### **India's Attempt to Control Social Media Content**

Studies conducted on social media censorship in India found that the government participates in extreme censorship and that the methods are proven effective (Rahul &

DineshBabu, 2021, p. 11166). Although there is no specific legislation in India that deals with social media, several so-called “cyber laws” (Tiwari & Ghosh, 2014, p. 8) affect social media users, and some feel that it threatens Indian citizens’ freedom of speech (Tiwari & Ghosh, 2014, p. 13).

News reporter Heather Timmons shed light on the extent to which the Indian government is involved with censorship practices. Timmons claimed that the Indian government asked Internet companies and social media sites, such as Facebook, to prescreen user content from India. Timmons further stated that the government requested that these companies remove disparaging, inflammatory, or defamatory content before it goes online (Rajkhowa, 2015, p. 871). Google reported denying the request because of its inability to fulfill it and hesitation related to ethical concerns (p. 871).

### **China’s Approach to Media Censorship**

Internet censorship mechanisms in China are highly dynamic (Tai & Fu, 2020, p. 842). According to Pan (2017), some communist countries use technology to manipulate information on social media to control public opinion and gain favor. For this reason, the Chinese and North Korea each limit what their citizens can see and do on the Internet (Pan, 2017, p. 182).

The Chinese government relies on private companies to implement content controls while also utilizing public punishment to repress social media users (Ruan et al., 2021, p. 133). Social media firms in China allow the Chinese government to engage in censorship through content removal (Pan, 2017, p. 167). China’s domestic firms comply with the Chinese government’s censorship requirements, allowing the regime to censor content (Pan, 2017, p. 182). An example of censorship tactics is that the government censor's media platforms by deleting posts using

keywords and select users that are censored, deleted, or blocked from the public's eye for political reasons (Zhao, 2017, p. 74).

### **The History of Social Media Censorship**

Now that the history of the censorship of mass communication is understood, it is fitting to review what social media censorship is and why it is a controversial topic in the United States. Social media censorship is the suppression or prohibition (Anastaplo, 2020) of forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personalized messages, and other content (e.g., videos; Edosomwan et al., 2011, p. 79).

It is important to note that although censorship is “an enduring feature of all human communities,” the concept is fluid, and a legal definition is almost impossible to attain (Duthie, 2010, p. 86). In addition, each social media platform implements censorship practices differently. The terms of service of each company reflect that company's product and community. For instance, the terms of service for Google Search, Google's leading search engine, differ from those for Google's YouTube (Ammori, 2014, p. 2273).

The literature in Chapter Two established that censorship concerns all forms of mass communication. Social media censorship is a recent concern given that social media is a newer form of mass communication. Internet content regulation is like “nailing Jell-O to a wall” due to rapid technological changes that quickly outpace mechanisms for censorship (Persily & Tucker, 2020, p. 200). Two popular methods are identifying objectionable content with algorithm detection and flagging posts containing specific language. Platform users can also report posts that violate community standards (Crawford et al., 2016, p. 410).

Recent studies seek to understand what media censorship is, the ethical concerns that come with it, and its effects on society. There are a variety of positions on social media censorship. For example, some Americans believe that social media companies favor some news organizations over others, and approximately 82% of United States adults say that social media sites treat some news organizations differently from others (Shearer & Grieco, 2019, p. 3). Further, some United States citizens believe that social media companies have too much control over what is shown (Shearer & Grieco, 2019, p. 1). Other studies have found that users self-censored because they did not find any benefit in sharing unpopular opinions as a result of seeing others share unpopular opinions and get rebuked in the comments (Powers et al., 2019, p. 3630).

#### ***Private Policy and Terms and Conditions on Social Media Platforms***

Studies report that some find that organizations' social media guidelines hinder rather than enable employees' free speech rights (Stohl et al., 2017, p. 427). A privacy policy is different from terms and conditions; however, both are legally binding agreements that social media platforms use to enforce censorship. Privacy policies are understood to seek to promote consumer choice and reduce the risks of disclosing personal information online. For their part, terms and conditions define the relationship between social media companies and users (Milne et al., 2004, p. 15). The terms and conditions of a social media platform must be followed (Schneble et al., 2021, p. 1).

Unfortunately, studies find that users often do not read the privacy policies when creating an account (Steinfeld, 2016, p. 995). Legal agreements are usually extended and written in complex language; the terms and conditions are often too long and difficult to understand, especially for younger users (Schneble et al., 2021, p. 10). A study on whether users read online policies before agreeing showed that only 20.3% of the participants clicked the link to read the

procedure, and 79.7% agreed to the terms without clicking the link to read the policy (Steinfeld, 2016, p. 995).

Those who read the policies and are made aware of the conditions later often show significant dissatisfaction with current practices and policies enforced by social media platforms (Custers et al., 2014, p. 291). In addition, a study by Custers et al. (2014, p. 291) found a significant disconnect between users and data controllers concerning expectations of consent and privacy because data controllers focus simply on complying with all existing legislation rather than on users' needs, interests, and preferences. The disconnect and dysfunction of these media policies could be attributed to the fact that social media platforms often write policies out of sheer necessity due to legal obligations (Schneble et al., 2021, p. 10).

### ***Arguments in Favor of Social Media Censorship***

People sometimes argue in favor of social media platform censorship, and social media platforms sometimes justify censorship tactics by arguing that the intent is to protect users from harm caused by certain types of content. Facebook communicated its intent to protect users in its guidelines (*Facebook Community Standards*, 2021). Along with other platforms, Facebook states the types of violations that it intends to censor, including violent and criminal behavior, content that harms the user's safety, objectionable content, violations related to integrity and authenticity, cybersecurity threats, and manipulated media (*Facebook Community Standards*, 2021). The intent outlined is to serve the greater good of the people, but it has yet to be proven.

Social media platforms use the community guidelines/standards published on their United States websites in June–August 2021 to guide regulated social media content (Singhal et al., 2023, p. 875). A 2023 study categorized the themes of content requiring censorship in these guidelines. The categories included adult nudity and sexual content, bots or automation, child



sexual exploitation, defamation, fake engagement, fraud or impersonation, spam, harassment and bullying, hate speech, human trafficking, illegal activities, misinformation, glorification of self-harm, and terrorism (Singhal et al., 2023, pp. 875–876). These do not exhaust the list but cover the majority of the categories listed.

### **Behavioral Health Concerns Linked to Social Media Use**

The mental health of social media users is a widespread concern regarding uncensored social media (Arrazy, 2021, p. 12). Studies show that the Internet may encourage suicidal behavior (Alao et al., 2006, p. 489). Nine in 10 Americans say that harassment or bullying online is a problem, and many have personally experienced being a target online (Vogels, 2021, p. 6). Cyberbullying and addictive behavior are also examples of the negative effects of social media use that lead to suicidal thoughts (Arrazy, 2021, p. 7). According to research, there is a connection between cyberbullying and Internet addiction and an increased risk of suicide or suicidal behavior among teenagers due to social media access (Arrazy, 2021, p. 12).

Suicide prevention outreach is ongoing, and studies attempt to evaluate the success of online suicide prevention measures. Research has found that many suicide survivors publicly use social media to address their grief and pain; therefore, suicide prevention measures can target those individuals (Perusse, 2021, p. 2). Online screening machines learn what people post online and can predict later searches with mental health self-references (Jacobson et al., 2020, p. 276); these tools have been found to be effective at predicting future suicidal behaviors based on past content (Jacobson et al., 2020, p. 280). This only scratches the surface of the power of online suicide prevention.

### **Online Harassment on Social Media**

There are benefits to instant, online communication on social media platforms as it allows people to learn and interact with different communities and cultures. Social media also promotes diversity and acceptance of other ways of life, economic growth and new jobs, political interest, democratic progress, and education (Studen & Tiberius, 2020, p. 7). Nevertheless, there are instances of media censorship harming society, and studies attempt to uncover threats to prevent these dangers in the future (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 23). Prior research on third-person effects has shown that people who believe in the harmful effects of the media are more willing to engage in preventive or accommodative strategies, such as censorship (Sherrick, 2016, p. 919).

There are many reasons why users and governments advocate for social media censorship, and mental health concerns are among the main ones. Studies of mental illness related to the media are diverse and extensive. They have produced varied and sometimes contradictory findings on how the media affects users. Social media can cause mental health problems among young adults, from body image issues to depression and social isolation (LaRoe, 2018, p. 43). Studies indicate that social media can influence an individual's mental health and well-being (Studen & Tiberius, 2020, p. 7). In particular, social media can cause depression, isolation and loneliness, negative body images, self-centeredness, and narcissism. Additionally, users' attention spans can decrease (Studen & Tiberius, 2020, p. 12). Studies have also demonstrated that heavy media use leads to conditions often associated with unhappiness and depression (Fang, 1997, p. 141).

Coyne's 8-year study on whether social media impacts mental health found that time spent using social media was not related to individual changes in depression or anxiety (Coyne et al., 2020, p. 106160). Yet, other studies suggest that social media directly affects audiences and

that many research gaps remain regarding its indirect effects, which require scholarly attention (Chung & Moon, 2016, p. 332).

Online harassment can lead to emotional distress, self-harm, and suicide among users (Islam et al., 2020, p. 292). However, online harassment is sometimes challenging to filter because of the inability to reach a consensus on which actions cross a line and which do not (Jhaver et al., 2017, p. 3). In addition, there is complex disagreement about what constitutes “harassment” and where to draw the line between freedom of expression and censorship (Jhaver et al., 2017, p. 1). There is a push to censor online harassment content, as one study concluded that media platforms should censor and monitor harassment and offensive behavior and provide mechanisms for users to report behavior that causes emotional distress (Henry & Powell, 2016, p. 397).

### **Cyberbullying and Hate Speech on Social Media**

Ruddock (2017, p. 27) writes that cyberbullying is an unstoppable force that perplexes governments, businesses, and families. One study found that the cyberbully-victim group displays the highest levels of depressive symptoms, the lowest family support, and the highest levels of anxiety symptoms (Helfeldt, 2020, p. 1). Research has shown the damaging effects of cyberbullying, which is linked to higher suicide rates among high school students (Dorol & Mishara, 2021, p. 152) because it causes mental health issues that can lead to suicide (LaRoe, 2018, p. 43). The study discovered ways to prevent incidents such as these from occurring in the future, including by providing support groups and stress management classes.

Hate speech may occur in any form of expression, including text, images, and video (Guo & Johnson, 2020, p. 2). Due to the difficulty of agreeing on what constitutes hate speech, censoring it on social media platforms is difficult (Ullmann & Tomalin, 2019, p. 69). Further, the

automatic detection of online hate speech and offensive language has become a topic of active research in the field of machine learning (Ullmann & Tomalin, 2019, p. 69). Companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google take a stand against hate speech by removing offensive content once it has been posted. However, these companies face criticism because users see these posts before their removal given that users must report them first. Therefore, the posts still have the potential to cause psychological harm to users (Ullmann & Tomalin, 2019, p. 69).

### **Censoring Explicit and Violent Social Media Content**

Social media users share billions of images across different platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) daily. As informative and socially engaging as the Internet can be, it is also notoriously a medium for distributing materials that are considered objectionable and harmful (Duthie, 2010, p. 88). Such images sometimes depict events of extreme violence, which circulate uninhibited by the conventional constraints associated with traditional news media censorship (Duncombe, 2020, p. 609).

An academic journal addressed the unethical practice of journalism and the need for censorship of extreme imagery depicting violence, such as photos of dead bodies. Clay (2011, p. 121) used an image of an execution in 1928 as an example because it was featured on the front page of the news (Clay, 2011, p. 121). The concern regarding allowing the public to see these explicit images is that they may “haunt sensitive readers for the rest of their lives” (Hauptman, 2012, p. 1).

### **Online Sexual Content on Social Media Platforms**

Justifications for censorship sometimes relate to sexual content. Social media community guidelines on what is permissible on a platform in terms of sexual content vary. Policies on Research (2021) claims that the United States is one of the countries where social media

platforms tend to censor sexual speech—this is particularly the case for Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, from which content and performers may suddenly vanish (Tusikov, 2021, p. 64). OnlyFans is a social media platform with a controversial reputation due to its known connection to heavy sexual content, with users paying to view a creator's content (Bella & Beachum, 2021). Although it did not start this way, the site is now used primarily by sex workers to share and sell their content. However, there are currently limitations to what is permissible on social media platforms in the United States and content that pertains to minors. Bhalerao and McCoy (2022, p. 7) found that social media content that depicts, promotes, or glorifies sexual solicitation in the United States is often banned.

The Communications Decency Act (CDA) was passed by Congress in 1996. The CDA imposed criminal sanctions on anyone who:

Knowingly (A) uses an interactive computer service to send to a specific person or persons under 18 years of age, or (B) uses any interactive computer service to display in a manner available to a person under 18 years of age, any comment, request, suggestion, proposal, image, or other communication that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organs. (CDA 1996, Sec. 502)

The CDA marked Congress's first attempt to regulate pornography on the internet (Steele, 2020, p. 15).

### **The Beginning of Fake News and its Effects**

There are many real examples of harm caused by misinformation spreading on social media, from dangerous health decisions to stock market manipulations (Shao et al., 2017, p. 1). Even political satire has been mistaken as truth when users reading titles do not immediately

detect sarcasm and humor. The significant amount of misinformation circulating online and the harm it causes is so evident that a term exists to describe this type of content found on social media: “fake news.”

Fake news is fabricated information that mimics news media content in form, not in organizational process or intent (Lazer et al., 2020, p. 1094). Fake news articles are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2020, p. 213). The sharing of fake news on social media platforms is a global concern as it generates mistrust and exacerbates social and cultural dynamics by misusing political, regional, and religious undercurrents (Talwar et al., 2020, p. 1). Half of Americans think that made-up news and information are a critical problem for the country (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 11). People accuse Facebook and Twitter of spreading fake news (Lazer et al., 2020, p. 1095).

Efforts are underway to combat the spread of misinformation (Loeb et al., 2020, p. 439). Misleading information in everyday-access media outlets has caused the development of tools to identify what online content is trustworthy and what is not. These tools include AltNews, APF Fact Check, BSDetector, Hoaxy, Reverse, Image Search, Snopes, and PolitiFact (Hangloo & Arora, 2021, p. 2).

### ***Arguments Against Social Media Censorship***

It is essential to examine the other side of the debate, which claims that media censorship can harm society. Many believe that censorship comes from the robbery of one's right to freedom of speech in the United States (Tocia, 2018, p. 216). Some even say that censorship leads to an uninformed public who cannot educate themselves because people do not know what they do not know and cannot demand or search for the information they are unaware of (Rubin & Rubin, 2008, p. 7). Today, technology is often associated with functioning as a “capitalist structure”

(Girija, 2020, p. 91) because the government and corporations' control what is permissible on the Internet and social media (Girija, 2020, p. 81). Some believe that media censorship strips citizens of their innate human right to freedom of speech. Censorship is proven to shatter morality and create resentment toward authority. One study found that the listener's attitude changes when they know that a speech contains censorship (Worchel, 1973, p. 365) because censorship threatens the participant's freedom to access information.

Scholars call into question the ethics of censorship practices, such as the censorship of libraries by removing certain books (Duthie, 2010, p. 92). One concern with social media censorship is that it can manipulate the perception of truth. Some governments use censorship to gain tyrannical control of their people, as proven throughout history (Zhao, 2017, p. 74). Media platforms are using censorship for profit at the expense of their users (Johnson, 2018, p. 1285).

### **The United States Value of Freedom of Speech**

The value of personal freedom of expression is deeply rooted in the values of the United States, starting at its origin. The United States Constitution contains legal protection of freedom of speech in the form of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from passing laws abridging the freedom of speech (Gelber, 2021, p. 213). In addition, the First Amendment states that Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion, prohibiting the free exercise, or abridging the freedom of speech or the press (US Constitution, Article I).

Social media users who experienced censorship of their posted content said that they felt it was unjustified. For example, right-wing conservatism in the United States claims that dominant social media platforms are increasingly perceived as discriminating against conservative and right-wing viewpoints (Nunziato, 2022, p. 1255). More frequently than ever, social media users claim that platforms censor their posts, ideas, and views. Some even go as far

as to file lawsuits against social media companies for infringing on users' First Amendment freedom of speech (Cuetos, 2022, p. 1).

Pew Research Center released a study that found 73% of the public believes that there is a right to freedom of speech in the United States (Wike et al., 2020, p. 23). Freedom of speech is one of the core values the founding fathers built into the United States (Wike et al., 2020, p. 20). According to a survey conducted in 2017, about 59% of Americans claim to think people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions in public, even those deeply offensive to others (Ekins, 2017, p. 6).

Opinions about whether the media in the United States needs censorship vary. Additional research found that most United States citizens agree that censorship should not come at the cost of freedom of expression. A study by Vogels et al. (2020, p. 3) reveals that roughly three-quarters of United States adults say it is "very" or "somewhat" likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints that they find objectionable.

### ***The United States' Founders and Modern Leaders***

The founders of the United States strongly believed in freedom of speech and saw it as essential to democracy. Benjamin Franklin wrote that there can be no such thing as wisdom without freedom of thought and that there can be no public liberty without freedom of speech (Franklin, 1722). Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, wrote that liberty depends on the freedom of the press and cannot be limited without being lost (Jefferson, 1786).

The philosophy of freedom of speech as a right was held by more recent United States presidents, including George W. Bush (2002), who said: "America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the power of the state; respect for women; private property; free speech; equal justice; and religious tolerance."



President Barack Obama stated in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly that “the United States Constitution protects the right to practice free speech” (Obama, 2012). More recently, former President Donald Trump has been focusing his 2024 presidential campaign on free speech on social media and the reform of major tech companies to accomplish this; according to a recent article, Trump vows “free speech” reform of government, universities, media, tech firms if elected in 2024 (Mangan, 2022).

### **Unethical Censorship Methods Employed by Social Media Platforms**

Social media users have voiced concern over the censorship practices currently enforced by social media platforms. One study found that while social media platforms censor content and enforce moderation policies in the language of human rights, the actions of these companies are primarily driven by business priorities, the threat of government regulation, and outside pressure from the public and the mainstream media (Arun, 2021, p. 29). One group of frequent social media users—in addition to the others discussed in this chapter—who have voiced frustration with current policies is influencers. Social media influencers noted that if their censored content gains enough support, the platform often restores it. For instance, the OnlyFans ban reversal is often attributed to public backlash, which threatened the platform’s revenue (Lawlor et al., 2023, p. 1). In reaction to potential unethical censorship, studies have pieced together clear content moderation and appeal policy suggestions for all platforms (Díaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021, p. 21).

### **Censorship for the Sake of Self-Interest and Power**

Despite the desirable attributes of instant communication such as social media, many concerns arise as people find that ill-intentioned individuals use these platforms to harm others (Ng et al., 2019, p. 2804). Nonetheless, social media platforms are under fire for censoring not out of concern for their users’ well-being but to preserve their own profits. Social media

platforms are said to function as network gatekeepers as they tend to rank, channel, promote, censor, and delete content that holds power to facilitate or hinder information (West, 2017, p. 28). Researchers claim that there is governance by social media rather than governance of social media (DeNardis & Hackl, 2015, p. 761).

Social media's hold on society did not simply emerge organically. Social media platform developers purposefully developed the platforms to entice users to constantly use them by strategically manufacturing authenticity and relatability (Scholz, 2021, p. 510). A recent Facebook whistleblower, Frances Haugen, attests that the company puts astronomical profits before people, at the expense of children and the destabilization of democracy (Kelly & Duffy, 2021).

Scholars accuse media platforms of censoring content to facilitate or hinder information circulation (West, 2017, p. 28). Social media is now weaponized as new media is an alternative source of independent information for citizens and, potentially, an agent of political change in nondemocratic regimes (Enikolopov et al., 2018, p. 151). For example, citizens and activists might use social media to share information about wrongdoings by politicians or public officials. This information can change how people and public officials behave by encouraging more transparency and improving accountability. Therefore, social media can discipline corruption even in a country with limited political competition and heavy censorship (Enikolopov et al., 2018, p. 150).

### **The United States Government's Recent Involvement with Social Media Censorship**

A concern related to social media censorship is government manipulation of the public. Recently, a Louisiana trial court issued a preliminary injunction barring Biden administration officials from communicating with social media platforms to coordinate the identification and

removal of purported, which was confirmed by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals (Dickinson, 2023, p. 23). When President Biden's Press Secretary, Jen Paaki, was questioned during a press conference, she stated that the Biden administration is regularly in touch with social media platforms about COVID-19-related misinformation, including misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine, and admitted to working with Facebook to flag inappropriate posts (Bovard, 2021).

It is essential to look at social media censorship in other forms of mass communication to understand government involvement before social media censorship. The United States government justifies censoring media content for the protection of its citizens. An example of government involvement in marketing tactics for the safety of citizens is the *Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act*, which mandates that tobacco companies put warning labels on cigarette packages (Cooney & Proctor, 2015, p. 339). In a more recent example, United States Senator Mark Warner proposed a bill that would enhance the privacy protection required of internet platforms (Fukuyama & Grotto, 2020, p. 199).

### ***The First Amendment and Freedom of Speech***

Different public policies protect and provide provisions for freedom of speech on mass communication media in the United States. The First Amendment (US Constitution, Article I) is an example of a policy that protects freedom of speech in the United States (Tocia, 2018, p. 206). An article published in the *Harvard Law Review* examined how a private operator of a public access television network is considered a state actor who can be sued for First Amendment violations (*Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck*, 2019, p. 282). The article stated that the First Amendment is the axiom that the government may not discriminate against private speakers based on the viewpoints expressed in their speech" (*Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck*, 2019, p. 282). This aspect of the First Amendment gives ammunition to those

who think that media platforms should not be allowed to censor controversial viewpoints and that this right must be protected by the government.

### ***Corporate Social Media Censorship***

Corporations can regulate the Internet and limit the information released (Bambauer, 2009). However, there is worry that corporate censorship is less concerned with the safety of users as social media platforms have been accused of implementing censorship for self-gain and profit at the expense of truth (Johnson, 2018, p. 1285). One study investigating corporate censorship found that social networks widely interfere with private and personal communications without legal or regulatory requirements (Watters & Ziegler, 2016, p. 706).

### ***Section 230 of the Communications Act of 1934***

Over time, Section 230 of the Communications Act of 1934 became outdated. The government saw the need to revise it as newer platforms and other forms of online communication emerged given that there are exceptions to Section 230 immunity. Issues surrounding fake news and censorship might require new media policies and even increase the relevance of the role of public or even state media (Student & Tiberius, 2020, p. 13). Facebook's recent whistleblower Frances Haugen called for the reform of Section 230 and beyond, claiming that the policy protects media platforms that do nothing to protect their users (Zakrzewski, 2021). In 2018, one of the more recent modifications to Section 230 created exceptions for sex trafficking offenses (Brannon & Holmes, 2021, p. 28).

### ***The United States Government vs. TikTok***

The Consolidated Appropriations Act (2023) allows Congress to officially ban TikTok on all federal government over data security concerns (H.R.2617, 2022). The ban came after the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Communications Commission warned that

TikTok could share users' data with China's authoritarian government. The government is also concerned with the damage the platform can cause to teenagers' mental health (Hadero, 2023).

More recently, Congress considered a complete ban of TikTok from public devices in the United States. United States lawmakers held a hearing about the potential ban, questioning TikTok's CEO, Shou Zi Chew, over data security and harmful content (Hadero, 2023). Shou Zi Chew defended the platform and made the bold move to point out that American companies have also made mistakes in the past: "With a lot of respect, American social companies do not have a good data privacy and user security track record. Just look at Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, for one example" (Kelly, 2023).

### ***Introduction of the RESTRICT Act and DATA Act***

US Senators Mark R. Warner (D-VA), Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and John Thune (R-SD), ranking member of the Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Communications, and others introduced the Restricting the Emergence of Security Threats that Risk Information and Communications Technology (RESTRICT) Act (S.686, 2023). The RESTRICT Act gives the secretary of commerce broad power to regulate tech produced by six countries that have adversarial relationships with the United States and pose a threat to its security: China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela (Wong & Collier, 2023).

On February 24, 2023, Representative Michael McCaul (R-Texas) introduced the Deterring America's Technological Adversaries (DATA) Act, which requires federal actions to protect the sensitive personal data of United States persons, with a particular focus on prohibiting the transfer of such data to foreign persons influenced by China (H.R.1153, 2023). The bill provides the president with more authority to block transactions associated with the import or

export of Americans' "sensitive data" where there are national security risks (Sherman, 2023). If the bill is implemented, President Joe Biden will impose penalties and a possible ban on a foreign company if it knowingly transfers user data to any unfamiliar person affiliated with the Chinese government (Hutton, 2023).

### ***The Social Media Regulation Act***

Utah became the first state in the United States to enact laws limiting children's use of social media. Utah Governor Spencer Cox signed two bills that protect children from the harmful effects of social media; both laws are collectively known as the Social Media Regulation Act, set to take effect on March 1, 2024 (Kohli, 2023). Under Utah's new laws, minors are barred from using social media sites at specific hours, and residents under 18 also will need parental consent to create social media accounts to help monitor exposure to potentially harmful content (Barrabi, 2023). In addition, the second bill prohibits social media companies from employing techniques that could cause minors to develop an "addiction" to the platforms (Singh, 2023).

### **Foundations to Protect Freedom of Speech on Social Media Platforms**

With instant communication in the digital age come new efforts to maintain censorship of specific content online. In response, efforts have been made to protect freedom of expression worldwide. In June 2018, the United Nations' top expert for freedom of expression called on companies to align their speech codes with standards that embody international human rights law. The request gained the attention of various social media platforms. Twitter's CEO even agreed on the importance of human rights law (Aswad, 2018, p. 26).

Certain foundations emerged because of the growing concern among United States citizens over free speech. There are social justice advocacy organizations to protect free speech in the United States. Two organizations dedicated to the cause of protecting freedom of speech

and privacy online are the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

The EFF, founded in 1990, is a digital rights group based in San Francisco and a leading nonprofit organization defending civil liberties in the digital world. The EFF is involved in various online and computer-related civil-liberty litigation and has sought to extend free speech and privacy rights to online communications (Kendall, 2023). The EFF defends user privacy, free expression, and innovation through impact litigation, policy analysis, grassroots activism, and technology development; its mission is to ensure that technology supports freedom, justice, and innovation for all people of the world (About EFF, 2021).

The FCC is an independent United States regulatory government agency overseen by Congress (About the FCC, 2022) and established by the Communications Act of 1934 to develop and regulate a nationwide communications system (Caterino, 2009). The FCC regulates interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and United States territories (About the FCC, 2022). An example of a user protection policy advocated by the FCC is net neutrality, created in the United States in 2015 (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 16). Net neutrality is the concept that Internet service providers should treat all Internet traffic equally and not intercede between users and their Internet destinations to create a more consistent and fair understanding of the standards and expectations of users across all platforms (Tthesis, 2017, p. 605).

Currently, the FCC is taking a strong stand against public organizations taking advantage of users using mass communication mediums. In 2020, the FCC stood up to big social media platforms as it decided to start implementing regulations (Johnson, 2020). Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai spoke about the Trump administration's

executive order that takes away the legal immunity put in place by Section 230 of the Communications Act for major platforms:

Members of all three branches of the federal government have expressed serious concerns about the prevailing interpretation of the immunity set for in Section 230 of the Communications Act. There is bipartisan support in Congress to reform the law. Social media companies have a First Amendment right to free speech. But they do not have a First Amendment right to a special immunity denied to other media outlets, such as newspapers and broadcasters (Kelly, 2020)

It is evident that the FCC can make an impact on policy by advocating for the protection of users from social media platforms.

In March of 2023, the FCC shifted its focus to target and eliminate unlawful text messages sent to scam users (Rosenworcel & Starks, 2023). The same month, the FCC proposed a pricing transparency requirement for cable and satellite (Perez, 2023). These are but a few examples of the laws and regulations put in place by the FCC to protect users of mass communication.

### **Self-Censorship on Social Media Platforms**

A study showed that in 2020, more than four in 10 people engaged in self-censorship (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023, p. 361). Self-censorship of information is defined as intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others without formal obstacles; it prevents unrestricted access to information, freedom of expression, and the flow of information (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 37). The concept of self-censorship is described as an extrinsic trait dictated by the climate of public opinion and individuals' internal desire to speak out based on this climate (Nicolini & Filak, 2020, p. 105).



Opinion expression avoidance is a form of self-censorship on social media. Opinion expression avoidance became a desirable solution for social media users to alleviate stress and frustration (Wu, 2021, p. 1). It tends to occur when individuals are requested—or feel socially obligated—to express their opinion in response to an audience perceived to be hostile to that opinion (Wu, 2021, p. 3). Prior research on third-person effects has shown that people who believe in harmful media effects are more willing to engage in preventive or accommodative strategies, such as censorship (Sherrick, 2016, p. 906). Communication arena in which coworkers can actively contribute to organizational communication.

### ***Employees Censor Themselves to Protect Their Jobs***

Often, people censor themselves on social media to maintain or obtain employment. One survey (Strossen, 2020) found that most people believe that the political climate prevents them from expressing opinions because others might find them offensive. Moreover, 32% of respondents worry that they could miss out on job opportunities or get fired if they have political views (Strossen, 2020, p. 5). A case study in a Danish bank found that coworkers carefully considered the consequences of their posts or comments before publishing them (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016, p. 387).

### ***Parents Censor to Protect Their Children***

Parents find that while there are many advantages to letting their children use social media, potential risks can be encountered online (Nikken & Oprea, 2018, p. 1570). Parents see a need to censor their children's social media out of concern for their safety (Moodley & Singh, 2016, p. 15). Parents' primary and growing concerns are teenagers' online behaviors, the personal information they make available, and the people they interact with (Anderson, 2020, p. 2). One study (Anderson, 2020) found that 39% of parents report using parental controls for

blocking, filtering, or monitoring their teenager's online activities. A total of 16% use parental controls to restrict their teenager's cellphone use, and 16% monitor their teenager's cell phone to track their location (Anderson, 2020, p. 3).

### **Summary**

Chapter Two comprehensively reviewed the relevant scholarly literature, offering insights into the evolution of human communication. It traced the historical trajectory of mass communication from its origins in spoken and written language to the contemporary landscape of advanced technologies, including video and direct messaging. Within this historical exploration, the literature thoughtfully dissects the nuances between government and corporate censorship, shedding light on their distinctions.

Furthermore, the chapter intricately elucidated the study's theoretical framework by drawing from a multitude of sources that expound on the development of phenomenological and sociopsychological traditions, alongside the insightful incorporation of the spiral of silence theory. This theoretical foundation is pivotal in understanding the underpinnings of the research. The literature also offers profound insights into the role of social media in shaping modern society, the factors precipitating social media censorship, and the justifications put forth for such measures, citing concerns about potential societal harm.

Notably, the review uncovered critical gaps in the existing research landscape concerning social media censorship. These gaps encompass an incomplete comprehension of contemporary social media censorship practices in the United States and a dearth of knowledge concerning the impact of such censorship on users and its subsequent influence on their perceptions of this phenomenon. In response, the present study aims to bridge these research gaps by employing a

qualitative questionnaire and interviews to collect data from individuals who believe they have experienced social media censorship.

Moreover, the literature examined in this chapter underscores the pressing need for an in-depth investigation into the domain of social media censorship and its ramifications for users. Rapid technological advancements in the realm of social media have engendered concerns related to user privacy, data security (Saura et al., 2022, p. 1694), and freedom of speech. Scholars have aptly likened the regulation of online content to the challenge of “nailing Jell-O to a wall,” emphasizing the difficulty of keeping pace with ever-evolving technology through government censorship mechanisms (Persily & Tucker, 2020, p. 200).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Overview

The initial chapter introduced the issues of social media censorship and provided an overview of social media's current pivotal role in society as a global facilitator of ideas and a primary form of long-distance communication (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 71). The second chapter covered the extensive history of social media, censorship, and the opportunities and dangers social media presents as a tool for long-distance communication. The existence of social media in society is still relatively recent; however, statistics show that it is heavily used in the United States. Chapter Three will now give an in-depth overview of the present study's methodology. Methodology refers to the systematic and structured approach that researchers use to conduct a study, gather data, analyze information, and draw conclusions and is a crucial aspect of research because it helps ensure the reliability, validity, and credibility of a study's findings (Kazdin, 2016, pp. 3–4).

The chosen methodology offered the best framework for conducting the study and gathering answers to the research questions. It allowed users to share their subjective experience with social media censorship to expose perceived injustices and use the newly learned information to suggest potentially better censorship practices. Chapter Three discusses the research design in detail, including the research questions, setting, participants, procedures, the role of the researcher, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical concerns related to the study.

The type of design adopted for the study is qualitative, a research method used in social sciences, humanities, and other fields to explore and understand complex phenomena in depth (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23). This qualitative study utilized inductive reasoning to answer research

questions, beginning with a broad area of interest or opportunity and actively working within the research space to discover meaning (Terrell, 2016, p. 69). The researcher collected detailed, high-quality data that provided a “thick description” of the people group under study (Geertz, 1973, p. 2).

The study is phenomenological as it focuses on analyzing and describing individuals' lived experiences of censorship of their posted social media content (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90). A phenomenological study is appropriate because it delves deep into human experiences, perceptions, and consciousness to uncover the underlying structures and meanings that define those experiences (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015, p. 22). The goal of a phenomenological study is to come to a deeper understanding of a topic by an individual sharing a subjective of a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91).

The primary method used to answer the study's research questions was a qualitative questionnaire administered to a total of 115 participants. The qualifying participants were United States residents over the age of 18 who believed they had experienced censorship of their posted content on one or several social media platforms. The questionnaire featured closed and open-ended questions to obtain a “thick description” and quality details from the participants.

A questionnaire is an appropriate instrument in this phenomenological study because of its emphasis on open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to give explanatory answers regarding their perceived experiences of censorship. Additionally, a qualitative questionnaire facilitated a greater sample size to collect qualitative data from more people than using in-depth interviews alone.

A secondary method used to answer the research questions was in-depth interviews. The goal was to conduct interviews with 10% of the questionnaire respondents; after 12 in-depth

interviews, information collection during the research portion of the study was deemed complete. Interview participants comprised questionnaire participants who emailed the researcher to volunteer for the interview. Qualtrics and other qualitative analytical software can help with coding and patterns in data analysis. In-depth interviews in the context of the qualitative questionnaire were chosen as the most effective instrument to gain more focused insights from those who experienced censorship by social media platforms.

The two-pronged approach of using questionnaires and interviews provides meaningful and substantial answers to the research questions. These methods fill research gaps and offer more current insights into social media trends and information on research topics. More details are provided on these methods later in this chapter.

### **Qualitative Questionnaire and in-Depth Interviews**

One of the research methods chosen for the study is the qualitative questionnaire. Questionnaires are embedded in the history of society (Willis, 2020, p. 1). A questionnaire gathers information from respondents to answer research questions. One advantage of conducting a questionnaire in a qualitative study is that it is a convenient way of collecting information from many people within a defined period (Jenn, 2006, p. 32). Overall, qualitative survey research is utilized to gain in-depth information about people's underlying reasoning and motivations (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 510).

The steps for developing questionnaires include wording and formatting methods for items and administration methods (Song et al., 2015, p. 323). The researcher must also remember that designing questionnaire questions requires time and consideration to maximize the response rate and undertake appropriate data analysis (Rowley, 2014, p. 308). A characteristic of questionnaires is that they can include open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. The

questions must be clear and straightforward to gather precise information (Song et al., 2015, p. 328).

Another form of qualitative research is conducting in-depth interviews with knowledgeable individuals who have experienced phenomena central to the research questions and then interpreting their descriptive accounts (Alase, 2017, p. 10). The researcher can carry out face-to-face interviews with participants, focus group interviews (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 157), or interviews (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019, p. 3060). These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few and intended to collect the views and opinions of the participants (Bilus, 2020, p. 15). In the present study, the interviews validated the answers given in the questionnaire.

### **Research Questions**

As discussed in Chapter One, in a qualitative study, a primary research question explores the central phenomenon broadly, and subsequent research questions narrow the inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192). Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the experiences of those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms?

Experiences have value and guide behavior (Cleeremans, & Tallon-Baudry, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider how the experience of being censored affects one's use of social media.

**RQ2:** Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms think that censorship is ever justified or necessary?

It is necessary to evaluate the relationship between the subject matter (contents) of an action and the circumstances in which it is performed (Mon, 2015, p. 86).

**RQ3:** Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms change their views on censorship?

There is clear evidence that sustained experiences may affect both brain structure and function (Park & Huang, 2010, p. 391). Therefore, it is important to encompass subjective experiences with media censorship in an individual's overall outlook on censorship.

**RQ4:** Should social media companies change their current social media censorship practices?

Policies, laws, and regulations are often needed to drive environmental and social changes (Swinburn, 2008, p. 1). If changes in policy regarding censorship are currently needed, individuals who experienced censorship can bring this to light.

### **Setting**

The study's setting is a crucial methodological consideration (Lofland et al., 2022, p. 3) and provides a description of the environment in which the research is conducted. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, specific names and identifying information are deliberately omitted, as recommended by Kalkbrenner (2022, pp. 219-220). The setting not only contextualizes the research but also ensures adherence to ethical standards, thus underscoring its fundamental role in the study's overall rigor and integrity.

The setting of the study is where the research took place and is an important methodological consideration. The section of a dissertation offers a detailed description of the environment where research is conducted. It is important to omit certain information in the setting section, such as specific names of participants, to protect privacy and confidentiality



(Kalkbrenner, 2022, p. 219-220). Overall, the setting is an essential piece to any study with requirements that need met to ensure

The setting for the study begins with the qualitative questionnaire built and administered on Qualtrics. The researcher used social media to recruit participants. The researcher's connections were encouraged to share the questionnaire recruitment post on their feed to maximize participation. The researcher's existing social media and connections were used to recruit questionnaire participants. The chosen approach to recruitment ensured that a diverse group with different values, beliefs, traditions, and political and religious viewpoints in the United States took part in the questionnaire. The goal was to reach a minimum of 100 completed questionnaires; however, the study concluded after 115 qualifying questionnaires were submitted and after the researcher found information saturation.

The 12 in-depth interviews with the selected participants occurred via recorded Microsoft Teams calls. The aim was to conduct the research in a natural setting that is quiet and free from stress and distractions. The proper environment ensured that each participant had enough time to answer the questions thoroughly. The interviews had a similar natural, quiet, and distraction-free setting, with an hour and a half allotted. The researcher planned an extra 30 minutes (15 minutes before and 15 minutes after the interview) to allow the interview to begin and end so the participants did not feel rushed. Moreover, the additional time allowed for equipment adjustment if there were technical issues.

Due to the distance between the participants and researchers and other logistical complications, a video interview combined with transcription recording software was the best method for the study. The interviewees' comfort during the interview was essential to obtain informative answers. The interviewees participated from a secluded area free from distractions

and noises that might disrupt the audio and transcript process. In addition, the interviewees tested their audio before the interview, which limited technical difficulties.

All interviews for the study took place on Microsoft Teams as it was convenient for each participant and the researcher. Microsoft Teams and the Otter AI system recorded and automatically transcribed the interviews with the participants' consent. The Otter AI system was ideal due to its advanced ability to accurately provide real-time captions and notes for meetings. Quirkos helped create themes and data coding from transcriptions to assist the researcher in understanding the findings (Quirkos, 2022). The system allowed the researcher to identify common themes and parallel answers and analyze the information from the qualitative questionnaire.

### **Participants**

The researcher ensured that the 115 participants for the qualitative questionnaire and the 12 selected for the in-depth interviews met specific criteria. In addition, demographic information about the research participants was collected (Lee & Schuele, 2010, p. 347). The participants in the qualitative questionnaire and the subsequent interviewees included male and female participants over 18 years of age. The researcher chose this age specification to ensure that the answers were from a mature perspective.

Demographics refers to the statistical characteristics of a population or a group of people, typically including age, gender, race, ethnicity, income, education level, marital status, geographic location, and other relevant factors. Demographic data are often used in communication to analyze and understand the composition of a population, track changes over time, and make informed decisions (Murdock et al., 2015, p. 20). It is essential to note the

demographics of a population and the reasons behind the selected demographics, as it should assist with answering the research questions.

The study sought the perspectives of participants from any race, religion, and area within the United States. Random sampling was the method of choice for selecting participants; with this technique, each member of the population has an equal chance of being chosen as a subject. The sampling process consists of a single step, in which each subject is selected independently of the other population members (Sharma, 2017, p. 750). Therefore, random sampling is the best technique for selecting participants from their demographic backgrounds.

In addition to demographic requirements, specific psychographics requirements were set for the participants: they had to be currently using social media and also believe that they had experienced social media censorship of their content on a social media platform. The purpose was to ensure that participants were up to date with current social media practices and familiar with current platform regulations. Finally, participants had to be open to discussing their social media censorship experience, or the questionnaire and interview could not collect appropriate information.

### **Procedures**

The researcher took several steps to ensure that the study met ethical requirements. First, the researcher upheld the well-being and privacy of the participants during the study. A review of ethical concerns during research is essential, as well as securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The most salient ethical values implicated in using human participants in the study are beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity and trust within the fiduciary investigator/participant relationship, personal dignity, and autonomy about both informed,

voluntary, competent decision-making and the privacy of personal information (Kapp, 2006, p. 336).

After the dissertation committee and the IRB approved the project, the researcher began collecting and analyzing information through the questionnaire and interviews to proceed with the study. The data collection for the qualitative research consisted of, first, a qualitative questionnaire (hosted through Qualtrics). Second, 12 of the questionnaire participants took part in an in-depth interview via the Microsoft Teams platform.

The interview was confidential and protected the identities of the participants. The researcher obtained approximately 115 questionnaire responses and 12 in-depth interviews to reach information saturation. If this is the case, the researcher will conduct more interviews beyond the 10%. The questionnaire and interviews provide valuable answers to the research questions.

The qualitative questionnaire participants who desired to participate in the interview emailed the researcher. Random sampling was used to ensure that there was no favoritism; the interviewer scheduled the participants in the order in which their signed consent form was received and within their availability window. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions and featured five open-ended questions to get a “thick description” and quality details from respondents. The researcher distributed the questionnaire by posting on a personal social media account on Facebook and LinkedIn and encouraging social media connections to repost the original post on their social media platforms. The message posted on social media briefly described the study and provided a link to the questionnaire for those who wished to participate.

### **Researcher's Role**

In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection (Wambaleka, 2020, p. 34). As the human instrument in the study, the researcher mediates the data rather than inventories, questionnaires, or machines (Ochieng, 2009, p. 13). Qualitative research helps researchers access participants' thoughts and feelings as it enables them to understand the meaning people ascribe to their experiences (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 226).

### **Personal Bias and the Preservation of Truth**

Creswell (2012) states that particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study. Further, the investigator's contribution to the research setting can be helpful and positive rather than detrimental (Creswell, 2012, p. 181). The role of the researcher is also described as collecting data through extensive literature reviews and by interviewing elected participants of the study (Sutton & Austin, 2015, pp. 226–227).

There are concerns surrounding personal bias that comes with using a “human instrument” in a study. Chenail (2011) describes some issues in *Interviewing the Investigator: Strategies for Addressing Instrumentation and Researcher Bias Concerns in Qualitative Research*. Chenail (2011, p. 255) states that instrumentation rigor and bias management are significant challenges for qualitative researchers employing interviewing as a data generation method. The researcher has personal biases during qualitative studies and forms opinions on some of the questions asked. Therefore, the researcher must be careful not to favor specific answers that differ from their opinion on the research question.

The researcher took several measures to ensure that she, as the human instrument, did not allow personal bias to affect the study's outcome. First, the researcher used random sampling to avoid personal preference when selecting participants. The questionnaire was posted on the

researcher's public social media platform and allowed connections to share the post, allowing them to distribute the questionnaire to their social circles. These methods avoided personal bias as they took away the researcher's ability to hand-pick participants.

Additionally, the researcher offered everyone who completed the questionnaire an opportunity to participate in an interview. All interviewees received equal attention. Each interviewee received the same list of questions and time (one hour), and none of the participants were cut short during their interviews as the time allotted was more than sufficient for all interviewees. Those who participated in the interview answered the same set of interview questions. The researcher asked all the participants to review their transcripts to ensure that the documents were accurate before finalization.

### **Protection of Questionnaire and Interview Participants**

The role of the researcher includes protecting the participants who chose to contribute to the study. The "Code of Ethics" adopted by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (also known as the AEJMC Code of Ethics) discusses confidentiality and the treatment of manuscripts to ensure confidentiality and integrity during every phase of the editorial review process (AEJMC, 2023). Without exception, authors' manuscripts must be evaluated objectively on the quality of the work, not personal preferences, hidden agendas, or politics (Standing Committee on Research, 2021).

Protecting research participants is essential because without confidentiality, people will not trust researchers with their personal information. This will make future research challenging because people will only volunteer to participate in studies due to the lost trust regarding handling the information, autonomy, confidentiality, and beneficence (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1632).

Therefore, it is imperative for the future of all research that researchers do not allow personal bias to cloud their studies or put the participants at risk.

The researcher protected participants' privacy during the study. To start, the records of this study are private as the researcher is the only one with access. Further, published reports do not include any personal and identifiable information that could make it possible to identify the subject. Research records are stored securely; the only person with access to records is the researcher. These records include transcripts, video recordings, email correspondence, and other documents with identifiable information.

The researcher protected the participants' identity during the questionnaire and interviews. The participants' responses to the online questionnaire are kept anonymous. The participants' responses to the interview questions are confidential, with pseudonyms replacing the participants' real names. All interviews took place privately, so others did not overhear them. The researcher removed all information that could identify participants. Further, the researcher stored information and recordings gathered on participants on a password-locked computer.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The second chapter presented a comprehensive literature review as a foundation for the study. The next step in the data collection process was to administer a questionnaire and conduct in-depth interviews with 10% of the questionnaire participants. There is an essential distinction between a qualitative questionnaire and an interview, which both serve equally important purposes for this study.

The questionnaire aims to match the variation in one variable with variations in other variables. This means that the questionnaire does not seek numeral data but to determine the diversity of some topic of interest within a given population (Jansen, 2010, pp. 2–3). The

questionnaire harnesses the rich potential of qualitative data as it can provide more than an individual response. Doing so offers the opportunity to extract more details from the interviewee (Braun, 2021, p. 644).

The researcher used social media platforms, namely, Facebook and LinkedIn, to distribute the questionnaire for the study. Microsoft Teams was the preferred method for interviews. Teams and Otter recorded and transcribed the interview so that the researcher could cross-check the transcription. The participants' responses to the interviews are confidential; the researcher upheld confidentiality by replacing names with pseudonyms. The researcher used pseudonyms to identify the participants within the study when using their quotes within the listed research. A password on the researcher's computer secures the recordings and transcriptions so that no one except the researcher can access them.

The researcher wrote out the themes and ideas abstracted from the interview transcripts and utilized Quirkos to assist with the process. The information compiled from the interviews parallels the literature findings and yields similar results. Finally, the researcher validated the findings by corroborating evidence through the triangulation of multiple data sources and evidence. The interviews validated the answers given in the questionnaire. The interview participants also reviewed their transcripts to ensure information accuracy. Chapters Four and Five of the dissertation present the results and conclusion of the study.

### **Questionnaire Questions**

Qualtrics is an online survey tool used to create and support the questionnaire. The researcher distributed the questionnaire on her personal Facebook and LinkedIn social media platforms. The questionnaire was shared on the researcher's platform to encourage social media



connection with her, allow for more outreach, and increase the likelihood of participants. Below are the questions listed for participants on the Qualtrics platform.

**Q1:** Do you believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your own posted content in the past?

- a. Yes
- b. No

**Q2:** Are you 18 years of age or older?

- a. Yes
- b. No

**Q3:** Are you a resident of the United States?

- a. Yes
- b. No

**Q4:** Do you use social media platforms?

- a. Yes
- b. No

**Q5:** What is your age range?

- a. 18–24
- b. 25–34
- c. 35–44
- d. 45–54
- e. 55–64
- f. 65+

**Q6:** What is your gender?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Other \_\_\_\_\_.

**Q7:** What is your race/ethnicity?

- a. White or Caucasian
- b. Black or African American
- c. American Indian or Alaska Native
- d. Asian or Asian American
- e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- f. Hispanic or Latino
- g. Other \_\_\_\_\_.

**Q8:** What social media platforms do you use? (select all that apply)

- a. Snapchat

- b. Instagram
- c. Facebook
- d. Twitter
- e. TikTok
- f. Pinterest
- g. YouTube
- h. LinkedIn
- i. Other(s)

(please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q9:** How often do you use social media platforms?

- a. Every day
- b. A few times a week
- c. About once a week
- d. A few times a month
- e. About once a month
- f. Less than once a month

**Q10:** If once a day, how many hours?

- a. Does not apply
- b. 1–2
- c. 3–4
- d. 5–6
- e. 7+

**Q11:** Please explain the details of your experience with social media censorship. What do you believe you posted on social media that was censored? What social media platform was it posted on? How did the platform respond?

Note: If you have had more than one censorship experience, feel free to share more than one.

**Q12:** As explained previously with your censorship experience, do you believe that the platform was justified in censoring your post? Why or why not?

**Q13:** After experiencing social media censorship, did your views on social media censorship change? If so, what changed and why did you come to that conclusion? If your views stayed consistent after your experience, please explain why.

**Q14:** Do you believe that social media platforms need to change any current practices on censorship? What changes would you recommend, if any, and why?

**Q15:** Do you have any other comments about censorship of social media platforms?

### **Interview Questions**

The researcher used a data collection strategy to interview people who believed they had experienced social media censorship. The interviews between the participant and the researcher occurred on Microsoft Teams. The participant was asked a series of questions during the interview, and following the interview, the researcher cleaned up the transcription and had each interviewee verify its accuracy.

#### ***Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions***

**Q1:** Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.

**Q2:** You stated in the questionnaire that you believe you were censored on a social media site. Can you share what happened?

**Q3:** Do you believe that the platform was justified in censoring your post?

**Q4:** Did this experience change your views on social media censorship?

**Q5:** What changes do you believe social media platforms need to make to improve censorship practices?

**Q6:** Do you have any other comments about the censorship of social media platforms?

**Q7:** Thank you for your time and for answering the questions to the best of your ability. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used the theoretical framework for the study to analyze the information from the questionnaire and interview responses. The software used for the study included Qualtrics, Microsoft Teams, Otter, and Quirkos. Once Otter and Microsoft Teams recorded the transcription, the researcher listened to the recording and edited the transcript as needed. Next, the researcher emailed the recordings and transcriptions to the interviewee to verify the accuracy

of their transcription. Upon receiving confirmation, the researcher analyzed the information and utilized Quirkos to highlight connections and parallels in the information to deduce meaning.

In addition to using the software, the researcher manually analyzed the interview transcripts with the recordings. Upon completion of the analysis, the researcher applied triangulation. During this validity procedure, researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Some authors argue that triangulation is useful only for broadening and deepening the understanding of the study phenomenon. In contrast, others have argued that triangulation increases the study's accuracy (Hussein, 2009, p. 106). Triangulation, which uses multiple sources or referents to conclude what constitutes the truth, is one approach to establishing credibility (Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 267). Thus, triangulation tactics validated the truthfulness of the information.

### **Data Analysis Through the Theoretical Lens**

The researcher analyzed the data collected from the qualitative questionnaire and the in-depth interviews through a theoretical lens. Qualitative researchers often use a lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture central to ethnography or gendered, racial, or class differences, depending on the theoretical orientation. The theoretical lenses that the present study utilizes are the phenomenological and sociocultural communication traditions, the spiral of silence theory, and the muted group theory.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Trustworthiness is necessary for all research. However, trustworthiness is an overarching concept used in qualitative research. Frey (2018) describes trustworthiness as related to the procedures researchers employ to ensure a study's quality, rigor, and credibility (p. 1728). Unlike

quantitative researchers, who apply statistical methods to establish the validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the “trustworthiness” of the results (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 34). Trustworthiness in qualitative research encompasses several dimensions, including dependability, confirmability, authenticity, transferability, and credibility (Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 267).

Qualitative inquirers must demonstrate the credibility of their studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124). Studies are credible when they take into account personal biases. Personal bias could influence the findings and distort the truth. A study is also credible when it is consistent and neutral (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 34). Credibility is only achieved to the extent that the research methods engender confidence in the truthfulness of the data and the researchers' interpretations (Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 267). To support credibility when reporting a qualitative study, the researcher should demonstrate engagement, methods of observation, and audit trails (Cope et al., 2014, p. 89). In summary, credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher. A study is credible because of its efforts to ensure the use of rich information and avoid implementing personal bias.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data in similar conditions (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 48). This means that if another researcher were to repeat the study, the findings would parallel those of the original research. However, the study could be more dependable if the results were far from accurate. To summarize, a study is trustworthy if the findings are replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Koch, 2006, p. 53). The present research ensured dependability by cross-referencing studies with similar results.

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses, not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Biased information is often a concern in qualitative research. If proper measures are put in place to limit bias interference with the information obtained, the study can achieve confirmability. This study ensured confirmability by avoiding biased information in the literature.

### **Transferability, Validity, and Reliability**

A study must ensure transferability to uphold the trustworthiness of its findings. Transferability implies that the findings apply to other settings or groups (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 4). The building, merging, and linking of the grounded saturated data enhanced the chances that the findings would be transferable. For example, repeating the study with a group of subject matter experts on media regulation as the subjects would produce helpful information. However, greater transferability is needed in the study (Slevin & Sines, 2000, p. 94).

Validity refers to the integrity and application of methods and the accuracy with which the findings reflect the data (Noble, p. 34, 2015). It ensures that the underlying data is accurate (O'Mara Sage, 2019, p. 292). Integrity and precision (O'Mara Sage, 2019, p. 292) are necessary for the study to be valid (Noble, 2015, p. 34). It is important to understand that without validation of the study, the foundation for the research crumbles.

Qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and projects (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 814). In addition, reliability describes consistency in the analytical procedures employed (Noble, 2015, p. 34; O'Mara Sage, 2019, p. 292). However, qualitative research sometimes requires more scientific rigor and a better justification of the methods adopted. Furthermore, qualitative and quantitative methods

differ tremendously in terms of philosophical positions and purpose. This is why it is more important to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research (Leung, 2015, p. 324).

### **Achieving Trustworthiness through Triangulation and Peer Review**

A study achieves trustworthiness when using the method of triangulation. Triangulation relies on multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999, p. 1192). Triangulation is also a qualitative research strategy to test validity through converging information from various sources (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545). It supports a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it and do not contradict it (Jentoft, 2019, p. 179).

Triangulation is applied through different research methods, including interviews, observation, and field notes (Carter et al., 2014, p. 546). The method validates the information discovered in the study by assuring that its findings have confirmability, transferability, and dependability. The researcher uses multiple and diverse sources to provide corroborating evidence (Bazeley, 2013, p. 259).

Member checking and peer review are other examples of ways to ensure trustworthiness. Peer review is the process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research, or ideas to the scrutiny of others in the same field (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 227), and member checking is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). Synthesized member checking allows participants to engage with, add to, interview, and interpret data after their interview (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1802). The researcher implemented triangulation and member-checking techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three delineated the study's overarching purpose and the strategy devised for its execution. The chosen methodology entailed the utilization of a qualitative questionnaire administered through Qualtrics, followed by a carefully selected set of in-depth interviews conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform. These data collection methods were thoughtfully crafted to address the research questions that underpin the study. In the pursuit of data accuracy and reliability, the researcher employed triangulation and peer review techniques, assuring the veracity, confirmability, and dependability of the information gathered to address the research questions. The researcher remained steadfast in upholding ethical considerations, prioritizing the safeguarding of participants' privacy and well-being.



## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Overview

The purpose of the study was to collect qualitative information about social media censorship from those who have direct experience with social media censorship of their posted content. The objective was to learn more about social media censorship and how it is employed and understand how platform users view current censorship practices on social media. The study is significant because it covers current research gaps and may help improve social media censorship practices through feedback from individuals who have experienced it.

In Chapter One, the researcher presented the study with a historical background on social media and censorship and an overview of the methodology, problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter Two listed the relevant literature and previous studies on social media censorship to serve as a foundation of understanding on which to conduct research. Chapter Two also provided an overview of the traditions and communication theories used to interpret the qualitative findings.

Chapter Three provided the context of the study's two research methods. First, the researcher distributed and collected qualitative information through a qualitative questionnaire, which was filled out by 115 participants. All participants who completed the questionnaire were invited to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview based on similar questions. The purpose of the interview was to gather more detailed information. A total of 12 participants, representing 10% of the qualitative questionnaire respondents, were interviewed.

The following chapter presents the results and findings of the research derived from the questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The researcher uses tables to help the reader understand

the information. Additionally, the researcher abstracted common themes among the participants to answer the research questions.

## **Participants**

### **Demographic Information of the Questionnaire Participants**

#### *Age, Gender, and Race of Questionnaire Participants*

The study relied on a qualitative questionnaire and interviews to gather data. A total of 115 individuals met the requirements and completed the questionnaire. Participants took 36 minutes to complete the questionnaire on average. The researcher discarded questionnaire submissions if the participant finished the questionnaire in less than one minute. Submissions that did not attempt to answer the question and consisted of incoherent text appearing as spam were also discarded.

The first four questions of the study ensured that the participants met the questionnaire requirements. All 115 participants answered “yes” to these first four questions. The qualitative questions 11–15 delve deeper and specifically concern the participant’s experience of being censored and how this experience changed their views on censorship. All questions are listed in Table 4 below. In addition, for each question, the researcher looked for common themes and profound statements made by the questionnaire participants.

The questionnaire and the interview participants shared information about their demographic background. Questions 5–7 of the questionnaire gathered demographic information about the participants, including gender, age, and race. Most questionnaire participants were male (77%), and less than a quarter were female (23%). The most represented age bracket is young adults aged 25–34 years, accounting for 69.5% of the respondents. The second largest bracket was 18–24-year-olds, making up 20% of the questionnaire participants, followed by 35–

44-year-olds (9.5%) and 45–54-year-olds (1%). The most represented races were Black or African American (60%), White or Caucasian (34%), and Asian or Asian American (3.5%).

**Table 1**

*Demographics of Questionnaire Participants: Gender, Age, and Race.*

<b>Demographics of Questionnaire Participants</b>			
	<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Q5</b>	<b>Gender</b>		
		Female	23
		Male	77
		Other	0
<b>Q6</b>	<b>Age</b>		
		18–24	20
		25–34	69.5
		35–44	9.5
		45–54	1
		55–64	0
		65+	0
<b>Q7</b>	<b>Race</b>		
		White or Caucasian	34
		Black or African American	60
		American Indian or Alaska Native	0
		Asian or Asian American	3.5
		Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
		Hispanic or Latino	1
		Other	1.5

***Preliminary Questions for Questionnaire Participants***

The first part of the questionnaire asked the preliminary questions for taking part in the study. The purpose was to verify that the participant met the requirements to narrow the study group. Each participant believed that they were at one point censored on social media, were over 18 years of age, were a United States resident, and currently used social media platforms. Table 2 shows the preliminary questions 1–4 in the questionnaire.

**Table 2**

## Initial Preliminary Questionnaire Questions

<b>Questionnaire Questions: 1–4</b>	
<b>Q1</b>	Do you believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your own posted content in the past?
<b>Q2</b>	Are you 18 years of age or older?
<b>Q3</b>	Are you a resident of the United States?
<b>Q4</b>	Do you use social media platforms?

*Social Media Habits of Questionnaire Participants*

Questions 8–10 of the questionnaire gathered information on the participant's social media habits. The main platforms used by the participants included Facebook (93.9%), Instagram (80.8%), and Twitter (75.6%). The platforms least used by the participants were Pinterest (31.3%), LinkedIn (49.5%), and Snapchat (58.2%). Most participants used social media daily (92%), with the second most popular answer being a few times a day (5%). However, hours spent on social media varied. The top answer was 7+ hours a day (37.5%), followed by 3–4 (24.5%) and 5–6 hours a day (16.5%).

**Table 3**

## Social Media Habits of Questionnaire Participants

<b>Social Media Habits</b>			
	<b>Category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
<b>Q8</b>	<b>Social media platform(s) used</b>		
		Snapchat	58.2
		Instagram	80.8
		Facebook	93.9
		Twitter	75.6
		TikTok	65.2
		YouTube	72.1
		Pinterest	31.3
		LinkedIn	49.5
		Other(s)	0
<b>Q9</b>	<b>Frequency of social media use</b>		
		Every day	92
		A few times a week	5
		Once a week	1
		A few times a month	2
		Once a month	0
		Less than once a month	0
<b>Q10</b>	<b>Hours a day spent on social media</b>		
		N/A	8.5
		1–2	13
		3–4	24.5
		5–6	16.5
		7+	37.5

**Demographic Information of the Interview Participants**

In addition to the questionnaire, the researcher conducted interviews with 12 participants to gather more information on their censorship experiences. Once the researcher received an email from a participant requesting an interview, she ensured that the potential interviewee had signed a consent form and provided three possible days and times for the interview. Once the research reached approximately a 10% ratio of interviews to questionnaire participants, the interviews were closed.

The general demographics of the interview participants are listed below, including pseudonyms, gender, age, race and U.S. State. Pseudonyms are used in the table and throughout the chapter to protect the privacy and identity of the study's participants. From the information gathered, 17% of participants were female, and 83% were male. The participants were primarily young adults aged 25–34 years. Around 67% of the interviewees were Black, and 33% were White. All the participants lived in the United States, most are from New York.

**Table 4**

*Pseudonym, Gender, Age, Race, and Location of Interview Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>U.S. State</b>
<b>Walter</b>	male	24	white	Texas
<b>Frank</b>	male	32	black	California
<b>Jake</b>	male	27	black	Georgia
<b>Angelo</b>	male	25	black	New York
<b>James</b>	male	25	black	New York
<b>Jeffery</b>	male	23	white	New York
<b>Devon</b>	male	29	white	New York
<b>Christine</b>	female	26	black	Texas
<b>Tanya</b>	female	22	white	Massachusetts
<b>Jacob</b>	male	25	black	New York
<b>Brian</b>	male	32	black	Texas
<b>Blaze</b>	male	35	black	California

### **Answering the Research Questions**

A well-formulated research question is a cornerstone of any study, serving as the focal point for addressing a specific issue or problem (Ratan, 2019, p. 20). In the preceding chapters, the researcher introduced four pivotal research questions that set the overarching objectives of the study before the initiation of the questionnaire and interviews. In this section, which is dedicated to addressing these research questions, the researcher provides comprehensive answers drawing insights from the data collected through the questionnaire and interviews.

#### **Results for RQ1: What are the experiences of those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms?**

Question 11 of the questionnaire is a pivotal tool in unraveling answers to RQ1. This question directly probes the participant's encounters with social media censorship, seeking detailed information to guide the extraction of specific insights. Question 11 states the following:

Please explain the details of your experience with social media censorship. What do you believe you posted on social media that was censored? What social media platform was it posted on? How did the platform respond?

Note: If you have more than one censorship experience, feel free to share more than one. This question delves into nuanced aspects of the participant's experience, seeking details such as the platform where the censorship occurred, the nature of the content (video, photo, text), the subject matter, and the platform's response to the content poster during the censorship process.

#### ***Questionnaire Question 11 Answers and Findings***

The responses to Question 11 were segmented into three distinct parts. Initially, the researcher noted the platform where censorship incidents occurred, followed by an examination of the type of content and, finally, an investigation into the platform's censorship mechanisms. A

notable limitation of the questionnaire surfaced in the brevity of most responses, thereby constraining the depth of information derived from this question. The analysis of the responses unveiled that the majority of participants encountered content censorship on Facebook (55%), trailed by Instagram (17%), Twitter (13%), TikTok (11%), LinkedIn (2%), Reddit (1%), and YouTube (1%).

Concerning the nature of the censored content, videos constituted the primary category (50%), followed by images (24%) and comments (20%). News articles and reposted content both registered at 3%. A subset of participants who reposted content and faced censorship expressed dissatisfaction with the platform's failure to flag the original content poster. One participant voiced this concern, stating, "I actually reposted a piece of content from a TikTok influencer, and inexplicably, I faced censorship without the original poster being flagged."

Question 11 was designed to generate insights into how various platforms respond to the users they intend to censor and the specific censorship practices employed. Notably, diverse platforms employed varying methods for censorship, as illustrated in Table 8, which categorizes the responses from questionnaire participants regarding the platforms' censorship practices.

The predominant response detailing how platforms reacted to censored content was a concise acknowledgment that the platform "censored" the content. However, this response lacked specificity, with participants stating merely that they experienced "censorship." To avoid assumptions about the nature of this censorship, participants who provided only this brief response were categorized accordingly. The second most frequent response regarding platform censorship practices was content deletion. Participants shared instances when their content, ranging from sports-related posts on Facebook to community politics on Reddit, was deleted for purported guideline violations.



The third most prevalent response on this point involved the platform “flagging” the post or comment, whereby “flagged” consistently indicated that the content was removed or deleted by the social media platform. Participants recounted instances such as posting videos on Facebook or political speeches on Twitter, only to have them flagged and subsequently removed, with allegations of incitement or other policy violations. For instance, one participant explained: “I posted a video on Facebook about a college student protest for equality, and it was flagged and taken down, alleging that I was inciting public unrest.” Another participant shared a similar experience, stating, “I posted a political speech video on Twitter, and my account was immediately flagged, censored, and disabled.”

**Table 5**

Censorship Practices Used by the Platform

N (%)	Censorship Practices Used by the Platform
1	Shadow banning
3	Account suspension
25	Deleted the post/comment
3	Warning
1	The platform asked the user to take down the post; the post was deleted if the user did not comply, and the user was then temporarily banned from the account
8	Flagged post/account
3	Asked to delete the comment/post
55	Post/comment was “censored”
1	Disclosure for COVID-19

***Interview Question 2 and Answers***

The initial interview inquiry prompted participants to provide an introduction. This served as an opportunity for the researcher to confirm the participant’s full name, their approximate location in the United States, and details about their occupation. Subsequently, the second interview question delved into the interviewee’s narrative of the events leading to the censoring of their social media content. The question posed was: “You stated in the questionnaire

that you believe you were censored on a social media site. Can you share what happened?" The individual interview responses from each participant are presented below.

### **Frank**

Frank is a 24-year-old Black male who lives in New York State. He encountered social media censorship when he reposted a 45-second video initially shared by another user on Facebook. Surprisingly, even though the content did not originate from Frank's account, Facebook removed his video and suspended his account. Upon reflection, Frank acknowledged that his action may have violated the platform's terms and conditions. He remarked: "I just posted the video on Facebook, but I came to realize that it was not a good idea... maybe it went against terms and conditions?" He said the video was explicit but did not detail its subject matter.

### **Jacob**

Jacob is a 25-year-old black male from New York. Jacob's encounters with censorship unfolded across Facebook and Twitter, predominantly revolving around content related to renowned figures in United States politics and celebrities. Describing his political inclination, Jacob shared, "I am someone who is into politics. I faced censorship on both my Facebook and Twitter accounts." Notably, Jacob's political posts were primarily reposts, with original content limited to occasional live streams from political rallies. "I enjoy sharing whatever politicians do and say," he admitted.

Delving into the methods employed by the platforms to censor his content, Jacob recounted the loss of social media accounts due to censorship issues. "Sometimes, my reposts get flagged, and certain posts get deleted on Facebook. I even lost my Twitter account due to censorship," he explained. Acknowledging that he received a warning on one occasion, Jacob admitted to disregarding the platform's warning about the sensitivity of his content.

Consequently, the platform autonomously deleted his post and suspended his social media account.

Jacob expressed frustration with the lack of specific reasons provided for censorship, aside from the platforms vaguely labeling his content as “sensitive.” “All they said was that it was sensitive content. First, ‘warning, warning, warning,’ and then later my account was deleted,” he recounted with frustration. This was not an isolated incident as Jacob revealed experiencing censorship even when reposting content without adding his own words. “Most of the time on Twitter, when I retweet quotes, I don’t add my own words,” he explained. Consistent ignorance of warnings and content deletion ultimately led to the indefinite suspension of his Twitter account.

### **Blaze**

Blaze is a black 35-year-old male who lives in California. Blaze shared his experience of a 6-month suspension of his Facebook account, suspecting that another user reported him after he posted about recent events, including terrorist attacks. Notably, Facebook took a distinctive approach by directly communicating with Blaze through a private message to address the content in question: “They reached out to me privately just to confirm it with me personally. They wanted to ensure the post was still there and verify that it wasn’t an unauthorized account access situation. Subsequently, they informed me that general comments on topics like terrorism are prohibited under their rules.” He noted that Facebook also mentioned that while social media platforms generally allow users to express opinions and make comments on sensitive subjects, terrorism falls under the category of very sensitive topics. Thus, they reached out to him to seek clarification.

Blaze's experience stands out as unique among the interviewees because Facebook chose to engage with him directly, not through a demand but by inquiring and asking for an explanation of his post. Instead of a simple warning and demand for content removal, the platform sought clarification before deciding on the appropriate action regarding the post.

### **Christin**

Like other interviewees, Christin faced censorship for a video post, but hers is the only account of one such incident occurring on Instagram. Instagram concluded that Christin's video breached the platform's rules and regulations, yet the specifics behind the takedown remained undisclosed. Christin presumes that this action resulted from the video's explicit and bloody content, although Instagram did not explicitly outline the violation. Expressing frustration, Christin explained: "They said it was a violation of a rule. They did not say it because it was violent. So, the post was taken down, and then my account was suspended for a while."

### **James**

James is a black male from New York and is 25 years of age. James experienced censorship on his Facebook account. What makes James's experience unique is that it occurred in a closed group on the platform. James shared his frustrations with a college program, expressing his belief that the selection process was discriminatory. The program randomly chose participants, but James felt that he never had an equal opportunity.

Questioning the program's criteria initially yielded unsatisfactory answers. James turned to social media, specifically posting on Facebook, to vent his frustration and voice his concerns. Shortly thereafter, he was contacted by a school official, who discouraged airing grievances on the platform, citing concerns about the potential for inciting violence and starting a riot. The

school official requested that James remove his post, warning of serious consequences and potential disciplinary actions by the school.

James admitted that he removed the post from the private group: "I took it down because I did not want to rub shoulders with the school administration because that would get ugly." Despite deleting the post from the college's private group to avoid conflict with the administration, James maintained it on his private account, refusing to take it down. This decision triggered a Facebook investigation, leading to the deactivation of James's account. Facebook communicated with him about the investigation, ultimately flagging, removing, and suspending his account indefinitely due to the mention of a specific club in his post. James recounted the notification he received: "Facebook flagged it, took it down, and suspended my account."

*Tanya.*

Tanya is a 22-year-old white female from Massachusetts. She revealed that she encountered censorship on Twitter several times, even on seemingly non-controversial posts related to COVID-19 and quarantine. Even though her posts concerned inquiries or updates related to her college experience during the pandemic, they were either taken down or accompanied by disclaimers.

Her engagement with subjects like COVID-19 and quarantine was personal, driven by her experience of being sent home from college during the pandemic. Tanya recounted: "Even simple requests for updates or tweeting about my university resulted in my posts being taken down or posted with a caveat." An illustrative example was when Tanya expressed the need for booster shots; even liking such a post triggered a disclaimer prompting fact-checking: "For

example, we needed to get our booster shots. So even liking that post, I was given a caveat saying, 'be sure to check this post to fact check and see if this is real.'"

Notably, Tanya clarified that Twitter was not the only platform where she faced this type of censorship. While Twitter is her primary platform, she also experienced similar restrictions on Instagram, particularly when posting stories. Instagram, like Twitter, added disclosures when she shared content related to COVID. This dual-platform censorship highlighted the broader issue Tanya faced, transcending a single social media platform. "I am most active on Twitter, but I have experienced it on Instagram as well, specifically when posting on my story," said Tanya.

### **Brian**

Brian is a Texas resident and describes himself as a 32-year-old black male. Brian's encounter with censorship unfolded on Facebook during a religious debate, and his comments and responses were subjected to Facebook's content moderation. The discussion revolved around religious beliefs, primarily focusing on Christianity and Islam. Brian, attempting to share his opinions on these topics, found his comments censored by the platform.

He elaborated: "It was a post about religion discussing beliefs, particularly about Christians. I was expressing my views on Christianity and the Islamic religion." When queried about the nature of his comments, Brian clarified that he used "normal words" and maintained a factual tone. However, he acknowledged the subjective nature of perception, stating, "The words I used were normal, But, to someone else, they may have thought it might not be."

Expressing frustration, Brian lamented the censorship of his comments in a discussion centered on religion, emphasizing his desire to engage in a meaningful conversation. As a Christian, he aimed to foster a dialogue around the notion that "the wisdom of God is like

foolishness to man.” Brian speculated that the use of the term “foolishness” might have triggered Facebook’s decision to censor his comments.

### **Devon**

Devon, a resident of New York, is a white male and 29 years of age. Devon was censored by Facebook on account of his political content, which was deemed to violate the platform’s rules and regulations due to its perceived violence. Expressing discontent, Devon voiced his disappointment with the lack of clarity surrounding the specific rules breached and the absence of communication from Facebook when he sought further information about the takedown.

Devon explained:

The content was from a political point of view during President Trump’s administration.

Unfortunately, the exact rules or regulations violated were not specified. I even went to try to meet up with the admins to get further information because I believe social media is one of the spaces where I could have my freedom to express my political point of view, but frankly, the content was taken down. So, I could not get information on it.

Devon shared a parallel experience involving a friend who posted similar content but with different election results. Devon clarified that his political post contained asterisks in certain words, rendering them graphic, and the explicit language prompted a flag on his post. Despite removing it from Facebook, he proceeded to share the same content on WhatsApp without repercussions. When Devon attempted to repost the content on his Facebook page multiple times, Facebook responded by suspending his account for 3 days. Following the temporary suspension, Devon chose not to repost the content on Facebook.

**Walter**

Walter is a 24-year-old white male and a Texas resident. Much like Devon, Walter encountered censorship related to political posts during the 2020 election, but his experience unfolded on Twitter rather than Facebook. Recounting the incident, Walter shared: "It was during the 2020 election when Trump was campaigning. I used to retweet some of Trump's posts." Walter said he received warnings for a violation before removing his post due to his Tweet containing "violence." Walter explained: "Initially, I received a warning about a violation. Then they removed the post."

**Angelo**

Angelo described himself as a 25-year-old black male from New York. He found himself subjected to Facebook's censorship when he posted a video capturing an arrest. The removal of his video left him "shocked" and questioning the platform's decision: "I felt like, what happened? Why would they do that? Why would it feel like it is something bad for me to post or to post from the media for people to see?"

The rationale provided by Facebook for the video's censorship was "sensitive content," yet no further explanation was given. Dissatisfied with the lack of clarity, Angelo expressed his disagreement with the decision to take down his video, stating, "That's all they said. It was labeled as sensitive and deemed inconvenient for certain situations or environments." Angelo admitted that Facebook's action left him "angry" as he felt it should not have occurred.

Angelo's experience extended beyond Facebook as he recounted a similar incident on Twitter. A video he posted about a shooting was mysteriously removed, with no reason provided by the platform. The video, sourced from a friend, went blank after posting, leaving Angelo perplexed by the lack of explanation from Twitter.



**Jeffery**

Jeffery is a 23-year-old white male from New York. Jeffery shared an experience on Twitter where he posted what he deemed a comprehensive caption on a “sensitive topic.” Reflecting on the incident, he explained: “It was on Twitter, and I made a post about a very sensitive topic. I said everything which I knew was actually right.” Although the precise phrasing used by Twitter for the reason for removal escaped Jeffery’s memory, he recalled that the platform mentioned that his content caused a “lack of order.”

**Jake**

Jake is a black male, 24 years of age, and a Georgia resident. Jake recounted a recent encounter with social media censorship, which occurred just a few months before he volunteered as an interview participant. Jake shared that he had posted a photo on both Facebook and Twitter, focusing on a popular musician. However, while the post faced censorship on Facebook, identical content remained unaffected on his Twitter account. He believes that the censorship on Facebook was prompted by his failure to provide sufficient clarification for the information he posted.

Describing the sequence of events, Jake mentioned: “I posted on Facebook and on my Twitter. It was a photo with a caption, and it concerned a popular musician. While the post was blocked on Facebook, the exact same content was not blocked on Twitter.” Jake received a notification about the flagged post but was offline at the time of the incident. When he became aware of the censorship, he attempted to reach out to Facebook to clarify the post’s intent and the source of the content. However, he never received a response from Facebook on the topic.

**Results for RQ2: Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms think that censorship is ever justified or necessary?**

Question 12 in the questionnaire is tailored to address RQ2. Initially, it aims to discern whether participants perceive the censoring of their content as justified. Subsequently, the question delves deeper, seeking to uncover the rationale behind their stance and eliciting the “why” of their perception. The question is articulated as follows: “As explained previously with your censorship experience, do you believe the platform was justified in censoring your post? Why or why not?”

***Question 12 Answers and Findings***

Question 12 probes participants about whether they perceive the platform’s censoring of their posts as justified. Additionally, it encourages participants to provide a detailed explanation of their reasoning. Notably, 49% of participants expressed a belief that censorship was not justified, while 41% agreed that the applied censorship was warranted. About 10% either did not state a clear stance or interpreted censorship as both justified and unjustified to some extent.

**Reasons Why Social Media Platforms’ Censoring of Users is Justified**

***Terms and Conditions of the Platform***

The latter part of Question 12 delves into the rationales behind participants’ perspectives on the justification of post censorship. A prevalent sentiment among participants who deemed censorship justified centers on the acknowledgment that the platform possesses the authority to censor content based on its terms and conditions or policies. For instance, one participant emphasized that the breach was explicitly outlined in the platform’s terms and conditions: “Yes, it was stated in their terms and conditions.” Another concurred, stating, “Yes. I went against their

rules and regulations.” A third participant expressed a similar viewpoint: “based on their policy, I would say yes [it was justified].”

These participants underscored the platform’s prerogative to make decisions about what warrants censorship on a privately owned social media platform:

Censoring what you say on social media is a violation of your free speech, right? Well, not exactly. According to the First Amendment, free speech is the government’s responsibility. Private companies like YouTube and Twitter are allowed to monitor their platforms in whatever way they choose. Still, it’s obvious things are changing. Many would argue that social media platforms have become the new public square and the main forum for public discourse. People are certainly using their social media posts to express their political opinions more than ever before.

Similarly, another participant asserted that the decision to censor content is within the platform’s purview: “I think it was under their consideration.”

### ***The Need to Uphold Law and Order on Platforms***

One participant underscored the importance of curbing the circulation of false information, emphasizing the need for individuals to verify information before posting to avoid potential account restrictions. They stated: “Platform review is to prevent the spread of illegal content within the platform.” Another participant articulated the broader societal context, expressing the belief that the platform’s censorship was justified to uphold law and order: “Yes, I believe that this platform was justified in censoring posts. It is important because of politics, power, social norms, morals, and security concerns.”

Participants shared examples of censored violations, ranging from inadvertent actions to lapses in judgment. Instances included posts containing personally identifiable information, as

one participant admitted: “Yes, some things may be personally identifiable information.” Another acknowledged that their post was flagged due to its threatening nature towards another person: “Yes, it was because the post was threatening.” Moreover, a participant recognized that censorship was warranted to prevent potential depression in younger viewers, stating: “Yes [it is justified], because it can prevent depression in teenagers.” Another participant concurred, noting censorship due to “some unfiltered write-ups” and the general acknowledgment of a negative impact on others.

In a broader context, one participant advocated for private companies’ autonomy in content removal, asserting that the government should not dictate their actions unless they engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical practices. Most cited violations were linked to direct harm on other users, aligning with the perspective that such censorship serves to regulate online conduct, mitigate potential “insurrections,” and foster a safer and more productive social environment.

### **Reasons Why Social Media Platforms’ Censorship of Users is Not Justified**

A substantial number of individuals who argued against the platform’s decision primarily disagreed with the rationale provided for the censorship. Additionally, some participants expressed dissatisfaction due to a lack of communication, leaving them with the impression that there was no violation of the platform’s policies. The gathered information revealed several discernible themes, outlining the specific reasons for their disagreement with the platform’s decision to censor their content.

### ***Freedom of Speech is a Right***

Several questionnaire participants view censorship as a violation of human rights, with some equating it to an infringement on their “second amendment right.” These participants

adamantly express their disapproval of censorship, asserting that it contradicts their fundamental rights. For instance, one participant unequivocally stated, “I do not believe in censorship,” while another emphasized, “No, it was not justified. I believe everyone should be able to share their opinions on social media for others to learn from them.” These comments represent a subset of users articulating a general aversion to social media censorship practices.

However, not everyone perceives censorship in absolute terms. Some participants provided nuanced perspectives, offering specific reasons for their views. A recurrent theme was the emphasis on maintaining freedom of expression. Citing their United States citizenship rights, one participant rejected the justification for censorship, deeming it “Not at all justified, since I can express my thoughts and criticize anyone the way I want.” Another participant contended that censorship is unwarranted because it infringes on the right to speak freely: “No, violation of my rights to freedom of speech.” Another contributor concurred, asserting that “people should have freedom of expression.” These nuanced responses highlight varying viewpoints on the justifiability of censorship, with some participants linking their stance to broader principles of individual rights and freedom of expression.

### **Poor Application of Censorship by the Platform**

#### ***No Reason Given for the Censorship of Content***

Many participants who had experienced censorship on social media noted that the platform often failed to provide a specific reason for censoring their posts. In instances where reasons were offered, participants expressed the desire for more specificity, seeking clarity on how the stated reasons applied to their content. For instance, one participant argued: “It is not justified if I do not know the violation.” Some social media users received reasons for censorship

but contested their validity, stating that “They could not provide an explanation as to why the post was censored, and it did not violate any of their community standards.”

### ***Inconsistent Implementation of Censorship Practices***

The implementation of censorship policies by platforms exhibited inconsistency and inequality. A participant pointed out this disparity: “Other people posted similar things, but only mine was censored.” Another participant questioned the fairness of the censorship practices, asking, “there are a lot of gore videos on social media, why was mine flagged?” Several participants highlighted instances where the platform misunderstood or misrepresented their posts. One user argued that their post was not harmful because they did not perceive it as dangerous, stating that “The post was not immoral or illegal.”

A few questionnaire participants observed that the platform did not consistently censor the original poster of the content, even when the latter was reposted without alterations. Moreover, the platform’s communication regarding censorship varied, with reasons sometimes provided and sometimes not. Many participants concurred on the importance of transparency, asserting that content posters have the right to know why the platform enforces censorship. This not only substantiates the policy behind the action but also empowers content creators to better understand the boundaries of acceptable content for future posts. A participant also expressed frustration with inconsistency across different social media platforms, noting disparities in censorship practices.

### ***Censorship Performed by Artificial Intelligence***

Participants in the questionnaire brought attention to the utilization of AI for social media platform censorship. One user described an instance where mentioning photography and using the term “shot” in the context of taking a photo triggered an immediate COVID-19 disclosure.

The AI system misunderstood the reference, assuming it pertained to the vaccine. Users expressed a prevailing sentiment advocating for human oversight in censorship processes to prevent content from being misconstrued by AI, leading to unjust censorship.

### **Social Media Users Disagreeing with Platforms' Reason(s) for Censoring Content**

#### ***Wrongly Accused by the Platform***

Certain participants asserted that the platform's rationales for censorship were inaccurate and did not align with their content, attributing this discrepancy to instances where their posts were taken out of context. The earlier example, wherein the term "shot" triggered an AI system's misinterpretation, serves as a prime illustration of this situation. The user considered the censorship "unnecessary" because they were aware it occurred solely due to the automated code associated with the word "shot."

#### ***The Reason for Censorship Does Not Apply to the Post***

Several statements from questionnaire participants highlighted their disagreement with the platform's reasoning, asserting that the provided justifications did not appropriately apply to their specific content. For instance, a user flagged for "disturbing content" defended their post, contending that "sensitive topics are still important to discuss." Another participant argued that their content was not harmful as it "did not attack anyone specifically and, therefore, should be left alone." Additionally, they emphasized that "personal offense or disagreement of a view is not a good enough reason to flag a post."

Furthermore, a participant shared that users did not perceive any harm in a posted photo: "I just posted a picture of myself." In another instance, a user uploaded a picture of a half-dressed child, leading the platform to remove it for "sexually explicit material." The censored

poster argued that “children are not sexual beings,” expressing disagreement with the platform’s decision to censor the photograph.

When the social media platform asserted that a post contained false information, the content poster contested this claim: “it is not justified since I never posted any illegal content.” In another instance where the platform accused a user of hate speech, the content poster disagreed, saying: “I do not think the censorship was just. They should not have censored the ‘hate speech’ and ‘racist words’ in the Tweet.”

Moreover, several questionnaire participants echoed the sentiment that social media platforms should refrain from intervening in political and social media posts. A user highlighted that when platforms delve into political matters, it appears as if they are adopting a “political bias stance on a topic.” Consequently, displaying political bias was perceived as unfair and unjust to social media participants.

### ***Interview Question 3 and Answers***

Approximately 75% of interview participants believed that the platform’s decision to censor their post was unjustified, with the remaining 25% deeming it justified. Each interviewee offered comprehensive insights into the reasoning behind their individual answers. A subset of interview participants held the view that the platform’s censorship of their content was justified. The summary below provides concise reasons supporting these stances, with quotations to represent each justification.

#### **Jeffery**

Jeffery acknowledges that Twitter has the legal right “to a point” to censor his content given his agreement to the platform’s terms and conditions upon joining. However, he disputes the validity of their reason for censoring his content, emphasizing the need for updates to the



terms and conditions: “I think to a point, yes, but still, I know I was right. Taking the post down—that is not right since I could have easily made adjustments. But they just took it down.”

### **Jake**

Jake conceded that the platform’s actions were justifiable, acknowledging that he should have clarified his content before making it public. He stated: “Yeah. I should have clarified the content before I made it public; the action was justifiable.” Additionally, he expressed gratitude for the platform’s notification of the censorship: “The fact that they notified me, I was glad about that.”

### **Brian**

Brian experienced anger upon discovering that the platform had censored his posted content. Despite this initial emotional reaction, Brian acknowledged that he understood that the action was justifiable, recognizing that he had violated regulations on speech. He reflected: “Initially, I was angry. But I am trying to just remember the fact that I broke the regulation on speech.”

### **Reasons Why the Platform Was Not Justified in Censoring Social Media Content**

#### ***Tanya***

Tanya staunchly asserted the unjust nature of the censorship imposed on her content, vehemently disagreeing with the platform’s claim that her post constituted hate speech. “It was not any sort of hate speech. I do not think that that is the case. I think that you should be able to post what you want within reason,” she emphasized. Tanya also recounted a previous instance where merely liking a post resulted in a warning about false information, further fueling her belief that the censorship was unwarranted.

***Jacob***

Jacob argued that the platform engaged in discriminatory practices, citing an incident where the same content shared by someone else faced no censorship. In contrast, Jacob's reposting accompanied by his own quotes was flagged. "If somebody else has posted it, and it was not censored or deleted—why is it that when I reposted it with my own quotes it is a problem? I do not feel like it is fair," he expressed, highlighting a perceived inconsistency in the platform's actions.

***Devon***

Echoing Jacob's sentiments, Devon perceived the treatment of his content compared to others who shared similar political content as unfair. "I went through a feed on the political page, and people shared some content that supported the administration. Not only were the contents left online, but even those that shared the content were not flagged. Their content was not so different from mine," he explained, pointing out a disparity in the platform's response.

***James***

James contended that censorship lacked justification, emphasizing the absence of communication with the platform: "I do not feel it [was] justified because they never heard my side of the story." Reflecting on the nature of his posted content, he expressed: "The kind of content I posted in my timeline, I do not feel it really needed that much attention. So, to an extent- my account [was] only flagged because of a single person's reaction."

***Christine***

Christine is a black 26-year-old from Texas. She one of the two female interview participants within the study. Christine states that she believes that the censoring of her posted content was unnecessary because the content was not causing harm to a person: "I do not think

so because the posts were not causing harm to anybody. It was just more like passing across the information. Like so some people know what is happening. So, I do not think it was justified to take down my post.”

*Angelo*

Freedom of speech served as the justification for Angelo’s belief that the platform was wrong in taking down his posts. “I think I have the right to post freely on social media and to make my opinions on views being seen by other people,” he asserted. He expressed concern about the platform infringing on users’ rights: “So, I think it is actually a way of just shutting me down and not expressing my rights.”

*Walter*

Walter shared Angelo’s concern about the lack of freedom of speech on social media platforms. “I think, for social media platforms, it is not the right thing to do. I think they should not moderate people’s content because you are limiting the freedom of speech of other people. So yeah, I do not agree with what they do,” he concluded, emphasizing the importance of preserving freedom of speech on these platforms.

**Results for RQ3: Do those who believe that they have been censored on social media platforms change their views on censorship?**

RQ3 delves into the impact of personal experiences with social media censorship on users’ perspectives. Specifically, Question 13 in the qualitative section of the questionnaire aimed to uncover nuanced insights on the topic. The initial segment of the question probed whether participants’ views changed following their encounters with censorship. Notably, a majority (56%) of the 115 participants acknowledged a shift in their perspectives. Conversely,

30% maintained that their views remained unaltered, while 14% provided either unclear or neutral responses. Question 13 was presented as follows:

After experiencing social media censorship, did your views on social media censorship change? If so, what changed and why did you come to that conclusion? If your views stayed consistent after your experience, please explain why

In the second part of Question 13, participants were prompted to articulate how their views evolved post censorship. The responses generated a spectrum of themes, unveiling diverse dimensions of the participants' changing perspectives.

### ***Question 13 Answers and Findings***

#### **How Experiencing Social Media Censorship Changed Platform Users' Actions**

Question 13 asked the questionnaire participants if their experience with social media censorship changed their views; many participants stated that they had. Additionally, many users described the course of action that they followed as a result of experiencing censorship of their content. For example, some users became more selective with what they post online: "Yes [my views changed], I am caution with what I post since it is censored, and it can bring some unnecessary problems."

#### ***Users Post Less on their Platforms***

One participant stated that their "views" on social media did not change, but the experience of censorship affected their posting habits: "My view did not change about social media. I just had to conclude that certain things are not meant to be shared on the social media space." Some users avoided certain types of content because of a user's experience: "My view changed in posting politics jokes because it can lead me to problems." Other participants admitted that they had stopped posting altogether. "I stopped frequently using Facebook,"

explained one, while another wrote, "It [my view on social media] changed, so I stayed away from posting for a while." Some users also developed a negative outlook on social media, which affected their actions on the platform: "It caused me to dislike social media strongly and to even stop posting."

### ***Users Act More Cautiously on Social Media Platforms***

As stated previously, some participants' experiences of censorship caused them to post less frequently or stop posting altogether in some cases. However, these experiences had the opposite effect on others. Participants wrote about becoming more careful about posting and seeking a second opinion before making a post: "My view changed in the sense that I seek people's consent before posting what directly happened to them." Censored social media users also stopped posting on a specific platform because of the experience. Furthermore, users stated that anything on social media may be offensive to someone and that this should not be enough reason to censor content.

### ***Users Conform to the Platform's Rules***

While a few participants noted that their social media habits did not change after their experience of censorship, asserting, "I still post whatever I want," others did modify their online practices. Participants knew what they had to change because the platform communicated it to them; they took the feedback and "adjusted to the community rules." Another participant's views did not change, but they wrote that they "just had to adjust to the community rules." Another commenter stated, "I became more aware of what I post."

## **Negative Views Developed from Experiencing Social Media Censorship**

### ***Distrust of the Social Media Platform***

Poor censorship practices led to users' strong distrust of social media platforms. One user wrote: "I believe all censorship is wrong. Whether it is a post I agree with or not, people have a right to voice their opinions." Another explained: "I no longer trust fact-checkers or community standards keepers on social media sites. The more they push back, the more I want to know." Some participants felt that social media platforms are too controlling: "Yes, my view changed. I feel like the bodies in charge of social media are a bit too controlling, trying to decide what is best and not best and disregarding public opinions and ideas."

Some respondents even went as far as to say that the platforms are corrupt and do not look out for the well-being of their users but instead have an agenda of some kind; they saw social media as not for the people but rather as seeking profit and control. "I definitely believe social media is influenced by an agenda/government. It is not about the people, just profit & control," a participant asserted. Another stated: "It is entirely possible that real information is blocked along with fake information, which opens up a large debate about what you should and should not restrict/access." Yet another participant wrote: "I feel like social media censorship isn't always justified. They just do this because they can."

### ***Censorship Practices in Need of Process Improvement***

Participants often developed negative outlooks on social media censorship due to the need to improve the censorship process. "They are limiting freedom of expression," said one comment, while another argued that "Social media has too much power." Experiencing censorship made participants rethink how they came to conclusions regarding what should be censored and whether they are doing enough to "prevent the spread of illegal content" but

continue to censor the wrong content in their opinion: “Much of it is way insensitive and very unnecessary,” said a comment.

One idea that questionnaire participants entertained to improve the censorship process is to get the United States government involved so that a higher authority can provide checks and balances:

Nevertheless, government regulation does have an important role to play in increasing the transparency with which social media companies operate—transparency that would subject such companies to greater public scrutiny and increase the pressure to mitigate the worst effects of polarization.

The user believed that government involvement can minimize the corruption of social media platforms and make them adjust their regulations for the good of the people.

### **Social Media Users Learned From their Experience**

Some questionnaire participants looked at their censorship experience as a learning opportunity. For example, one commenter noted that they now had a better understanding of the social media platform’s rules and expectations: “My view changed as I was made to understand that sending random DM’s [direct messages] or dropping unwanted/abusive comments on other users['] DM is abusing the social media platform as a whole.” Another user wrote that he “better understands the audit system” now.

### ***Interview Question 4 and Answers***

#### **Interview Participants’ New Views on Social Media Censorship**

Interview Question 4 asked the participants whether they believed that their views on social media censorship had changed due to their experience. All interview participants admitted

that their personal experience with censorship had altered their opinions. They then elaborated on what changed and how they now viewed social media censorship.

*Tanya*

Tanya expressed that she was deeply affected by her censorship experience and that her opinion changed after this experience. She explained that before her experience, she did not have a formed opinion on social media censorship or give it much thought: “Oh, definitely. I think I never really had an opinion on censorship. Especially just pre COVID. It just was not something that really existed. And something that I was not, you know, super aware of.”

Tanya recalled that she had to work remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that this led her to pay more attention to what was happening on social media. Once she started using her social media accounts more, she became more aware of the censorship that was taking place: “As you know, things went remote. We relied so much more on social media for updates and staying connected that when that did happen, it was definitely a shock.”

*James*

James commented that his opinion on terms and policies for social media platforms evolved after his experience of being censored: “The legal separation- it should not be there. Some content should not go online, but they go online.” He added: “But then there should be kind of some rules and guidelines on how it is done. It cannot just be done randomly.” James elaborated on the inconsistency of the application of social media censorship: “And let us say that today—this will be an issue. The next day—it will not be an issue.”

*Jeffery*

Jeffery's perspective underwent a significant shift after he experienced social media censorship, prompting him to recognize the immense power wielded by these platforms. He



emphasized the selective nature of their choices: “You know, it made me realize these people are super powerful, and they get to pick exactly the ones they want.”

*Walter*

Walter, too, experienced a change in viewpoint post censorship. He questioned whether the guidelines and policies align with the fundamental values of the US, particularly freedom of speech and democracy. Walter asserted: “After that, I felt that social media does not stand with freedom of speech, liberty, and democracy. So yeah, maybe it needs to change.

*Devon*

Reflecting on the recent Twitter events involving Elon Musk reinstating accounts, Devon admitted that a shift occurred in his own views on social media censorship. He observed the paradox of social media as a public space governed by private individuals: “So yeah, this event has changed my idea about social media. It is a public space for the people, but it still runs on dictatorship or the private individual.” Devon recognized the platform’s role in providing a space for individuals to express opinions they might hesitate to voice in person, describing it as a means to exercise human rights. He thus acknowledged social media’s dual nature, capable of giving voice to the voiceless and empowering individuals to articulate their views openly.

*Christine*

Much like her fellow interviewees, Christine’s perspective underwent a transformation after she faced social media censorship. She recounted witnessing friends undergo similar experiences online: “I know some friends who had their videos taken down, but I do not have details of what happened.” However, experiencing censorship firsthand brought to light aspects she had not initially considered, such as platforms’ opaque justifications for censoring users.

Christine reflected: "After it happened to me, I just feel like sometimes when this does happen, they do not really justify it as they should."

### *Blaze*

Blaze conveyed a mix of surprise and disappointment at finding himself censored and banned from his account for a substantial period (6 months). This unexpected turn led him to question the platform's commitment to free speech. He explained: "For some reason, at first, I was really disappointed. I never expected to get out of my social media account for about 6 months. I thought it was not fair, you know, punishment, for whatever happened." Blaze's experience highlighted the apparent contradiction between the platform's claim to be a space for free speech and its propensity to censor and remove posts deemed inappropriate. He realized that expressing one's perspective, even on factual matters, can lead to censorship on a platform that ostensibly champions free speech. In essence, Blaze recognized the tangible consequences of one's actions in the realm of social media.

### *Frank*

Frank's perspective shifted significantly, accompanied by frustration, as he found himself compelled to start anew on a different social media platform due to an indefinite ban on his previous account. Reflecting on the experience, he remarked: "I did not realize maybe this could happen to me, so my view changed a lot. Maybe you have had an account for 3 to 4 years, and it is blocked, so you have to create another one. You have lost information and groups." The unfortunate loss of years' worth of content underscored the platform's disapproval of his posted material.

***Jacob***

Jacob developed a belief that platforms base their censorship decisions on popularity and social status: "In a way, I understand that not just anyone can post. Like, it depends on what multitude or impact you have. It depends on maybe the number of likes you usually get, comments, retweets, and everything. Like, not just anyone can just post any type of sensitive content. That is why I feel like it is unfair. My view is not fair to everyone." Jacob highlighted his perception that popularity and influence play a role in determining the acceptability of posted content on social media.

***Angelo***

In Angelo's case, frustration arose as he realized that he could not freely vent about public injustices towards certain races in the United States on Facebook without facing censorship. He expressed his sentiments as follows: "I felt like, it is bad if Black Americans cannot go public and express their thoughts on why they feel about politics and about how Black Americans are being treated on the street." Angelo emphasized the significance of the Internet as a platform for expressing feelings and thoughts, underlining its role in providing hope and a means for self-expression. However, the removal of his post left him feeling unheard, raising concerns about social media's apparent lack of interest in diverse perspectives. He stressed the importance of social media as a tool for combating racism and preserving freedom of speech.

***Jake***

Jake decided to conform to the platform's rules based on the feedback he received. Jake admits that the experience of censorship made him reflect on whether he should post his content: "Yeah, my view changed. Now, before I put something on, I make sure it has some clarification before I know, send it out to the public."

***Brian***

Like Jake, Brian wished to conform more to the platform's rules and regulations. However, he appreciated that the platform clarified its policies when censoring his content, so he now understands to be more careful with his word choice when posting: "Yes, it has changed my view. Now at least because of that incident, I know how to put my comments and how to reply to certain things on social media platforms. At least I know the words to use, when to use them, and how to use them." Jake appreciated the feedback from the platform, which helped him understand how to articulate his ideas better in the future.

**Results for RQ4: Should social media companies change their current social media censorship practices?**

The study's final research question focuses on utilizing the newfound insights from participants to address the concerns they raised about social media. Question 4 was formulated as follows: "Do you believe that social media platforms need to change any current practices on censorship? What changes would you recommend, if any, and why?" By leveraging their experiential knowledge of the social media process, participants are well-positioned to pinpoint inconsistencies, flaws, and injustices in the current system. This makes them valuable subject-matter experts capable of offering constructive solutions for refining existing practices.

A considerable number of questionnaire participants actively contributed suggestions for enhancing current social media censorship practices. These suggestions are organized thematically, encompassing areas such as government involvement, proactive measures for social media platforms, safeguarding freedom of speech, improving user-platform communication, recommendations for social media policies, and subjects that social media should or should not censor in the future.

### **Questionnaire Question 11 Answers and Findings**

Among the 115 participants surveyed, 24% were of the opinion that the current practices of social media platforms required no alterations, whereas a significant majority of 74% advocated for necessary changes. A mere 2% expressed uncertainty on the matter. Notably, the recommendations provided by participants predominantly centered on the types of changes deemed crucial for comprehensive process enhancement.

Some respondents underscored the advantages of reducing or eliminating censorship altogether, emphasizing the value of unrestricted expression. Numerous comments underlined the importance of “freedom of speech,” advocating for greater latitude in posting content. Conversely, a substantial number recognized the merits of censorship, contingent on improvements to its current implementation. This nuanced perspective highlights the complexity of opinions regarding the role and extent of censorship in social media practices.

#### ***Platforms Do Not Need to Make Changes to Censorship Practices***

Not every participant called for changes to censorship practices, and some social media users who experienced censorship acknowledged the positive aspects of how platforms currently handle censorship. A participant expressed satisfaction, stating: “The current practice on censorship on social media platforms is okay by me because people must really have to verify information before posting them to avoid their account getting blocked.”

For many respondents, safety emerged as a pivotal reason to appreciate the existing censorship practices. A participant highlighted this perspective: “No not really, this helps to regulate online ‘insurrections,’ promotes people's safety, and enhances a productive social environment.” The recognition of safety as a key consideration underscores the multifaceted nature of opinions on the role of censorship in fostering a secure and constructive online space.

***Increasing Government Involvement with Social Media Platforms***

Various comments shed light on a nuanced perspective regarding government involvement in shaping platform policies. One viewpoint suggested limited government intervention, with an emphasis on preserving transparency within social media companies. According to one comment, government regulation can enhance platform transparency, subjecting these companies to public scrutiny and pressuring them to address the adverse effects of polarization. The comment reflected a belief that judicious government oversight can be a positive force in mitigating potential issues.

Another participant highlighted the delicate balance between protecting private company rights and recognizing the need for government involvement to a certain extent. The participant explained: "I think that private companies have the right to remove any content they do not like and do not think the U.S. government has any grounds to 'tell' private entities what they can/cannot do (unless it's illegal, immoral, or unethical)." The participant thus advocated for limited government intervention, focusing specifically on matters deemed illegal, immoral, or unethical, thereby delineating a boundary for governmental involvement.

***Platforms Must Maintain and Possibly Strengthen Censorship Practices***

Several participants underscored the importance of maintaining censorship practices for the well-being of the community, expressing sentiments such as "They should keep the censorship as it makes the community safe and accommodating for all users." Another participant echoed this perspective, stating that "Censorship helps to regulate online 'insurrections,' promote people's safety, and enhances a productive social environment." The consensus among questionnaire participants was that the platforms should actively address all unpleasant situations to ensure a secure environment.

In summary, safety emerged as a paramount concern among participants, and they expressed the view that the platforms should continue enhancing security measures. While opinions on the specifics of censorship practices may vary, the participants generally appreciated the safety they bring to the platform. One participant acknowledged the necessity of censorship for protecting young adults and children: “Yes, it needs to go back to freedom of speech unless it is directly harmful, such as gruesome content.” The participant insisted on the need for social media platforms to manage spam accounts more effectively to shield vulnerable individuals from inappropriate content and potential exploitation.

### ***Implementing Changes to Protect Freedom of Speech***

The questionnaire participants underscored freedom of speech as a key concern on social media. One respondent advocated for a nuanced approach, suggesting that platforms should “allow hate speech if it is not slander or threatening.” Another participant recommended a moderation of censorship, proposing that “a little less censorship” would be a positive enhancement.

Some participants asserted that censorship should be applied sparingly, reserving intervention for extreme cases to foster a healthy public discourse on various topics. As one participant expressed, “You must have open and free discourse. Only the worst of worst comments should be removed.” Another participant highlighted the educational value of graphic material, arguing that “They should at least not ban some violent pictures posts because some of it has a great lesson in it.”

The potential harm that social media may inflict on children and young adults stood out as a persuasive argument supporting the need for censorship. One participant proposed a strategic approach, suggesting that platforms should tailor censorship based on age to safeguard

children and teenagers while opposing broad restrictions: “If a post is not meant for a particular age grade or class or race whatsoever, then they should deny those affected accounts the ability to view, rather than stopping everyone from viewing.” Clearly, the participants endorsed a system where posts intended for specific age groups are selectively restricted, presenting a nuanced solution to address this concern.

### ***Improving Two-Way Communication Between the User and the Platform***

Numerous comments in the questionnaire underscored the importance of fostering two-way communication between platforms and users. One participant emphasized this need, stating that “They [the platforms] should consider giving room for two-way communication.” Another contributor echoed this sentiment: “I recommend they discuss directly with posters on social media to know why they posted the content.” Additionally, participants stressed the significance of clarifying the reasons behind content censorship. One participant explained: “They should not censor content in any way they feel like. They need to let us know the reason why this content is being censored on a particular social media platform.”

Censored users are eager to understand how they violated the rules, highlighting the necessity for platforms to communicate the violation to the user. This approach not only enhances user awareness for future posting but also encourages platforms to substantiate their decisions based on policy, thus fostering consistency and motivating ongoing policy improvement.

Improved communication is also vital to establishing an open dialogue on violations. Users posit that censored comments or posts are sometimes misconstrued or taken out of context. To address this, a participant suggested minimizing the reliance on AI systems and incorporating human judgment to assess posts within context: “Yes, they should pay extra attention to the posts



of users on the platform, not just letting the AI do the checks.” Another contributor concurred: “Yes, I would recommend they get to understand the point of speech before carrying out any action.” Empowering users to explain themselves can prevent misunderstandings and reduce unnecessary censorship perceived as a violation of freedom of speech.

### *Types of Content Social Media Platforms Should Censor*

Various suggestions were put forth regarding the topics that social media platforms should cease censoring, with notable mentions including politics and music (for copyright reasons). A participant succinctly expressed dissatisfaction with music censorship, stating: “The music censorship is totally unnecessary.” Participants collectively voiced a desire for less censorship across comments, images, videos, and private groups, with one participant asserting that “They should relax the rules.”

Nonetheless, recommendations were also made for diligent censorship on specific topics. One participant advocated for the removal of only the most egregious comments, citing examples such as child pornography, murder, or rape. Another suggested that extreme violence should be carefully monitored due to its potential to trigger, upset, or disturb users. Participants also noted that censorship could be justified when the user is found to be “breaking the law.”

Opinions on current censorship practices diverged among participants, with some acknowledging their importance in preventing misinformation, while others emphasized their necessity in addressing various pressing issues. One participant supported the existing censorship measures, stating: “The current practice of censorship on social media platforms is okay by me because people must really have to verify the information before posting them to avoid their account being blocked.” Additionally, participants reiterated the need for censorship to prevent violent insurrections, shield vulnerable individuals from scammers, mitigate the risk of increased

depression among users, and address abusive language, encompassing but not limited to hate speech and racism.

### **Question 15 Answers and Findings**

The final question, Question 15, served as the last opportunity for participants to share additional insights on censorship on social media platforms. The question was formulated as follows: “Do you have any other comments about censorship about social media platforms?” The responses predominantly encapsulated participants’ concluding thoughts, summarizing and reinforcing key concepts from earlier responses within the questionnaire.

#### ***Censorship Corruption on Social Media Platforms***

Throughout the questionnaire, participants voiced robust opinions on their perceptions of censorship. They delved into the political dimension, highlighting concerns about platform political bias. One comment succinctly captured this sentiment: “Social media is definitely biased to one political side.” Another participant echoed a prevalent belief, stating that “Americans by and large believe social media companies are censoring political viewpoints they find objectionable.” A deeper critique emerged as one participant expressed apprehension about the broader issues surrounding social media platforms, citing concerns about political motivations, profit-driven decisions, and the accumulation of power:

I think it’s a larger issue than censorship. Big Tech accrued profits and power over our lives without accruing corresponding regulations needed to protect users. By pilfering personal data; perpetuating inequalities between marginalized groups (digital redlining); Big Tech can potentially undermine American democracy as well as democracies abroad.

Ethical considerations emerged as a prominent concern among questionnaire participants, who questioned the true motives behind social media censorship, suggesting that ethical principles may not always be the driving force behind such actions.

### ***Policy Suggestions for a Better Process***

Questionnaire participants directed their attention towards policy suggestions in their responses. A consensus emerged that “violence” and “vulgar language” should serve as grounds for censorship. As one participant expressed, “Censorship should be there but should be limited only to violent videos and super harsh wording.”

The importance of improved communication between users and platforms was highlighted, with a participant writing, “Tell me where the violation is so I do not make the same mistake.” Recognizing the diversity of users, another participant called for social media regulations to be considerate of people from various backgrounds, stating that “Social media laws have to consider different personalities of people.” These policy suggestions aim to refine the censorship process by establishing clear guidelines, enhancing communication, and acknowledging the diverse perspectives of social media users.

### ***Negative Thoughts on Social Media Censorship***

Participants' opinions regarding the merits of censorship varied, encompassing perspectives on its goodness, potential drawbacks, the necessity for reform, and perceptions of mishandling by platforms. One participant delved into the “negative effects” of social media platforms, while another characterized censorship as a “scam,” positing that users have unwittingly fallen prey to it: “Social media companies are under increased scrutiny for their mishandling of hateful speech and fake news on their platforms.” In addition, one response called for governmental audits to enhance security: “Social media needs to be audited to ensure

the security of the platform's own content." These diverse viewpoints illustrate the nuanced and multifaceted nature of opinions surrounding social media censorship.

The respondents also addressed concerns about perceived corruption within social media companies. One participant highlighted platforms' shift from an earlier state and expressed a desire for a return to those origins: "Hopefully, things change and revert to the way they used to be when the apps first came out. They always seem to be normal in the beginning. However, once they have a big enough platform, they manipulate people." This reflects a nostalgic perspective, emphasizing the participant's yearning for the simplicity and authenticity of the platform's early days.

### **Recent Evolution of Social Media Sites**

The dynamic nature of social media is evident as platforms continuously evolve and undergo changes in their developmental journey. Recent transformations on Twitter, particularly following Elon Musk's assumption of the role of CEO, garnered positive remarks from participants, with one commenter opining that "Elon is doing great things." Additionally, there was recognition of the emergence of new platforms that challenge the existing social media monopoly:

There are a lot of alternate social media sites now, like Minds.com, which are much more open and seem to be growing. Each site has its own personality, and that is a good thing. The days of mega-data-mining sites like Facebook and Twitter are starting to end. We could see one, if not both, shut down by the 2024 elections due to lack of user interaction and therefore low revenue from ads.

Social media users who may not be happy with the current state of social media platforms are still optimistic about the future of social media.

**Interview Question 5 and Answers**

In their answers to Question 5, interview participants provided insights into the changes they deemed necessary for improving the censorship process. All the interview participants agreed that some change is necessary to improve current social media censorship practices. Drawing inspiration from their direct experiences, the participants' responses showcased a diverse range of opinions. Common themes emerged, such as the importance of enhanced communication between users and platforms, increased transparency in rules and regulations, a call for less stringent censorship practices to safeguard freedom of speech, and an overall desire for an improved reporting process.

***Brian***

Brian highlighted a positive aspect of the current process, noting that he appreciated the ability to directly message the person responsible for a post or comment and observe their activity: "Firstly, I really appreciate that I can message the person that made the comments or the reply or the post and that I can see about what the commentator just did and your activity." Brian advocated for enhancing communication between users and the platform as a means of improving censorship practices: "I think we should make some adjustments or make some changes to it. That will be better than censoring the person's comments on the social media platform."

***Devon***

Devon asserted that while some level of censorship is necessary, the current trend of over-censorship on social media platforms, especially on Facebook, dissuaded him and fellow users from actively participating:

Some social media calls for that [censorship]. Personally, after the censorship event, I have not been using Facebook as much. I would rather take my opinions elsewhere, where I would find like-minded individuals to support the campaign, have a thing to say about my post, or would rather engage without being judgmental. Like Twitter or take it to my WhatsApp page where it is just close friends and relatives.

Devon's reduced engagement on Facebook stemmed from his perception of excessive censorship, prompting him to seek alternative spaces for expressing his opinions and connecting with a more supportive audience.

### *Jeffery*

In contrast to Brian's perspective, Jeffery voiced his dissatisfaction with prevailing social media censorship practices, citing a notable lack of communication during the process. Jeffery contended that the platform should have engaged in dialogue with him, suggesting adjustments to specific aspects of his post rather than resorting to outright deletion: "I believe in freedom of speech. In my scenario, they could have easily asked me to change some things—I would have considered that. But unfortunately, they do not speak to the community that way." Jeffery advocated for improved two-way communication, positing that it could lead to less censorship, enabling users to modify their posts to align with platform rules.

### *Angelo*

Angelo echoed the sentiments of other interviewees, including Brian and Jeffery, emphasizing the inadequacy of communication about the reasons for censorship:

I think there should be more detailed information about why it was so taken down. There should be a more reason and a more accurate explanation about the post that was taken down. I feel like there should be more than enough information and more than enough

evidence on why my post or annual report was being taken down. To know the reason why it was taken down. Them giving information like that will let me know “why” and “what is next.” So, from there- I know if I am trying to post a video or picture, or media, data files on the internet, I know it might be taken down because I am not actually following the guidelines, or the guidelines lived by the social media platform I am using. I think it should tell more on why it is taken down and why it is harmful to viewers.

Angelo believed that providing clearer rules and communication to users would lead to fewer violations and reduce the likelihood of repeated occurrences.

### ***Blaze***

Blaze underscored the importance of notifying users when their content is censored and proposed implementing a warning system before resorting to post deletion:

I think they should rethink some of the rules they have and how to notify someone about it. I think there should be something like a warning plan. You know, before total censorship, and this should be a warning sign. And if the person does not heed to the warnings and all then, action may be undertaken, not decided, action being taken sometimes just take some kind of plan of security measures. It can be kind of friendly, and really coming in for a personal question. I think that would be a good start, you know? Show some kind of perspective, some kind of rights the person has over his social media account.

Blaze advocated a more gradual approach, incorporating warnings and personal engagement before resorting to extreme measures to provide users with a fair chance to adhere to platform guidelines.

*Christine*

Christine suggested a more user-driven approach to content enforcement on social media platforms, arguing that policies should only be enforced if other users report the content as offensive: "I think when we just get reported multiple times, that is when we should take it down. But if you do not give reports, I do not see any reason why they should get taken down." Christine wished for a system that considers user input through reports, promoting fairness, and community-driven content moderation.

*Walter*

Walter underlined the importance of transparent terms that users can easily access. He suggested that freedom of speech should not be restricted because this stifles the expression of diverse ideas. Instead, he advocated for open discussions within the framework of agreed-upon terms:

I think they should have their terms that we can easily see, but they should not limit freedom of speech because when they do that, they are avoiding people's ideas. So, they should have terms, and we will accept the terms we must follow. I think they should allow people to have an open discussion. When you have an open discussion, they should apply doctrine because most of the time, we will get censored, and you are just trying to have an open discussion. So, when they commit to their terms, they should focus on that. They should not just remove your post.

Walter envisioned a more democratic approach whereby censorship is triggered by user reports based on the agreed-upon terms, fostering open dialogue on the platform.



***James***

James emphasized the necessity for clearer rules and regulations to govern user engagement on the platform:

I feel rules of engagement with the users of that need [to be] clarified because when my account was flagged, I do not feel I really gave it too much thought. Maybe because the person who may have reported my account had the upper hand, but that does not mean I do not get to tell you my side of my story before such a decision is made. I feel there needs to be clear guidelines. Especially for the users. They need to be informed of when you do such things then this will help into your account. And when you keep with the rules, and there are guidelines, then we will know who is cooperating. I feel the need for the general users on social media also to get a grasp of how this really works.

James advocated for transparent guidelines, informed communication, and user education to create a more cooperative and informed social media community.

***Tanya***

Tanya insisted on the importance of clear and comprehensible guidelines for all users, contending that the current rules are too vague and laden with legal jargon:

I think there should be more specific guidelines when you sign up for the social media platform that you must agree to the guidelines. If there are new guidelines, make users agree to those, and the guidelines should be legible. Also, the rules and guidelines should not contain much legal jargon, so the average person does not know what they are signing up for on the platform. Users can either agree and decide to move forward with the platform or not move forward. I think we are moving forward with more kinds of disclosure on what you are getting yourself into and what you can post, and what you

cannot on this site. Every site can have rules, but it should make it easier for the consumer to figure out what is allowed and what is not.

Tanya supported the platforms' right to establish rules but called for transparency, user-friendly language, and clear communication of any rule changes.

### ***Jacob***

Jacob proposed a more user-friendly approach to censorship, advocating for increased user awareness and a warning system:

They should give you a chance to be like, "OK," or they should be like "OK, the problem is with us." We do not really read the terms and conditions to post. So even if you say they introduce some terms and conditions, we will agree. What I think they should do is, like Twitter right now, just mark your post as sensitive. Another thing is that before deleting content, I think they should provide you a warning, and they should give you a chance to delete it yourself. Like maybe do not delete your account but instead, suspend it or something.

Jacob envisioned a censorship process that provides users with more control and warnings before taking drastic measures.

### **Interview Question 6 and Answers**

For the interview's concluding question, participants offered closing remarks about their experiences with censorship and their overall perspectives. Like the questionnaire responses, these final comments summarized earlier views and experiences expressed throughout the interview. The researcher subsequently distilled these insights into thematic connections to offer a comprehensive view of the participants' sentiments.

### ***The Importance of Terms and Conditions***

Terms and conditions serve as the guidelines users must adhere to on the platform. Frank noted that “every social media platform has its own way to measure its terms and conditions.” He underscored the importance of thoroughly reading and comprehending these terms and conditions before engaging with the platform. Frank then elaborated on the necessity of these rules, pointing out that they play a crucial role in preventing illegal activities: “Some people use the platform to maybe do business which is illegal or something like that. When people see this, they report it. So, the censorship in this way is very, very good”.

### ***Consistent Censorship is Necessary***

Some interviewees took Question 6 as an opportunity to delve deeper into the observed discrepancies in the application of censorship to different individuals. Blaze, for instance, remarked on unequal treatment, noting that popular social media figures were not censored in the same manner as those with a less prominent status: “I see generally that the rule applies just to specific individuals. Swap lines to people of high-profile dignitaries to classes and maybe. You know, find the president from social media platforms and it’s kind of effective. So yeah, that in general I think it’s an example of how much the business of social media irrespective of social status.”

### ***Censorship Creates Order on Social Media***

James acknowledged that censorship is necessary because it brings order to social media platforms: “It is a good initiative because without order, in any kind of place, there will not be anything productive going on. So that applies to social media. They need order, and I think social media censorship kind of brings that.” However, he pointed out that the implementation process is a work in progress: “But then how is it implemented? The implementation process should be

really taken care of. It should be user friendly. I should be able to understand that when I do this, clearly, these are the kind of consequences that I will be facing.”

### ***Improving Communication Between the Platform and the User***

Many participants were deeply troubled by the lack of dialogue between the platform conducting censorship and the user. According to Jacob, “Sometimes they ask you why you think your post was deleted. Now it is like they are asking *you* the question *why* they did what they did to you. It should be: ‘we deleted the post because of this reason and that is not allowed.’” Jacob also proposed that, aside from warning users about the platform’s terms and conditions, there should be a grace period for dialogue before account deletion: “I had built my account for a long time. I had to start from scratch, which was a bit difficult. Maybe like a 2-week ban or a month. It should not be indefinite.”

Jeffery also advocates for improved communication between the user and the platform, particularly when there are concerns about a post. He believes that people should be given the opportunity to defend and explain their posts before any action is taken: “The person who is on the other side posting—we have to give them an opportunity to prove and kind of explain their post.”

### ***Censorship Protects Social Media Users***

Despite experiencing censorship for violent content, Angelo acknowledged the positive aspects of social media censorship: “I do not think censorship is bad. I think it is actually a good thing, especially when you’re trying to protect some peers.” He emphasized the potential long-term impact of graphic and violent content on individuals, sharing an example: “I have a friend of mine who, when they see a video of a serious accident, with lots of people and with blood on camera, he will not be able to sleep that night because he is terrified.” Angelo also highlighted

the importance of safeguarding children from such disturbing content: “I will say that it is very good for the kids; you know, kids use more social media than most adults these days. So, I think that is another thing that is done right by censorship.”

### **Summary**

Chapter Four offered a thorough exploration of the research participants' answers, amalgamating data from both the questionnaire and the interviews. It began by presenting demographic profiles for each participant group, employing tables to enhance visual clarity. The chapter then addressed the four research questions, synthesizing insights from the qualitative questionnaire and interviews to construct comprehensive answers. This pivotal chapter connects the study's overarching objectives with the qualitative data crucial for addressing the research questions.

## CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Five marks the culmination of this study, serving as its conclusive segment where communication theories and traditions are applied to the findings described in Chapter Four. Chapter One initiated the exploration by introducing the study's methodology and purpose, and Chapter Two delved into the pertinent literature, historical context, and referenced studies related to social media censorship. Chapter Three provided an overview of communication traditions and theories, strategically aligning them as a research lens for interpreting the qualitative findings of the study. Chapter Four then presented the demographic information of the questionnaire and interview participants and detailed responses to the research questions.

The overarching aim of this study is to scrutinize the ramifications of social media censorship for platform users, attentively gathering feedback on their individual experiences. Communication traditions and theories are applied to scrutinize the findings and bridge existing research gaps. The insights gleaned from the research questions contribute valuable information to the communication field, elucidating the complexities of social media censorship.

In Chapter Five, a comprehensive summary of the findings takes center stage, accompanied by a thorough discussion of their implications, encompassing both methodological and practical considerations. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the study's limitations and offers recommendations for future research endeavors. The list of references and appendix are then provided, presenting all the literature, documents, charts, and tables pertinent to the study.

### Summary of the Findings

This section comprehensively overviews the study's findings. The qualitative questionnaire and interview data were instrumental in addressing the research questions for the

study. Below are key themes and findings derived from the insights of individuals who have encountered content censorship on social media to answer the study's four research questions.

### **Research Question 1 Findings**

RQ1 interrogated the intricacies of the censorship process and the diverse experiences encountered. It sought insights into the perceptions of participants who believe that they have faced censorship on various social media platforms. Examining the firsthand experiences of participants provided a nuanced understanding of the censorship process, crucial to forming informed opinions on social media censorship. The findings, derived from the gathered data, unravel several themes associated with this research question.

#### ***Social Media Users Speak Out Against Group-Specific Censorship***

RQ1 revolves around the narratives of individuals who perceive themselves as victims of censorship on various social media platforms. Before delving into their experiences, it is essential to highlight the demographic composition of the sample. The majority of questionnaire respondents were Black (60%), predominantly male (77%), and between the ages of 25 and 34 (69.5%). Those who subsequently volunteered for interviews mirrored this demographic, a majority being Black (67%), male (83%), and aged 25–34 years. Participants shared personal accounts of censorship, attributing it to a perceived suppression of their political views, social status, and religious beliefs. Many volunteered for the study as an avenue to voice their grievances, hoping that their stories could prompt change and enhance the current censorship framework.

#### **Notable Findings Based on Participant Demographic Information Lack of *Transparency and Consistent Enforcement***

A recurring concern raised by participants was the lack of transparency exhibited by the

platforms. Dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the platforms' failure to provide clear explanations for imposed censorship, leaving users perplexed and frustrated. In instances where reasons were offered, these were often vague, contributing to dissatisfaction and a reluctance to continue posting. Clarity and transparency in the censorship process emerged as pivotal factors influencing user satisfaction and posting behavior. The study also sheds light on a lack of consistent enforcement of censorship practices on the same platform, as evidenced by varied testimonies from participants. Some even highlighted this inconsistency, underscoring its direct impact on their experience with social media censorship.

### **Research Question 2 Findings**

In addressing the question of whether participants perceived censorship as justified or necessary, both the questionnaire and interviews unveiled insights. Approximately 49% of questionnaire respondents expressed skepticism about the justification for social media censorship, while 41% deemed the censoring of their content justified. The interviews revealed a significant majority (75%) leaning towards the belief that censorship was not justified, with the remaining 25% endorsing its justification. Notably, more interview participants opposed censorship than questionnaire respondents, possibly reflecting a desire to voice concerns and prevent inadequate censorship in the future.

### ***Perceptions of Social Media Censorship Experiences as Unjustified***

The majority of participants opined that their social media censorship experiences were unjustified, citing reasons such as perceived rule ambiguity and a lack of dialogue for content defense or adjustment. Participants emphasized the importance of two-way communication and consistency in censorship practices, expressing concerns about unjust targeting. This stance,



rooted in the belief in freedom of speech, resonated particularly among certain groups, notably young adult Black males, revealing potential biases in social media company practices.

### *Aligning Demographics with the Findings*

Combining demographic data from RQ1 with the findings for RQ2, it is evident that specific groups, particularly young adult Black males, feel targeted by social media companies. The muted-group and spiral of silence theories come into play as participants assert that freedom of speech is a human right and censorship practices exhibit favoritism, silencing certain groups.

While a majority viewed their experiences with social media censorship as unjustified, a subset acknowledged the platforms' justification. Some individuals reflected on their content, recognizing the necessity of maintaining law and order to protect users and uphold platform terms and conditions.

### **Research Question 3 Findings**

Exploring the profound impact of personal encounters with social media censorship, particularly through the nuanced insights in Question 13 of the qualitative section, reveals substantial shifts in participants' perspectives. Of the 115 respondents, a notable 56% acknowledged a transformation of their views, while 30% maintained unchanged perspectives. The interviews corroborated questionnaire findings, emphasizing unanimous agreement among participants that their views changed due to perceived unjust censorship.

### **Social Media Users' Altered Views and Behavior**

Injustice spawned negative sentiments and a distrust of platforms' motives for censorship among the participants. Some saw room for process improvement, prompting behavioral changes in communication. Those with unchanged views saw censorship as necessary, either confirming existing beliefs or recognizing potential harm. Altered views led to self-censorship, creating a

“voiceless” community with individuals posting less, avoiding certain topics, acting cautiously, and conforming to platform rules.

### ***Research Question 3 Findings***

RQ3 inquired about participants' opinions on altering current social media censorship practices. Among the 115 respondents, 24% believed that no alteration was necessary, while a significant majority of 74% advocated for changes. The interviewees unanimously supported the need for improvement. Common themes emerged from suggestions in both the questionnaire and the interviews, reaffirming the findings and laying a foundation for actionable insights.

### **Suggested Changes to Platforms' Social Media Censorship Practices**

Given the feeling that minorities are being silenced, participants offered suggestions for combating injustices. Preserving the right to freedom of speech was a common concern, prompting recommendations for enhanced two-way communication during censorship and government involvement to prevent favoritism. Diverse opinions on censorship levels emerged, with some advocating for less censorship on specific aspects while others sought increased measures for user safety. Acknowledging the need for content moderation in extreme cases, participants highlighted the importance of striking a balance between free expression and platform regulation.

### **Research Question 4 Findings**

RQ4 probes into the necessity of altering current censorship practices, drawing insights from individuals who have experienced content censorship on social media. The prevailing sentiment among participants supports the need for change. Nevertheless, dissenting voices acknowledged the importance of order upheld by current censorship practices, emphasizing the responsibility of users to fact-check their information. The consensus is that platforms deploy censorship

measures such as post removal and account deactivation only in response to rule violations, fostering a nuanced perspective on the role and necessity of these practices.

### ***Proposed Policy Reforms for Enhanced Censorship Practices***

The study participants underscored the imperative for revisions in existing social media policies. The consensus among participants was that safeguarding users should extend beyond mere content removal, and they advocated for the exploration and implementation of alternative methods. A key suggestion was the empowerment of social media users to play a proactive role in censorship, shifting the initiative from the platform. Additionally, participants proposed a system wherein reported content triggers a constructive conversation about the necessity for removal, thereby fostering a collaborative and transparent approach to content moderation.

## **Discussion**

The study's results not only align with the literature examined in Chapter Two but also expand current knowledge substantially. The information addressing the research questions transcends the boundaries set by existing research, providing fresh insights and adeptly bridging gaps in our understanding of the topic. The following discussion delves into the literature highlighted in Chapter Two, establishing connections with the findings presented in Chapter Four.

### **Communication Breakdown: Social Media Platforms and Users**

Participants voiced concerns about inadequate communication between users and the platforms. Both questionnaire respondents and interviewees acknowledged instances where the platform's communication was unclear, especially during the censorship process. Users reported sudden deletions of their posts or comments without an opportunity to clarify them or make

necessary adjustments. The platforms' terms and conditions were described as excessively ambiguous, posing a challenge to those attempting to comprehend them.

These findings align with existing literature, such as Schneble's (2021, p. 10) study, which highlighted the complexity of social media policies for users. A majority of participants admitted to never having seen or read the platform's social media policies, echoing past studies (Custers et al., 2014, p. 291). Furthermore, participants expressed skepticism about the terms and conditions, perceiving them as serving the platform's self-interest rather than protecting user needs (Custers et al., 2014, p. 291). The lack of effective communication left many uncertain about how to navigate future content creation to avoid potential censorship.

***The Dual Impact of Online Mass Communication on Expression and Exclusion in Contemporary United States Society***

The landscape of communication underwent a profound transformation with the advent of online mass communication, as highlighted by Wong et al. (2021, p. 255), and has played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary society (Allen, 2014, p. 323). These perspectives find resonance in the findings of the present study. A key player in this digital evolution, social media is lauded by users for providing a platform to express thoughts and share creative content in both visual and written forms (Buzeta, 2020, p. 80). However, an undercurrent of disparity exists, with certain groups feeling that this right is not uniformly applied to individuals with diverse worldviews.

As underscored by Abrams (2008, p. 219), technology empowers individuals to influence and communicate to the point that it controls the narrative of the most widely accepted worldview in society. This control, in turn, silencing those whose perspectives diverge from the mainstream. The study's findings thus underscore the dual nature of online communication,

serving as a liberating force for some while inadvertently stifling the voices of others with differing worldviews.

### ***Demanding Accountability for Social Media Censorship Practices***

A recurring theme in both the questionnaire responses and interview discussions was a call for accountability from social media platforms, coupled with a strong push for third-party regulations, with many participants specifically advocating for United States government intervention. Participants emphasized the necessity of holding social media platforms accountable, particularly when their censorship practices were perceived as unethical. This sentiment aligns with prior literature, where individuals such as former Facebook employee Frances Haugen (Zakrzewski, 2021) and various testimonies from a Netflix documentary (McDavid, 2020, p. 1) have championed government intervention to address concerns related to censorship practices.

### ***Advocating for Government Oversight***

The research findings underscore a prevalent call among participants for government intervention to scrutinize and regulate social media platforms. This viewpoint is in line with that of DeNardis and Hackl (2015, p. 761), who assert that the United States government should take regulatory measures to prevent the abuse of power by media platforms. Echoing this sentiment, previous literature exemplified by Duffy (2015, p. 3) emphasizes the need for the United States government to take on an active role in addressing concerns related to media censorship.

Historical examples such as the Radio Act of 1927 and the Federal Communications Act of 1934 are past instances of government involvement in regulating communication media and establishing essential orders and guidelines (Jones, 2016, p. 6). This historical context provides a backdrop to the contemporary push for government oversight, evident in proposed acts like the

RESTRICT Act (S.686, 2023) and DATA Act (H.R.1153, 2023), indicating a continuous evolution of regulatory efforts in response to the dynamics of digital communication. Additional examples of government involvement include reformed Section 230 (Student & Tiberius, 2020, p. 13) and Congress's push to ban TikTok from United States devices (Hadero, 2023).

### ***Censorship Alters User Behavior on Social Media***

Following their encounters with censorship, the participants discussed their evolving perspectives on social media censorship, which prompted changes in their platform preferences. Participants explained that they had migrated to alternative platforms where they felt freer to express their content. The rise of new social media platforms such as Parler (Blazina & Stocking, 2023) and Truth Social (Forman-Katz & Stocking, 2023) illustrates this shift, indicating users' inclination towards platforms aligning with their belief systems. Notably, participants mentioned transitioning to Twitter after Elon Musk assumed the role of CEO. Previous literature corroborates this shift, citing Musk's changes to Twitter's content moderation policies, which resulted in fewer restrictions (Hickey et al., 2023, p. 1133).

Delving into how their perspectives on social media underwent transformations, participants explained that these shifts led to changes in their social media habits. Some expressed a hesitancy to post, fearing potential censorship, while others opted to cease posting on specific platforms altogether. This response aligns with existing literature on self-censorship on social media platforms, as discussed by Nicolini and Filak (2020, p. 105).

The present study's findings provide empirical support for the prevalence of self-censorship on social media, with more than four in 10 individuals engaging in this practice (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023, p. 361). The concept of opinion expression avoidance, identified as a form of self-censorship, finds resonance in the study's conclusions, drawing parallels with the

observed muted groups (Wu, 2021, p. 1). The study thus highlights the multifaceted nature of altered user behaviors, ranging from apprehension about self-expression to the nuanced dynamics of self-censorship within the digital landscape. Participants mentioned that some users who did not like their content most likely reported their content. The act of participants “policing” social media pages relates to the “cancel culture” discussed in Chapter Two (Duque et al., 2021, p. 11).

### ***Navigating the Call for Social Media Platform Censorship***

In the discussions, participants voiced a perceived necessity for censorship on social media platforms, citing concerns over its potential impact on teenagers and the association with depressive outcomes. Simultaneously, some participants expressed intense negative emotions in response to the censorship of their content. Studies, including that of Alao et al. (2006, p. 489), have noted that such negative sentiments can be attributed to internet-related experiences. Sherrick (2016, p. 919) further highlights that individuals who believe in harmful media effects are more inclined to endorse preventive or accommodative measures such as censorship. This highlights the interplay between users’ concerns for the well-being of others, emotional reactions to content moderation, and ensuing advocacy for censorship as a protective measure.

### **Scholars’ Caution and Contemporary Realities in the Digital Landscape**

Connecting the skepticism expressed by scholars regarding technological progress with the study’s findings is crucial to a comprehensive understanding. Jacques Ellul (2016, p. 429), for instance, cautioned against a disruptive cycle wherein the development of new technology aims to control existing technology, creating a paradox. This is exemplified in today’s flawed AI systems, particularly in the context of censorship, where words are often censored out of context.

In his critique of unrestrained technology, Neil Postman (2011, p. 303) offered insightful perspectives on its impact on culture and life. Describing “technocracy,” Postman (2011, p. 41) portrayed technology as an ultimate solution to human problems, loosely constrained by social custom and religious tradition. Examining the study’s findings through the lens of the socio-cultural tradition, it becomes evident that social media profoundly shapes society, creating illusions of widely accepted views and influencing cultural dynamics. The study revealed that social media platforms wield significant influence, shaping culture and empowering certain groups while silencing others.

Marshall McLuhan (1997) also delved into the contemporary effects of technology on individuals and society, particularly its influence on culture, a theme echoed in the study’s findings. McLuhan (1997, p. 54) highlighted how certain groups perceive themselves as oppressed, calling for third-party intervention. Aligning with Ellul’s (2016, p. 303) concerns, the study participants expressed a need for regulations and laws governing social media platforms, acknowledging potential corruption within the entities managing them. This mirrors the broader discussion on the societal implications of technology and reinforces the importance of critically examining its role and influence.

### **Implications**

The data gathered for the study is essential to answer the research question. The answers to the research questions provide information on experiences of social media censorship and their effects on platform users. Looking at these findings through the lens of communication traditions and theories provides focused and in-depth insights into the findings to fill current research gaps in the communication field.



## **Methodological and Theoretical Implications**

### ***The Phenomenological Tradition***

The phenomenological lens provided a nuanced framework for interpreting the questionnaire and interview findings, allowing us to uncover the rich tapestry of emotions, reflections, and behavioral changes that followed encounters with social media censorship. It enabled a deeper understanding of how participants actively constructed meaning from their experiences, shedding light on the varied responses and divergent viewpoints.

Edmund Husserl's phenomenological tradition, outlined by Farber (2017, p. 26), delves into the philosophical and methodological exploration of human consciousness and subjective experience (Olivares et al., 2015, p. 673). This approach aims to comprehend phenomena as individuals consciously encounter them, operating on the premise that people actively interpret their surroundings to construct a worldview (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 62).

In the present study, the researcher followed the phenomenological tradition to gain deeper insights from questionnaires and interviews. The survey results revealed that 56% of participants witnessed a shift in their perspective on social media censorship following their subjective encounters, a sentiment unanimously echoed by interviewees.

Examining the direct impacts, the researcher observed that a spectrum of emotions was triggered by these experiences. Initial surprise and shock evolved into intense feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness. Participants reflected on the consent they provided for their posts, questioning the ethical dimensions of content. Some developed a growing distrust of the platform's censorship practices, while others acknowledged and supported the decisions made.

Once emotions subsided, participants articulated their transformed views on social media censorship. Notably, opinions diverged on the justification of censorship, with 49% of

questionnaire respondents asserting that it was unjustified and 41% deeming it justified. In interviews, approximately 75% of the participants considered the platform's decision unjustified, while the remaining 25% found it justified.

Post emotional experience, behavioral shifts ensued based on this altered worldview. Dissatisfied individuals sometimes abandoned the platform altogether, altering posting habits not only on the specific platform but across all social media. Increased self-reflection on content occurred, with many deleting questionable posts or refraining from posting altogether due to fear of censorship. Ambiguities in platforms' terms and conditions prompted some users to reduce or cease their social media activity.

To retain a presence on the platform, users adapted their behavior to align with unclear rules, irrespective of whether they agreed with them. Those opposed to censorship vehemently advocated for process improvement, demanding clearer terms and conditions. Additionally, participants expressed a need for United States government intervention in regulating censorship practices, a sentiment gleaned from the study's findings.

To summarize, the application of the phenomenological tradition, rooted in the profound insights of Edmund Husserl, proved instrumental in unraveling the intricate layers of human experiences of social media censorship. By adopting this philosophical and methodological approach, the researcher was able to explore the nuances of consciousness, discerning the subjective intricacies that shape individuals' perceptions.

### ***The Socio-Cultural Tradition***

The socio-cultural tradition is concerned with the interplay of social structures, identities, norms, rituals, and collective belief systems, illustrating how communication both reflects and molds the broader social and cultural landscapes (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 365). This tradition

proves particularly pertinent in interpreting the outcomes of our study given its focus on the social and cultural dimensions of censorship in the US.

Within the social context, the participants—all United States citizens—tended to view freedom of speech as a crucial value worthy of protection. Yet, a deeper exploration of United States law reveals a nuanced perspective, with some emphasizing the private ownership rights of social media companies to curate permissible content on their platforms. The debate on private ownership and control over communication platforms in the United States dates back to the regulation of radio waves (Jones, 2016, p. 6), thus long predating the advent of social media.

The socio-cultural tradition provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the dynamics of communication, censorship, and power in the United States context and sheds light on the multifaceted influences that shape individuals' experiences and perceptions. Looking at the study's findings through the lens of this tradition provides. Examining the cultural context, it is evident that when minority groups become targets of censorship on social media, a feeling of being singled out can arise.

### ***The Spiral of Silence Theory***

The spiral of silence theory, as explored by Noelle-Neumann in 1974 (p. 43), describes the dynamics of human communication and public opinion. The online realm, where the fear of isolation acts as a potent silencer, is particularly relevant to our study. This investigation centers on the impact of users' experiences with censorship on their perceptions, which subsequently influenced their behaviors and communication patterns on the platform.

Regarding the first research question, participants revealed a sense of suppression when their information was deleted, removed, flagged, or displayed with a cautionary note. Censorship lacking sufficient justification, warning, or an opportunity to counter the decision elicited strong

negative emotions, including frustration, hopelessness, confusion, and a feeling of suppression. These sentiments prompted users to modify their social media actions, with self-censorship becoming a common response to avoid a recurrence of censorship or potential account suspension.

The second research question revealed that most participants disagreed with the decision to censor their content. Participants mentioned unclear or inaccessible terms and conditions on social media platforms, attributing this opacity to a deliberate avoidance of justifying content censorship. Users perceived this as encroaching on their freedoms, particularly freedom of speech, fueled by inconsistent censorship practices and perceived double standards. Platforms' apparent lack of concern for inaccuracies in their AI systems further fed suspicions that the platforms prioritized their own interests over righteous principles. However, a few participants mentioned instances when platforms sought clarification about the content, and such proactive communication was perceived positively, mitigating feelings of unjust silencing.

Concerning the third research question, participants acknowledged a shift in their views following experiences with censorship, which fostered a negative outlook on censorship and its underlying motives. Whether or not participants deemed the censorship just, a common outcome was a decision to reduce posting out of fear of subsequent censorship. Users who felt silenced modified their social media habits, becoming more cautious in their posts and seeking second opinions before sharing them. Compliance with platform rules was often driven by fear of account suspension or deletion rather than genuine agreement with the platforms' policies.

### ***The Muted Group Theory***

The muted group theory conceptualizes the challenges faced by certain societal groups as they grapple with how to express themselves in communication systems dominated by more

influential or mainstream groups (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 884). This theory contends that dominant groups have the capacity to silence subordinate groups (Sas & Turner, 1992, p. 21). The theory aligns seamlessly with the present study, revealing that certain minority groups, through their subjective experiences, have encountered targeted censorship.

Moreover, the theory intertwines with the overarching themes of power and inequality, spotlighting the perceived imbalance in influence between social media platforms and these muted minority groups. Language is the tool of domination in this theory. In the study, the social media platforms, which are seen as wielding excessive power, contribute to the marginalization and silencing—essentially, the muting—of these minority voices. This power disparity has sparked a call for reform to rectify the unequal distribution of power by giving a voice to the previously silenced. The quest for balance may extend to contemplating United States government intervention to address and rectify these power dynamics.

Finally, the findings from the last research question are in keeping with the spiral of silence theory as participants collectively recognized the need for change. While opinions on the nature and implementation of this change varied, there was a shared acknowledgment among participants that their social media habits would evolve until such changes materialize. In responding to this question, social media users openly admitted to feelings of suppression and injustice, emphasizing the urgency of action to implement the necessary changes.

### **Practical implications**

The information learned in this study points to necessary changes in the censorship process. Government involvement in regulating social media platforms and ensuring users' best interests should be at the core of the censorship process and was emphasized strongly by the research participants. There were opposing positions on whether censorship needed to be

increased or decreased, but one of the primary points of emphasis was the lack of communication between the user and the platform during censorship.

Participants suggested that the terms and conditions of the platforms should be written clearly and displayed before an individual creates an account to prevent the need to censor users in the future. Therefore, social media companies must make a point to update their terms and conditions, notify users if they change, and display them clearly before and after a user decides to join the platform. Increased platform transparency will provide users with a more pleasant experience going forward.

In addition, United States lawmakers should consider creating a policy to demand transparency from social media platforms. The United States government has already successfully implemented related policies, such as the Radio Act of 1927, which regulates mass communication media in the people's best interests. Social media companies should take communication with their users more seriously and devote more attention to improving their censorship practices to avoid making users feel silenced and oppressed

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Geographically, the participant sample was confined to United States citizens to align with the researcher's emphasis on examining censorship laws and regulations from a United States perspective. This narrowing of the population aimed to facilitate the identification of consistent themes within the findings, preventing the challenges associated with an overly broad audience. The study required participants to reside in the United States to narrow the scope of the research and look at social media censorship in a country that claims to protect and foster democracy. Limiting the participants to the United States also allowed the study to reach

saturation faster because people within the same geographic location could have everyday experiences online.

Active engagement on social media was a prerequisite for participation given that it forms the foundational basis for questionnaire responses and certain interview questions, ultimately contributing to the research's answers. Participants were required to be over 18 years old, with no maximum age limit, ensuring responses from mature adults and eliminating the need for waivers. The rationale behind setting a minimum age of 18 years is that the user is mature enough to provide thoughtful insights into their experience on social media. It also made the study more feasible in terms of execution since any participants under 18 would require a guardian or parent to consent for them to participate.

Theoretical framework delimitations embraced two traditions (phenomenological and socio-cultural) and two theories (muted group and spiral of silence). These were deemed the most fitting for extracting answers to the research questions. Technology delimitations specified that interviews were conducted exclusively on the Microsoft Teams platform, which offered flexibility to participants and accommodated constraints related to time and geographical distance.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative approach utilizing questionnaires and interviews to gather information. This choice was deliberate because qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within a real-world context through observation. In the context of this study, qualitative research proved instrumental in comprehending social media users' perceptions of the effects of censorship and provided a platform for them to share their subjective experiences. The open-ended nature of qualitative methods proved essential as a

quantitative approach would not have yielded the same nuanced insights into users' subjective experiences with censorship.

### **Qualitative Questionnaire and Interview Delimitations**

The researcher deliberately established delimitations to define the study's scope, enhancing precision and clarity by specifying what falls within and outside its boundaries. The participants were required to read and sign a consent form before responding to any questions. This step ensured adherence to ethical formalities and guarantees the study's ethical integrity. Furthermore, the participants had to comprehend the purpose of the research and how the provided information would be utilized. Following the consent form, preliminary questions were asked to confirm participants' alignment with the researcher's chosen demographics, which were deemed most suited to the research questions. The participants were required to respond to four preliminary questions in the affirmative.

Interviews served as a means for participants to elaborate on their written questionnaire responses, recognizing that some find it easier to express experiences verbally. It also provided an avenue for the researcher to ask follow-up questions to glean additional insights crucial for answering the research questions. To partake in interviews, participants were mandated to first complete the questionnaire. Preliminary questions in the questionnaire served to filter out participants who did not meet the requirements for the interview. This step also prompted potential interviewees to consider the types of questions posed, ensuring their ability to contribute valuable insights during the interview. Finally, interview participants were required to sign and submit a consent form before scheduling the interview, in line with the ethical procedures outlined for the questionnaire.



### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations in the study's application of research methods and the examination of findings can be identified. The researcher recognizes that the sample of questionnaire participants could have been more extensive to unveil commonalities and diverse experiences, offering insights that social media platforms may not have considered. Improved strategies for identifying interview participants have been devised, acknowledging that some people with valuable insights might have been overlooked and that greater diversity among interviewees is necessary. A recommended solution for future research involves implementing a stratified sampling method accompanied by demographic questions in the consent form for efficient scheduling.

Although social media proved successful in recruiting participants for this study, potential challenges in meeting the desired participant numbers suggest the need for alternative or multiple recruitment methods in future studies. Posting on more social media platforms could enhance the variety of experiences captured, avoiding potential bias resulting from limited platform selection. In refining future studies, especially those using a qualitative questionnaire and interviews, a reduction in open-ended questions is proposed. Participants struggled with providing detailed responses to open-ended queries, which suggests that including a list of options where applicable may be useful. In addition, ensuring clarity in open-ended questions and breaking down multi-part inquiries into more digestible components would enhance participant comprehension and response accuracy.

A potential improvement involves reducing the advertised interview time, thus acknowledging participant concerns about the commitment. The interviews did not exceed 30 minutes, mitigating concerns about perceived length. The researcher acknowledges potential bias

due to the participants' connection through social media and emphasizes the importance of transparency in addressing both limitations and delimitations.

Further, the researcher recognizes the challenge of conclusively verifying participants' experiences of censorship, given the subjective nature of interpretation. Trust in participants' understanding of their experiences introduces an inherent limitation. The chosen random sampling method, while providing equal probability, falls short of achieving the desired diversity compared to a more strategic stratified sampling method. In view of the importance of addressing these limitations transparently, the researcher suggests avenues for improvement in future research endeavors.

### **Future Research**

Considering the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, the researcher crafted recommendations and directions for future research on social media censorship. First, it is crucial for upcoming studies to persist in investigating groups that perceive themselves as targets of social media censorship, exploring the ways in which these individuals feel hindered in expressing their beliefs.

Moreover, future studies could derive added value by homing in on the demographic of young adult Black men who contend with the suppression of their content on social media. To strengthen the findings of the current research, conducting additional studies with a specific focus on this demographic would provide a more nuanced understanding of their unique experiences and challenges regarding social media censorship. A future study using similar research questions and delimitations should focus on implementing a stratified research method and recruiting more participants. In addition, further research could benefit from recruiting participants through additional means to avoid relying strictly on the researchers' social media.

Recently, the United States government has been looking into becoming more involved with social media tech companies' policies after the emergence of the DATA and RESTRICTION bills, the push for the ban of TikTok, and Utah's new social media policy for minors. If these policies are implemented, it will be beneficial to conduct a similar study on what social media users think of censorship practices by social media platforms once those policies go into effect. In any case, with media laws and regulations always in flux, it is essential to consistently assess how platform users feel about updated terms and conditions and how current policy is implemented. This will also allow more participants to share their experiences and will thus cover additional research gaps.

Additionally, future studies could focus on a specific social media platform and its terms and conditions for censorship. This could add more structure to the research. It may also increase the chances of finding participants with similar experiences and determine whether there is consistency in how the platform addresses problems and implements its censorship tactics. Further, it would be beneficial to conduct research on the emerging social media platforms that claim to support free speech and thought, such as Parler and Truth Social. Useful information can be obtained by looking at the experiences of social media users on these new platforms. Finally, future studies could compare the experiences of users on these new platforms to those of users of other platforms that have a poor reputation regarding allowing free speech and thought in user-posted content.

### **Summary**

This study delved into the perceived experiences of social media users facing censorship on communication platforms, employing qualitative research through questionnaires and interviews. By focusing on the subjective effects of censorship, the research provided a platform

for United States citizens to share their personal encounters with the phenomenon, shedding light on the nuances of content censorship and gauging opinions about necessary changes to the social media censorship process.

The study's findings highlight a pervasive discontent among users subjected to censorship, which transcends mere feelings of being silenced. The research brought to the forefront instances of social media platforms selectively targeting specific groups, with a particular emphasis on the oppression faced by young adult Black men in the United States concerning their freedom of speech. Notably, the study uncovered a strong sentiment among Black males aged 25–34 years, who feel unjustly targeted and censored. Because of their experiences, their opinions on social media censorship evolved, resulting in these groups urging immediate reform to eliminate unethical discrimination of their posted content.

Although participants recognized the need for social media censorship under certain circumstances to ensure user protection, they collectively expressed a desire for clearer guidelines on censorship practices. The study underscored a lack of transparency and coherent directives for online conduct, which gives platforms the latitude to selectively censor individuals and content. Participants called for a reevaluation of social media policies, emphasizing the urgent need for changes that protect users' rights and discourage discrimination based on various factors.

In conclusion, the study advocates for heightened scrutiny and potential regulation of social media platforms by the United States government in line with the oversight applied to other forms of mass communication. This advocacy stems from a shared concern for user well-being, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing user rights and preventing discriminatory practices in the future. The study underlines the significance of sharing the stories of those who

feel silenced by social media platforms, serving as a catalyst for exposing corrupt censorship tactics and fostering improvements in the current censorship system. As debates around the necessary or unjust suppression of free thought and expression on social media intensify, these narratives become crucial in shaping the discourse.

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## Appendix A

### Standardized Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions

**Q1:** Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.

**Q2:** You stated in the questionnaire that you believe you were censored on a social media site.

Can you share what happened?

**Q3:** Do you believe that the platform was justified in censoring your post?

**Q4:** Did this experience change your views on social media censorship?

**Q5:** What changes do you believe social media platforms need to make to improve censorship practices?

**Q6:** Do you have any other comments about the censorship of social media platforms?

**Q7:** Thank you for your time and for answering the questions to the best of your ability. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Appendix B****Questions Used for the Study's Questionnaire**

**Q1:** Do you believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your own posted content in the past?

- A. Yes
- B. No

**Q2:** Are you 18 years of age or older?

- A. Yes
- B. No

**Q3:** Are you a resident of the United States?

- A. Yes
- B. No

**Q4:** Do you use social media platforms?

- A. Yes
- B. No

**Q5:** What is your age range?

- A. 18–24
- B. 25–34
- C. 35–44
- D. 45–54
- E. 55–64
- F. 65+

**Q6:** What is your gender?

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Other \_\_\_\_\_.

**Q7:** What is your race/ethnicity?

- A. White or Caucasian
- B. Black or African American
- C. American Indian or Alaska Native



- D. Asian or Asian American
- E. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- F. Hispanic or Latino
- G. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q8:** What social media platforms do you use? (select all that apply)

- A. Snapchat
- B. Instagram
- C. Facebook
- D. Twitter
- E. TikTok
- F. Pinterest
- G. YouTube
- H. LinkedIn
- I. Other(s) (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q9:** How often do you use social media platforms?

- A. Every day
- B. A few times a week
- C. About once a week
- D. A few times a month
- E. About once a month
- F. Less than once a month

**Q10:** If once a day, how many hours?

- A. Does not apply
- B. 1–2
- C. 3–4
- D. 5–6
- E. 7+

**Q11:** Please explain the details of your experience with social media censorship. What do you believe you posted on social media that was censored? What social media platform was it posted on? How did the platform respond?

Note: If you have had more than one censorship experience, feel free to share more than one.

**Q12:** As explained previously with your censorship experience, do you believe that the platform was justified in censoring your post? Why or why not?

**Q13:** After experiencing social media censorship, did your views on social media censorship change? If so, what changed and why did you come to that conclusion? If your views stayed consistent after your experience, please explain why.

**Q14:** Do you believe that social media platforms need to change any current practices on censorship? What changes would you recommend, if any, and why?

**Q15:** Do you have any other comments about censorship on social media platforms?

**Q18:** Please send an email to the researcher if you are interested in participating in a confidential, recorded interview on Microsoft Teams. This will give you the opportunity to elaborate on your responses further.

Email: [vforbeck@liberty.edu](mailto:vforbeck@liberty.edu).

Once the researcher receives your email, she will then email you a consent form for you to sign.

Once the signed form is emailed back, you will be asked to choose a date and time that is convenient for you to participate in the interview.

## Appendix C

### Participant Consent Form

#### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Social Media Censorship

**Principal Investigator:** Vail Forbeck, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, be a resident of the United States, use social media platforms, and must believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your own posted content in the past. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to cover research gaps and improve current social media censorship practices going forward based on the feedback given by individuals who have identified as experiencing social media censorship.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an online, anonymous questionnaire with an estimated completion time of 30 minutes.
2. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview. If you agree to participate in the interview and if you are selected, the time estimate for the Microsoft Teams interview is 45–60 minutes.
3. Review the interview transcript for accuracy, if applicable.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The possible benefits to society could include affecting pro-social censorship practices on social media platforms.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses to the online questionnaire will be anonymous. Participant responses to the interview will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Questionnaire participants will not receive compensation. Interview participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time. The Amazon gift card will be emailed to the participants following the interview.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision regarding whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the questionnaire without affecting those relationships.

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the questionnaire and close your internet browser. Once the questionnaire is submitted, the information cannot be withdrawn due to its anonymous nature. If you participate in the interview, you may choose to end the interview at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study following the interview, please contact the researcher at the phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from your questionnaire responses, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Vail Forbeck. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at (phone number). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Richard Previte, at (email).

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board is tasked with ensuring that human subject research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Participant Consent Form**

#### **Consent Form: Interviews**

**Title of the Project:** Social Media Censorship

**Principal Investigator:** Vail Forbeck, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

#### **Invitation to be part of a research study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, be a resident of the United States, use social media platforms, and must believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your own posted content in the past. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### **What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of the study is to cover research gaps and improve current social media censorship practices going forward based on the feedback given by individuals who have identified as experiencing social media censorship.

#### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an online, anonymous questionnaire with an estimated completion time of 30 minutes.
2. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview. If you agree to participate in the interview and if you are selected, the time estimate for the Microsoft Teams interview is 45–60 minutes.
3. Review the interview transcript for accuracy, if applicable.

#### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The possible benefits to society could include affecting pro-social censorship practices on social media platforms.

#### **What risk might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses to the online questionnaire will be anonymous. Participant responses to the interview will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Questionnaire participants will not receive compensation. Interview participants will receive a \$20 Amazon gift card for their time. The Amazon gift card will be emailed to the participants following the interview.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision regarding whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the questionnaire without affecting those relationships.

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the questionnaire and close your internet browser. Once the questionnaire is submitted, the information cannot be withdrawn due to its anonymous nature. If you participate in the interview, you may choose to end the interview at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study following the interview, please contact the researcher at the phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw,

data collected from you, apart from your questionnaire responses, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Vail Forbeck. You may ask any questions you have now.

If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at (phone number).

You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Richard Previte, at

[rprevite@liberty.edu](mailto:rprevite@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board is tasked with ensuring that human subject research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date



## Appendix E

### IRB Approval Letter

November 11, 2022  
Vail Forbeck  
Richard Previte

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-122 Social Media Censorship

Dear Vail Forbeck, Richard Previte,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required. Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d): Category 2.(iii)

Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration. Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research* | **Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix F

### Recruitment Social Media Post for Participants

ATTENTION FACEBOOK(LINKEDIN) FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Communication at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to understand how people view social media censorship practices in the United States.

To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, be a resident of the United States, a user of social media, and believe that you have experienced social media censorship of your posted online content. Participants will be asked to take an anonymous questionnaire, which should take 30 minutes to complete. Those who are willing to share their contact information will be asked to participate in a Microsoft Teams interview, which should take 45–60 minutes to complete.

Participants who complete the interview will also be asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here:

[https://liberty.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_6rplwinNMgMnRPM](https://liberty.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6rplwinNMgMnRPM). A consent document is provided as the first page of the questionnaire. The interview participants will receive a consent form to sign via email after they email me to express their interest in the interview. This consent document requires a signature from the participant and must be emailed back to me prior to the interview.

Participants will receive compensation for their time in the form of a \$20 Amazon gift card.

Please feel free to SHARE this announcement with other potential research participants.

Thank you all for your time. Every submission provides valuable information and is an immense help for the completion of the study!

Vail Ann Forbeck | Ph.D. Candidate

## Appendix G

### Transcript Sample: Tanya

Interview | Mariah | Nov. 23, 2022

Keywords

censorship, post, social media, social media platforms, experience, updates, guidelines, agree, censored, doctoral study, liking, disclosure, Twitter, audio, participating, transcribe, legible, site, aware, rules.

Researcher: Before I start, I just want to reiterate again that this is for my doctoral study, social media censorship. And I appreciate you taking the time to answer questions and gather and research on. Did you have any questions for me before we start?

Tanya: I don't think so.

Researcher: Please introduce yourself to me as if we had just met one another.

Tanya: [Demographic information removed to protect the participant's privacy].

Researcher: You stated in the questionnaire that you believe you're censored on a social media site. Can you share what happened?

Tanya: So, specifically on Twitter, I find that censorship has happened as my posts have been taken down before. Even ones that aren't in my eyes controversial. Either having to do with COVID or quarantining. I was sent home from college during COVID. So even just asking for updates. Tweeting my university, my posts got taken down, or they were posted with a caveat. So when people viewed them, there would be a little disclaimer saying to that effect.

Researcher: Was this only on Twitter? Or did you experience that on other social media sites as well?

Tanya: I'm most active on Twitter, but I have experienced it on Instagram as well, specifically when posting on my story.

Researcher: And is that the disclosure? Or is it like the post being taken [down]?

Tanya: [Disclosure].

Researcher: Whenever you would post about COVID? Was it, like, negative or condescending towards any policies? Or was it just, like, you know, factual or what you perceive as factual information about inquiring about the status of things with the school? Could you elaborate more on the subject matter of those posts?

Tanya: Yeah. So, for example, we needed to get our booster shots. So, even liking that post, I was given a caveat, not actually just to my account, saying, be sure to check this post to fact-check and see if this is real.

Researcher: So you said, you impose that you like it would send you a disclaimer after you liked the post?

Tanya: Yes.

Researcher: Alright. Do you believe the platform was justified in censoring your post?

Tanya: Um, no, I don't think that that is the case. I think that, you know, you should be able to post what you want within reason. It wasn't any sort of hate speech. For example, the one where I just liked the post, it was simply just liking it. So, no, I do not believe that.

Researcher: Okay. Did this experience change your view on social media censorship?

Tanya: Oh, definitely. I think I never really had an opinion on censorship. Especially just pre COVID it just wasn't something that really existed. And something that I wasn't, you know, super aware of, but as you know, things went remotely we relied so much more on social media for updates and staying connected that when that did happen, it was definitely a shock.

Researcher: What changes do you believe social media platforms need to make to improve censorship practices?

Tanya: Yeah, I think that, you know, there should be more specific guidelines when you sign up for the social media platform that you have to agree to. And if there's new guidelines, you know, making users really agree to those, it should be legible. Also, the rules and guidelines that shouldn't be, you know, so much legal jargon in there that the average person doesn't know quite what they're signing up for. So that, you know, they can either agree and decide to move forward with the platform or not. So I think we are moving forward with more kinds of disclosure on what you're getting yourself into and what you can post what you can't on this site. Every site, you know, is allowed to have rules, but I think just making it easier for the consumer to figure out what's allowed and what's not.

Researcher: Do you have any other comments about censorship of social media platforms?

Tanya: Um, I don't think so.

Researcher: Okay. Have you ever experienced, like, any other type of censorship? Or is it just, like, COVID-related posts?

Tanya: The only ones I can think of are COVID-related posts. I have not been censored for other topics that I'm aware of.

Researcher: Okay. All right. Well, thank you for your time and answering the questions to the best of your ability. Is there anything you would like to add to the study before we conclude?

Tanya: I don't think so. Thank you so much for your time.

Researcher: Yeah, of course. And thank you for transcribing our audio interview, and I'll send you the transcript so you can take a look and make sure that you know, everything was translated

from on paper correctly. And then with that email also send you the \$20 Amazon gift card as a thank you for participating as well.

Tanya: Great. Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Researcher: Yeah, thank you, have a good rest of your day.