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THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM IN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Antioch University Seattle

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

by

Kylie Schwabe

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0009-6219-8511

September 2024

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM IN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN

This dissertation, by Kylie Schwabe,  
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who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of  
Antioch University Seattle  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM IN YOUNG ADULT WOMEN**

Kylie Schwabe

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The present study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in order to examine the lived experiences of young adult, cisgender women and the development of internalized sexism. Eight participants completed semi-structured interviews focused on their relationships with other women and subsequent views of womanhood. Themes found were (a) womanhood is taught by women throughout the lifespan, (b) women are sexually responsible for men, (c) women are emotional caregivers, (d) there are biological bases of womanhood, (e) women are expected to “do it all,” (f) expectations of women are fueled by media portrayal, (g) traditional femininity is seen as oppositional to the feminist movement, and (h) womanhood is a community. The results of the study found that young adult women hold similar beliefs and attitudes surrounding what it means to be a woman. Additionally, young adult women’s perceptions of womanhood are similarly influenced by common external factors that stem from society’s sexism and misogyny and lead to behaviors of internalized sexism. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* internalized sexism, internalized misogyny, intersectional feminism, interpretative phenomenological analysis, womanhood

## **Dedication**

To the women who have raised me, loved me, and taught me.

To all of the women embracing womanhood.

And to Aly, who I can't wait to watch take on the world.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the many people who have shown me love and support as I have earned this degree. A special thank you to Dr. Kennedy, for the many emails, texts, and conversations about every dissertation idea that popped into my head, and thank you to the rest of my dissertation committee—Dr. Heusler and Dr. Lemm—for their consistent guidance and patience.

Thank you to my grandparents, stepparents, and the rest of my family for their unconditional support. And to Austin, Nate, and Aly, for reminding me to not take life too seriously.

Thank you, Annie, Cayla, Lauren, and Mo, for shaping me into the woman I am today. And thank you Seth, Chris, Noah, Claire, and Damian for knowing I could succeed when I thought I couldn't.

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Lastly, to the women who participated in this study, thank you for your vulnerability and openness; it has been an immense privilege to listen to your stories and be given the opportunity to share them.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	xi
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Defining Sexism & Misogyny, Internalized Misogyny, and Its Consequences.....	2
Research Question and Significance .....	3
Preliminary Hypotheses .....	3
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE .....	4
A Single Model of Sexism .....	4
Intersectionality and Intersectional Feminism .....	5
White Feminism vs. Intersectional Feminism and Its Role in History and Counterhistory ....	5
Representation in the Field of Psychology .....	9
Intersectional Feminism .....	10
Gender Roles and Stereotypes.....	11
Gender Roles and Motherhood.....	14
Gender Identity Development .....	14
The Sexualization of Girls and Women .....	16
The Feminist Movement and Femininity .....	17
The Year of the Girls.....	18
Summary of the Relevant Literature .....	19
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	21

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	21
Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Idiography.....	22
Research Using a Phenomenological Approach.....	23
IPA and the Present Study.....	24
Inclusion Criteria.....	24
Recruitment Procedures .....	25
Preliminary Procedures .....	25
Protection of Human Rights.....	26
Interview Procedures.....	26
Data Analysis .....	27
<b>CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Themes .....	30
Group Experiential Theme 1: Womanhood is Taught by Women Throughout the Lifespan... 32	
Personal Experiential Theme 1A: Early Exposure to Women as Caretakers.....	32
Personal Experiential Theme 1B: Ideas of Womanhood Change Overtime .....	32
Group Experiential Theme 2: Women Are Sexually Responsible for Men.....	33
Personal Experiential Theme 2A: Sexual Responsibility of Women.....	33
Personal Experiential Them 2B: To be a Woman is to be Sexualized .....	34
Group Experiential Theme 3: Women are Emotional Caregivers .....	35

Personal Experiential Theme 3A: Traditional Womanhood Means that Women are Meant to Serve Others .....	35
Personal Experiential Theme 3B: Women are Seen as Emotional and Sensitive .....	35
Group Experiential Theme 4: Biological Bases of Womanhood .....	36
Personal Experiential Theme 4A: Womanhood Begins with Menstruation .....	36
Personal Experiential Theme 4B: The Expectations of Motherhood .....	36
Group Experiential Theme 5: Women are Expected to “Do it All” .....	37
Personal Experiential Theme 5A: The Many Roles of a Woman .....	37
Group Experiential Theme 6: Expectations of Women are Fueled by Media Portrayal.....	38
Personal Experiential Theme 6A: The Impact of Media’s Portrayal of Women .....	38
Personal Experiential Theme 6B: Positive Media Representation Impacts Women as Individuals .....	39
Group Experiential Theme 7: Traditional Femininity is Seen as Oppositional to the Feminist Movement.....	39
Personal Experiential Theme 7A: Traditional Femininity is Viewed Negatively.....	40
Personal Experiential Theme 7B: Women are Taught to Judge Each Other Based on Traditional Gender Role Expectations .....	40
Group Experiential Theme 8: The Community of Womanhood.....	41
Personal Experiential Theme 8A: Womanhood is Connection.....	41
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	43

Research Question and Findings .....	43
Interpretations of the Results.....	43
Women Leading Women.....	43
“Doing it All:” Womanhood and Motherhood.....	45
Femininity vs. Feminism.....	46
Women in Today’s Media.....	47
Implications .....	48
Limitations .....	49
Recommendations for Future Research .....	50
Conclusion.....	51
References.....	52
APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT FLYER .....	57
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT.....	58

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Participant Demographics..... 29

Table 4.2 Group Experiential Themes and Personal Experiential Themes (Number of Endorsements)..... 31

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Empowered women empower women. But what happens when women either deliberately or unconsciously fail to empower one another? How does the role of internalized sexism interfere? The phenomenon of internalized sexism—or women’s sexist beliefs and attitudes against other women and/or themselves—has rarely been studied within the context of psychology (Means, 2021). Internalized sexism “occurs when women enact learned sexist behaviors upon themselves and other women” (Bearman et al., 2009, p. 10). These behaviors can be bold, such as when a woman believes other women should not pursue higher education but are more often subtle and occur as everyday interactions. Examples include low expectations of girls or women in subjects such as math and science, disliking female leaders for being too assertive or ambitious, the expectation of women to be passive in relationships, and even the expectation that a woman loses her last name when she marries a man (Bearman et al., 2009).

Internalized sexism developed through centuries of societal beliefs and expectations (Means, 2021) and is imposed on girls at a very young age (Bearman, et al., 2009). This leads to a number of questions: How does this impact girls developmentally? How does internalized sexism impact relationships throughout women’s lives? Is there a universal experience of how internalized sexism develops in young girls and women? In this qualitative study, I discovered answers to these questions by gaining insight into emerging adult women’s perceptions of womanhood.

Young adulthood, as a crucial point in identity development for both men and women, presents a unique opportunity to study this phenomenon. During this time, women may become increasingly aware of their sexualization, media portrayal, and how societal influences affect

how they may be perceived by their peers; combining these experiences with the changes in socialization and development in young adulthood may assist in bringing recognition to the way that internalized sexism rears its ugly head. This dissertation studied the way young women perceive womanhood and the impact that internalized sexism may have had on their lives thus far, leading to an understanding of the development of internalized sexism and its consequences.

### **Defining Sexism & Misogyny, Internalized Misogyny, and Its Consequences**

Both sexism and misogyny are forms of prejudice against women. Sexism exists in every level of society, and therefore permeates all of the systems, ideals, and institutions that create the daily experiences of all women (Lewis, 2018). This dissertation defined sexism as prejudice toward women assigned female at birth (AFAB) due to the belief that genetic and biological sex differences make them inferior to people assigned male at birth (AMAB; Manne, 2019).

Misogyny is therefore defined as prejudice toward people AFAB due to the moralistic ideas of sex differences, such as stereotypically traditional male and female gender roles. In this dissertation, the term internalized sexism will be used as a term that encapsulates the internalization of both sexism and misogyny and their impacts on women. Specifically, internalized sexism is the phenomenon of women using the sexist ideas of society to inform their judgments, opinions, and beliefs of both them and other women (Means, 2021).

Interrelated components of sexism—internalized, intersectional, and white feminism—lead to the psychosocial and behavioral outcomes of the patriarchy, a social system in which men are dominant (Dictionary.com, 2024). The three core components of modern sexism are “the belief that sexism is no longer an issue in society and is a thing of the past, negative attitudes toward women who fight for equity, and resentment toward women who advocate for affirmative

action or gender-conscious policies and practices” (Lewis, 2018, p. 383). An example of internalized sexism could be “women ... internalize these sexist beliefs and thereby prefer male supervisors or assume female supervisors are less competent” (Lewis, 2018, p. 382).

### **Research Question and Significance**

The current literature informs discussions surrounding why internalized misogyny exists, and how it impacts the lives of women and girls of all ages. However, many questions remain unanswered, such as how does the internalization of sexism and misogyny develop? By examining adolescent girls’ beliefs about what it means to be a woman, this study aimed to gain insight into the development and perpetuation of internalized sexism. Comprehending the development and effects of internalized sexism is one way to begin unraveling the structures, systems, and beliefs that uphold sexist ideals and mitigating the consequences of internalized sexism that affect women of all demographics.

Research Question: What do emerging adult women (18–24) believe it means to be a woman, and how is this related to the development of internalized sexism?

### **Preliminary Hypotheses**

The research question and current literature lead to two main hypotheses. The first was that young adult women held similar beliefs and attitudes surrounding what it means to be a woman. Additionally, young adult women’s perceptions of womanhood will be similarly influenced by common external factors that stem from society’s sexism and misogyny and lead to behaviors of internalized sexism. In this way, the participants in this study represented a lived homogenous experience of being a woman in the United States in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

### A Single Model of Sexism

Despite the prominence of sexism and its impact, there has been very little academic discussion of a model of sexism and its consequences. A single model of sexism, recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA) in the *APA Handbook on the Psychology of Women*, is a psychosocial model based on the published psychosocial model of racism (Lewis, 2018). Jioni Lewis, the creator of this model, states:

at the core of sexism are the historical and contemporary systematic practices that have created a hierarchical society in which men have unearned privileges and women experience disadvantage ... As a result, patriarchal policies, practices, and structures have granted men power over women. (Lewis, 2018, p. 382)

Lewis created this model to convey the relationship “between systems–level sexism and individual–level sexism and how these forms of sexism negatively influence women” (Lewis, 2018, p. 382). At the center of the model is patriarchy, which is the primary societal system that perpetuates sexist ideals by simultaneously creating male privilege and disadvantages for women. As a result of the patriarchy—as well as continuing to enforce it—Lewis discusses individual, institutional, and cultural sexism as *everyday sexism*, or *benevolent sexism*, which are caused by the patriarchy and simultaneously reinforce it (Lewis, 2018, p. 383). Benevolent sexism includes both the sexism that women experience from men and the sexism that women internalize and use both against themselves and each other. Also contributing to Lewis’ psychosocial model of sexism are gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class, which primarily address intersectional sexism.

Lewis' psychosocial model of sexism exemplifies the importance of intersecting identities in one's experience of sexism and the patriarchy. Because the internalization of sexism comes from many facets of society, it is important to consider intersectionality in the discussion of the development and course of internalized sexism and its impacts.

### **Intersectionality and Intersectional Feminism**

Intersectionality, or “how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life,” was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, specifically referencing the intersection of Blackness and being female (Crenshaw, 1989; Steinmetz, 2020, p. 1). This significant aspect is both relevant to some participants in the present study and provides valuable insight into the impact of internalized sexism.

### **White Feminism vs. Intersectional Feminism and Its Role in History and Counterhistory**

The story of white feminism presents a historical context for the development of internalized feminism. By situating the construct of internalized sexism from a historical perspective, the development of the construct can be more fully understood, as can its impacts. In *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (2022), author Kyla Schuller deconstructs various historical moments of the white feminism movement using an intersectional lens. Schuller details the lives and experiences of many women who have been a part of various feminist movements, both those who are well known in popular history and those are often overlooked.

### ***1912—The Birth of Reproductive Rights***

Margaret Sanger was a part-time nurse for a neighborhood doctor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schuller, 2022). In 1912, she assisted the doctor in saving a mother of three, Sadie, who

was dying of sepsis after attempting an at-home abortion. Sadie and her husband were already struggling to feed their three children, and she knew they could not afford to support a fourth. Thanks to the care of Sanger and the doctor, Sadie survived; sadly, only a few months later, Sadie died from complications of a “five-dollar abortion” (Schuller, 2022, p. 117). Sanger had seen situations like this before and transitioned from “part-time nurse into a full-time birth control crusader” (Schuller, 2022, p. 117). Sadie’s story was one that Sanger frequently told while advocating for women’s reproductive rights; however, Sanger did not speak of the tragedy of losing Sadie but instead used her as an example of “the wretchedness and hopelessness of the poor” (Schuller, 2022, p. 117).

Sanger’s birth control crusade was one of extreme controversy (Schuller, 2022). She believed that birth control could be used as a tool for eugenics—a popular idea of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The goals of Sanger’s ideals were to prevent “uncontrolled breeding” in impoverished and colored families and enable sexual autonomy for “fit” women (Schuller, 2022, p. 118). The popularity of eugenics played a significant role in the white feminist movement of the time, and Sanger used this to her advantage by promising that utilizing reproductive rights would “rid modernity of people deemed unworthy” (Schuller, 2022, p. 119).

Sanger and the popularization of reproductive rights is an example of how white feminist ideals have actively oppressed minority women. In Sanger’s arguments, the oppression of Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and impoverished women is an obvious centerpiece of her argument; over a century later, as the fight for women’s reproductive rights continues, the same women oppressed by Sanger are being oppressed today by laws and bans all over the world. In 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, a 1973 decision that

legalized abortion in all 50 states (Planned Parenthood, 2022). In the 2021 case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the Supreme Court ruled that individual states can determine their own abortion laws. Because of this decision, approximately 36 million people who can get pregnant lost access to safe abortions, almost a third of which are BIPOC individuals (Planned Parenthood, 2022). Today, there are only nine states that do not restrict abortion based on gestational duration (Kekatos, 2024). The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is the start of stories like Sadie’s once again becoming part of the norm.

During the time of Margaret Sanger’s fight for birth control, the field of psychology was still relatively new; however, it was not immune to the popularity of eugenics and the racist and sexist ideas promoted by it (Walsh et al., 2020). While Sanger used eugenics to oppress BIPOC women, psychologists used eugenics to “rank races” and promote education for “elite individuals,” as well as gatekeep women from the field and encourage them to remain working in the home (Walsh et al., 2020, p. 404).

### ***1973—The Harms of Trans–Exclusionary Radical Feminism***

In April of 1973, the third West Coast Lesbian Conference was held at UCLA (Schuller, 2022). In attendance were over 1500 “short-haired, bra-less, free-spirited, mostly white women clad in androgynous plaid” (Schuller, 2022, p. 185). Beth Elliot was scheduled to perform a few songs a few hours into the concert; she was a 21-year-old transgender lesbian who was an active member of the conference planning committee as well as the vice president of the Daughters of Bilitis, a nationwide lesbian organization. When Elliot stepped on stage, however, a few women in attendance rushed the stage, stole her microphone, and called her “a transexual and a rapist ... He has no right to perform” (Schuller, 2022, p. 186). The stage rush caused a huge conflict, both

physical and verbal; eventually, Elliot was allowed to perform, and almost 100 women left the conference in protest. The next day, the headlining speaker of the conference called Elliot “a Faggot–Effeminist” and stated that “we know what’s at work when whites wear blackface; the same thing is at work when men wear drag” (Schuller, 2022, pg. 187). This rhetoric created “the Black/woman analogy ... [where] racist mockery is equated with gender transition” (Schuller, 2022, p. 187). This analogy continues to be used in trans–exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) ideology today.

TERFs remain a portion of today’s feminists (Schuller, 2022). They believe that gender exists only in a binary, and that “maleness and femaleness alone pins one’s place in the social hierarchy and determines individual behavior” (Schuller, 2022, p. 197). Utilizing a binary approach and quoting biological sex as the most important societal factor blatantly ignores racism, colonialism, and capitalism as major contributors to social hierarchy and oppression of minorities.

In 1973, psychology as a field was beginning to warm up to the idea of women in psychology—in entry level positions only, of course (Walsh et al., 2020). Although it was becoming more welcoming to cisgender white women, psychology was continuing to use its influence to oppress queer and trans women. While 1973 was the year the APA removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), it was only seven years later, in 1980, that gender identity disorder was added to the DSM–III to diagnosis transgender people (Drescher, 2015; Koh, 2012).

### ***Today—Intersectional Identities in Politics***

In 2016, American politics saw a drastic change as Donald J. Trump became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States (Schuller, 2022). A few weeks later, a young bartender received a phone call from an unknown number asking her to run for Congress; this woman was Alexandria Ocasio–Cortez (AOC), and a little over a year later she became a Democratic Socialist representative of the Fourteenth District of New York City. An intersectional feminist, AOC formed *The Squad* with three other BIPOC women in Congress: Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib, and Ilhan Omar (Schuller, 2022, p. 224). The Squad “embody the future of feminist leadership” and represent minority populations in a way that is unprecedented in American politics (Schuller, 2021, p. 224).

AOC represents more to modern feminism than a BIPOC woman in Congress (Schuller, 2022). She is a young woman in the public eye who is forced to confront her own internalized sexism every day. As her popularity among progressive young women grew, she “began to root out something just as toxic as women’s tendency to underestimate their own leadership capacities—the constant self–pressure to become the best possible version of themselves and to achieve the career positions to match” (Schuller, 2022, pp. 233–234). In today’s society, AOC represents a break in the mold that white feminism has spent so many years perfecting; she is a Latina woman in power who denounces capitalism, perfectionism, and misogyny.

### **Representation in the Field of Psychology**

Today, undergraduate and graduate psychology programs are filled with women of many backgrounds—although still the majority are white (Walsh et al., 2020). Despite the shift in gender majority, most positions of power within the field of psychology continue to be held by

cisgender, heterosexual white men. The positions of power not held by men are primarily held by cisgender white women. When it comes to people in power in psychology, “gender equality and cultural diversity ... remain deficient” (Walsh et al., 2020, p. 823). Similarly, female academics are published less frequently in highly rated psychological journals than their male counterparts (Meyer & Rathmann, 2019).

The theme of the underrepresentation of women continues throughout the APA, the professional organization that represents the field of psychology in the United States. Despite the field being considered “women–dominated” for many years, it is only recently that the board of directors of the APA began to reflect the diversity of psychology. In 2021, the president of the APA was a cisgender man, as were almost half of the members on the board of directors (American Psychological Association, 2022). Today, the last three APA presidents have been women, and the majority of the current Board of Directors is also women. While there is still room for improvement in terms of diversity in leadership, recent years have shown progress in accurately reflecting the field’s population.

### **Intersectional Feminism**

The history of feminist movements is riddled with women such as Sanger and the Daughters of Bilitus—women who support gender equality, but do so in ways that oppress other areas of identities. The feminism that they endorsed falls under the category of white feminism, which posits that “women are homogeneously and universally oppressed across temporal, spatial, and cultural frames” (Upadhyay, 2021). Conversely, intersectional feminism seeks to recognize the various facets of identity that contribute to a person’s experience and does not believe that the degree to which a woman is oppressed is universal (Haddock–Lazala, 2020).

Utilizing an intersectional feminist lens allows for flexibility in one's understanding of oppression and recognizes overall social placement as crucial in determining identity and status, which in turn supports equity for all identities, rather than equality for one.

### **Gender Roles and Stereotypes**

Phrases like “man up,” “that’s not ladylike,” or even “don’t be a pussy” run rampant in today’s society and perpetuate the sexist ideas that men and women—or feminine-presenting and masculine-presenting people—must act in accordance with their gender presentation. The expectation that individuals must adhere to these societal gender roles affects the development of behaviors, attitudes, relationships, and many other aspects of life, starting at a young age and continuing to shape people’s identities throughout adulthood.

Gender stereotyping is defined by Goyal and Rose (2020) as “the propagation of fixed notions about masculinity and femininity [that] leads to allocation of a dichotomous set of standards about verbal and social behavior to males and females without much scope for ambiguity or difference” (p. 1). Because gender stereotypes are so prominent in everyday life, they have significant implications for women’s overall well-being (Rollero, 2013). For example, studies have shown that women who are more frequently subjected to viewing models shown in media are more likely to experience both body dissatisfaction and lowered confidence in their social abilities; similarly, men who frequently view media of objectified women are more likely to endorse gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles (Rollero, 2013). Other research has found that “some women might adopt traditional gender role ideologies—that generally disadvantage women compared with men—in order to increase predictability and control in times of high uncertainty” (Weiss et al., 2012, p. 1782).

Gender roles are often sustained by those in power (in the case of misogyny, men) because it serves their own self-interest (Weiss et al., 2012, p. 1775). Therefore, men are more likely to endorse traditional gender roles than women, because it protects their privileged status. There are, however, women who do still endorse traditional gender roles despite their disadvantaged place within them. One theory of why women comply with and encourage the use of traditional gender roles posits that “because women low in openness should be more threatened by the uncertainty of life transitions, traditional gender role ideology should buffer the negative effect of uncertainty on self-efficacy and subjective well-being,” and therefore openness directly impacts a woman’s gender role ideologies (Weiss et al., 2012, p. 1776). Research on women’s involvement in the preservation of traditional gender stereotypes often discuss openness as a key factor. It has been found that open-mindedness and openness to experiences are directly correlated to a person’s comfort with uncertainty, which could explain why some women continue to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes (Weiss et al., 2012).

The findings of Weiss and colleagues align with system justification theory, which was developed in order to help explain why people with marginalized identities participate in the systems and activities that oppress them (Jost, 2018). System justification theory posits that by participating in the established systems, the people who are disadvantaged by them are able to avoid “uncertainty, threat, and social discord,” as well as maintain the current status quo (Jost, 2018, p. 5). By utilizing system justification theory, women’s participation in patriarchal structure can be seen as both personally beneficial, as seen in the findings of Weiss and colleagues, as well as socially beneficial, as it allows them to maintain social order (Jost, 2018; Weiss et al., 2012).

The impacts of gender roles are not just societal, but directly impact daily living for many individuals and families and are so engrained in today's society that they are found in today's textbooks, which typically portray highly feminized and unrealistic depictions of women (Goyal & Rose, 2020). Research on a popular business English textbook has shown that textbooks can play a significant role in the construction of social structures; therefore, the ultrafeminine version of women in such texts continues to perpetuate stereotypes that encourage patriarchal views of women in society.

Women internalize these ideas of sexism and misogyny in a way that forces them to pursue a life where they can “do it all,” meaning that they can have a successful career, be a good parent, and still have a blossoming social life (Wenhold & Harrison, 2020). The lifestyle that accompanies these beliefs is often detrimental to a woman's physical, mental, and emotional health. In direct contrast to the typical societal belief that women can do it all, when studies asked men about their futures, they often described family life as an equal division of household duties, financial responsibility, and family involvement; however, “the men were willing to state expectations for a 50/50 split, but when it came to divvying up the household and childcare responsibilities, they were less willing to adhere to an equal divide” (Wenhold & Harrison, 2020, p. 215). These findings illustrate the day-to-day repercussions that the ideas of internalized sexism have on both men and women.

Overall, traditional gender roles have been shown to influence the development of values and behaviors in both men and women throughout adulthood. Because of this, the struggle to fight the patriarchy is perpetuated through the continued enforcement of gender roles and stereotypes as they are continuously woven into normal societal values.

## **Gender Roles and Motherhood**

Traditional gender roles stem from the idea that women are meant to be mothers, and that their purpose in life is to raise children. Although this attitude certainly still exists in the modern world, there is now even more pressure for women to “do it all”—cook, clean, work, raise children, and continue to be an individual (McFee, 2024). An article by Dr. Amber Thornton (2021) points out the key difference in how society views motherhood differently than fatherhood by recounting the many times she was asked how she could “do it all,” but the father of her children has never been asked the same question. Dr. Thornton posits that the reason for this is “because there is a narrative that the mother or mother-figure is the one that is responsible for all of these duties,” which perpetuates the idea that women must be the ones to “do it all” (Thornton, 2021, p. 4). This is further explored in a 2024 study that found “women construct the ideal woman as having dual, intertwining wife and mother duties” as well as a fulfilling personal life (Ginting-Carlström, 2024, p. 8). Growing up believing that success means quite literally doing everything—and doing it well—can create a sense of pressure and expectations that limit young women’s ideas of what their lives can look like (Ginting-Carlström, 2024).

## **Gender Identity Development**

The development of an individual’s gender identity and presentation are heavily influenced by social norms, stereotypes, and societal expectations. Research conducted on normative gender identity development has shown that particular gender differences can occur as early as infancy; for example, baby boys spend more time looking at physical-mechanical objects, and baby girls spend more time looking at people’s faces (de Vries et al., 2014). The traditional gender stereotypes society thinks of—such as soft, gentle behaviors in girls and

rowdy, boisterous behaviors in boys—are not observed until late toddlerhood or early childhood. At this stage of development, gender preferences begin to arise, as well as early signs of traditionally masculine and feminine behaviors. In adolescence, a social process called gender intensification occurs, the results of which include “increased pressure to conform to culturally sanctioned gender roles results in a further differentiation in gender role identification in boys and girls” (de Vries et al., 2014, p. 57).

After gender intensification, there are continued changes in the presentation of femininity and masculinity in both men and women (Jones et al., 2010). The concept of changing gender expression has existed in psychology for over a century, specifically in Jungian theories of “androgynous transformations of midlife,” which allows men to become more feminine and women to become more masculine after the confining gender demands in younger adulthood (Jones et al., 2010, p. 156). In fact, women who follow the normative trend of decreasing femininity over adulthood are often more psychologically healthy than women who increased in feminine presentation; however, there were no significant results regarding the psychological health of men who either followed or defied the normative trend of increased femininity. These implications parallel the rigidity in how women are socially expected to present their gender (Jones et al., 2010).

Gender identity also influences other areas of adult development, such as agency and family interactions (Sneed et al., 2006). It has been found that a decrease in contact with a person’s family of origin tends to occur more quickly in men than in women, and while men and women both increase in romantic and financial independence in early adulthood, “men tended to be characterized by higher levels of instrumentality than women in both domains” (Sneed et al.,

2006, p. 794). These results are generally consistent with social role theory, as well as traditional gender roles that specify women's roles remain with their families. Similarly, men tended to be more instrumental in their own decisions than women in multiple domains, which relates to the social concept of independence being a more masculine trait.

### **The Sexualization of Girls and Women**

Previous research has found that stereotypical gender roles are endorsed by children as young as two years old (Stone et al., 2015). However, the stereotypical behaviors of young girls have changed in the eyes of society over the past several decades. For example, traditional stereotypes show “girls are perceived as being kind, gentle, passive, and well behaved relative to boys” (Stone et al., 2015, p. 159). Over the past 20 years, these stereotypes have shifted into a sexualization of girls—even young girls—in popular media. According to the APA, “sexualization occurs when women and girls are most valued for their sexual appeal, are sexually objectified, or have sexuality inappropriately forced on them” (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Using this definition, society sexualizes girls, both in the media and in reality, at a very young age, sometimes even in prepubescence. The early sexualization of girls is one of many factors that lead to the internalization of sexist beliefs and behaviors in girls and women or the feminine rivalry that occurs when femininity becomes a competition (Anthony et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2015). By indoctrinating the main ideal of sexism—the belief that women are inherently inferior to men and most prized for their reproductive abilities—at a young age, women are taught to not only believe sexist ideas about themselves but also to perpetuate these sexist ideals through their behavior toward other women (Means, 2021).

The sexualization of girls and women has profound impacts on both the daily experiences of women and the broader implications of womanhood. Media portrayals of both women and girls are more often sexually provocative than portrayals of boys and men (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). The consequences of such portrayals include the objectification theory, which posits that girls internalize the sexualized messages of the media and develop *self-objectification* (Zurbriggen et al., 2007, p. 20). Self-objectification causes girls and women to assess their body image, self-worth, and success through a third-person lens based on typical media representations of women. This process often causes body dissatisfaction, feelings of worthlessness, depression, and low self-esteem in girls and women of all ages, all of which contribute to unhealthy life experiences for women.

Often, people of all genders equate femininity with “being sexually available to men,” and that any presentation of femininity—regardless of gender—is more likely to result in harassment from peers (Hoskin, 2019). As such, women are more likely to view femininity in a negative light (Twenge & Zucker, 1999). Additionally, the hypersexualization of girls and women in media contributes to stereotyping gender roles and often normalizes physical and sexual violence against women (J. Swift & Gould, 2021).

### **The Feminist Movement and Femininity**

The feminist movement has undergone many changes over the last few decades; the theme connecting each feminist ideology, however, remains the belief in the equality of genders (Alfonseca, 2023). While there is little data to determine which branch is the most popular, a 2022 poll found that 61% of women define themselves as feminists (Jackson, 2022). Modern feminism is typically referred to as the fourth wave feminism, which aims for inclusivity and

intersectionality; however, it also often fails to uplift women who do ascribe to traditional femininity, instead focusing on women in power (Alfonseca, 2023). While it is clear that representation of women in power is crucial in empowering women to “live more truly and authentically,” in order to be truly inclusive, feminism must also be able to recognize the validity of those whose authenticity resides in traditionally feminine presentations (Alfonseca, 2023, p. 7).

The complexity of the relationship between feminism and femininity can be exemplified in part by a 2024 study on cisgender women’s responses to threats to femininity. Previous research found that while men experience increased psychological distress in response to threats to their masculinity, women’s distress levels do not change when their femininity was similarly jeopardized (Wittlin et al., 2024). However, Wittlin and colleagues (2024) reexamined this claim, changing the topic from threat to psychological femininity and masculinity (i.e., gender roles and stereotypes) to threat to physical femininity and masculinity, particularly in how one presents their physical appearance. When women were faced with a threat to their physical femininity, they did respond with a significant increase in anxiety and decrease in self-esteem, as did men with masculinity (Wittlin et al., 2024). The study concluded that threats to physical femininity are more likely to invoke *identity invalidation* due to the general acceptance of women no longer adhering to psychological femininity, but the desire to present oneself in a traditionally feminine way (Wittlin et al., 2024).

### **The Year of the Girls**

Many media and news networks called 2023 “The Year of the Girls,” noting both an increase in media representation, as well as cultural shift in popular presentation, of girlhood

(Klein et al., 2024; Princiotti, 2023). On an episode of the National Public Radio (NPR) segment *All Things Considered*, host Juana Summers stated, “themes of girlhood were everywhere ... you couldn’t really walk a block in downtown New York without running headlong into legwarmers and ballet flats and pleated school skirts, and, like, bows—so many bows ... is there any culture for *adult* women anymore?” (Klein et al., 2024, 0:28–0:31). Summers’ guest, author Isabel Cristo, discusses the cultural phenomenon of girlhood—or as pop icon Chappell Roan recently coined it, the *femininomenon*—and how its appeal is cultivated by the “bleak political landscape” left by the aftermath of the Dobbs decision (Chappell Roan, 2023; Klein et al., 2024, 0:40).

In an article for *The Ringer*, author Nora Princiotti notes the discrepancy between the popularity of girlhood and the popularity of womanhood, stating “the opposite of ‘girl’ in these contexts isn’t ‘boy’—it’s ‘woman’ (Princiotti, 2023, p. 10). She exemplifies this by discussing the viral internet trend *girl dinner*, which encouraged women around the world to share their low-effort and self-serving meals as they realized that this was a shared experience by millions of women. Princiotti noted that despite the popularity of girl dinner amongst adult women, the trend focuses on the girlish aspects of the practice; she states, “girl dinner isn’t something one makes for a kid or a partner. It’s a celebration of a lack of responsibility typically associated with being a grown woman” (Princiotti, 2023, p. 11).

### **Summary of the Relevant Literature**

As the literature illustrates, the presence of internalized sexism is only beginning to be understood, with few empirical studies. The various development models have focused on both genders, with no recognition of the role of internalized sexism. The research into gender roles, as well as the sexualization of girls, has not yet explored internalized sexism in young adult women.

This dissertation sought to begin to fill this gap in research by discussing womanhood and its experiences and challenges with women who are currently in the young adult phase of life. By asking participants about their own experiences, as well as traits they admire and do not admire in other women, this study will begin to gain insight into how internalized sexism manifests, as well as what experiences contribute to a young woman's views of women and womanhood. The young adult age group allows for unique insight into the roles of adolescent experiences as well as the challenges of transitioning from girlhood to womanhood.

Overall, the purpose of this study was to collect preliminary data on the development of internalized sexism in women in order to help to dismantle the patriarchal ideals that cause it. Using a qualitative approach allowed for the lived experiences of women to be brought into the research space as more than simply numbers; qualitative research can help to ensure that the voices of participants are the primary focus of the data in order to best describe their individual and common experiences. Using qualitative research therefore allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of common experiences and perceptions shared amongst emerging adult women, making it the best fit for the current study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

As established, in order to best understand the lived experience of womanhood, this study utilized an experiential qualitative method (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) allows for each individual experience brought to the study to be discussed using its unique occurrences as well as its universal occurrences in order to report on the experience of womanhood with the most accuracy for each participant. By utilizing IPA, the present study was able to aid in gaining insight into how internalized sexism shapes young women's views of themselves and other women.

#### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA is unique in its philosophy as it involves two levels of interpretation: the participants are interpreting their experiences according to the researcher's questions, and the researcher is interpreting the participants' answers (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Through both interpretations, IPA analysis seeks to represent both individual and collective experiences of the same phenomenon. The basis of IPA was founded by Heidegger, who sought to further develop qualitative methods in order to gather more concrete results, rather than the more typical abstract results derived from qualitative research (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Heidegger believed that in order for qualitative data to be meaningful, it needed to include intersubjectivity, which recognizes that people's perspectives are based in relation to their engagement with their surroundings. In other words, he believed that humans create meaning based on their experiences, and that this same meaning-making can be applied to research.

### **Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Idiography**

IPA is designed to allow the researcher to learn about participants' beliefs, constructs, and personal narratives in a way that portrays their psychological processes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). To do so, IPA uses three foundational theories: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Phenomenology refers to the study of human experience and is used to examine the lives and perspectives of each individual participant in order to gain an understanding of common experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). It uses meaning-making on the part of both the researcher and participants that allows for the summarization of data to create a conceptualization of shared experiences or beliefs. By using phenomenology, IPA exists outside of pre-existing theories and concepts and instead aims to use the researcher to compile the data in a meaningful way.

Hermeneutics refers to the theory of interpretation (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA uses hermeneutics by assuming that there is a connection between a person's cognitive, linguistic, and physical experiences that can be studied using the interpretive skills of the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A hermeneutic approach can be used in lieu of a descriptive approach when the aim of the study is to interpret data rather than restate it. In order to effectively use IPA, the research must look beyond the surface appearance of participant statements and instead "closely engage with what is said" to determine the deeper meaning (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 7). Using IPA means using a double hermeneutic to collect data, which occurs when the participant interprets their experiences and answers interview questions, and then the researcher interprets meaning and therefore data from those answers (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Finally, idiography means that IPA does not seek to generalize results to an entire population, and instead focuses on accurately reporting on the experiences of the few participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022). An idiographic approach allows the researcher to hone in on specific details of an individual's experiences and deduce meaning and importance, as well as create patterns of convergence within multiple accounts of a shared experience. In order to remain idiographic, each participant's answers must be analyzed in their own context before they are considered in relation to others or to existing theories and frameworks.

### **Research Using a Phenomenological Approach**

IPA is used to make sense of connections between multiple individuals' common lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In order to do so effectively, studies using IPA use a small sample size, which allows for in-depth analysis of unique details in each participants' collected data. Participants are typically recruited through purposive sampling, which is when participants are chosen specifically because of their ability to provide insight into the research question (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Because of IPA's focus on specific experience, it often calls for a homogenous sample in order to ensure that differences in experience are more likely attributed to individual difference than demographic difference. Overall, the sample for an IPA study should include a homogenous group of people who may be particularly well-suited for the research topic (the definition of homogenous is often subjective according to the researcher and the present topic).

Data for IPA research is collected using semi-structured interviews that are meant to provoke rich data and discussion about an individual's experience, and not necessarily a conclusion of cause and effect (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 13). *Rich data* is typically collected

when participants “are able to answer questions freely, be reflective, and discuss their experiences at a good level of depth” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 14). Interviews should be accurately transcribed, and the researcher should invest careful time and considerable effort into interpretation of each interview in order to collect and analyze the data within individual context and alongside each participants’ experiences. The data will most likely begin to take shape, however, during the writing process, when the researcher is able to conceptualize the analysis through discussion of the results.

### **IPA and the Present Study**

The present study seeks to collect information on the lived experiences of young women in today’s society and its corresponding societal influences in order to develop an understanding of the development of internalized sexism in young women. Using the methodology of IPA allowed for each women’s experience to be carefully considered and interpreted in order to elevate their voice and their story, as well as for the convergence of shared experiences among the young women. Similarly, IPA acknowledges that the role of the researcher cannot be separated from the interpretation and analysis, which allows for the results of the current study to remain valid despite the meaningfulness of the topic to the researcher.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

All participants were individuals residing in the United States who are between 18 and 24 years of age. The participants spoke English as their first language as the researcher is only fluent in English. In addition, the participants had access to a device with internet capability and a Zoom software program. All participants are individuals who currently identify as cisgender women and whose sex was assigned female at birth (AFAB). The experiences of transgender,

non-binary, and non-cisgender women are vital to understanding the full impact of internalized sexism; however, their experiences with internalized sexism are beyond the scope of this preliminary study.

### **Recruitment Procedures**

The researcher recruited participants via email, social media, and professional connections. The message shared included a detailed description of the study, the approximate time participants would volunteer, and compensation for participants (see Appendix A). The information provided also included the researcher's contact information, inclusion criteria, and the limitations of confidentiality. Once the participants signed up for the study and confirmed they met the inclusion criteria, they received an informed consent form and the limitations to confidentiality via SurveyMonkey (see Appendix B).

### **Preliminary Procedures**

Participants were sent a SurveyMonkey link that contained an electronic informed consent form that details the purpose of the study, confidentiality, potential risks and benefits, a statement about recorded interviews, and voluntary participation (see Appendix B). All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Once the participants read the informed consent, they electronically selected the "agree" option to confirm that they understood the study and information provided and agreed to all procedures.

After completing the informed consent, the researcher reached out to the participants to schedule an online interview. All interviews were conducted through Zoom, a HIPAA-compliant platform that ensures the protection of participants' private information. The interviews were

recorded and transcribed in order to code the data at a later date. Virtual interviews also ensure the safety of participants and researchers during the COVID–19 pandemic.

### **Protection of Human Rights**

The benefits of participating in the present study were that each participant personally contributed to early research on the development of internalized sexism. They were also entered into a drawing for a \$50 Target gift card and one participant was randomly selected to receive it. Risks of participation included the possibility of emotional distress if interviews were to become upsetting due to the potential sensitivity surrounding discussions of gender, sexism, and related experiences. Participants were given the information for the 988 crisis line, as well as given the opportunity to debrief with the researcher after the interview. There is the potential for ethical concerns regarding confidentiality due to using telecommunication for interviews. In order to ensure confidentiality, the interviews took place using private, password–protected, HIPAA–compliant Zoom meeting rooms and recordings were secured in private accounts and destroyed after transcription.

### **Interview Procedures**

Semi–structured interviews were conducted one–on–one via HIPAA–compliant Zoom and explored each participant’s experiences with internalized sexism.

Interview questions included:

- Tell me what you think it means to be a woman.
- What has informed your ideas of what it means to be a woman?
- How have these ideas influenced your experiences as a woman?

- Can you think of a woman you consider a role model?
  - What do you like about her?
- Can you think of a woman you do not like or do not look up to?
  - What are the reasons?

Each interview was recorded using the Zoom recording feature in order to ensure accurately transcribed conversations. Recordings were saved in the researcher's secure, password-protected Zoom account on a password-protected device and destroyed after the completion of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were uploaded into Dedoose, a transcription and coding software. The researcher followed the analytical guidelines of IPA from Smith and colleagues (2022), which suggests specific steps to analyze each participant's interview one at a time (Smith et al., 2022). Step one of the analysis involves "reading and re-reading" each transcript in order to ensure the researcher has a thorough understanding of each participant's reported experiences (Smith et al., 2022, p. 32). The second step of data analysis is "formulating experiential statements" for each participant (Smith et al., 2022, p. 39). These statements are meant to briefly encapsulate the themes from participant's transcripts. Once these statements are determined by the researcher, step three is to thematically cluster them using the interpretative perspective of the researcher to determine which statements are related to each other. Step four of the analytical process is to compile the personal experiential themes (PETs). The titles of the PETs are meant to "[express] the convergence as the experiential statements are brought together" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 46). Once PETs are determined for each participant, the

researcher compares the PETs of each transcript and sorts them thematically in order to develop group experiential themes (GETs) by searching for similar meanings, experiences, and themes amongst the interviews.

The researcher closely followed the steps set forth by Smith and colleagues in order to both maintain the validity and reliability of IPA methodology as well as ensure that the experiences of participants are communicated in a way that is rooted in data while still viewed through the unique lens of the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2022).

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Eight participants completed the semi-structured interview, and each interview was transcribed and coded using Smith and colleagues recommended methodology for IPA data analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Specific demographics of the participants can be found in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**

*Participant Demographics*

	Age	Ethnicity	Education Level
Woman 1	23	White	Some college
Woman 2	24	White	Master's degree
Woman 3	18	White	High school diploma
Woman 4	19	White	Some college
Woman 5	19	White	Some college
Woman 6	24	Asian	Associate's degree
Woman 7	19	East Asian	Some college
Woman 8	18	White	Some college

### **Themes**

There were eight group experiential themes (GETs) pulled from the data: (a) womanhood is taught by women throughout the lifespan, (b) women are sexually responsible for men, (c) women are emotional caregivers, (d) there are biological bases of womanhood, (e) women are expected to “do it all,” (f) expectations of women are fueled by media portrayal, (g) traditional femininity is seen as oppositional to the feminist movement, and (h) womanhood is a community.

**Table 4.2***Group Experiential Themes and Personal Experiential Themes (Number of Endorsements)*

Group Experiential Themes	Personal Experiential Themes
Womanhood is Taught by Women Throughout the Lifespan (8)	Early Exposure to Women as Caretakers (8) Ideas of Womanhood Change Overtime (6)
Women are Sexually Responsible for Men (8)	Sexual Responsibility of Women (7) To be a Woman is to be Sexualized (6)
Women are Emotional Caregivers (8)	Traditional Womanhood Means that Women are Meant to Serve Others (6) Women are Seen as Emotional and Sensitive (7)
Biological Bases of Womanhood (7)	Womanhood Begins with Menstruation (5) The Expectations of Motherhood (5)
Women are Expected to “Do it All” (6)	The Many Roles of a Woman (6)
Expectations of Women are Fueled by Media Portrayal (6)	The Impact of Media’s Portrayal of Women (6) Positive Media Representation Impacts Women as Individuals (4)
Traditional Femininity is Viewed as Oppositional to the Feminist Movement (6)	Traditional Femininity is Viewed Negatively (5) Women are Taught to Judge Each Other Based on Traditional Gender Role Expectations (4)
The Community of Womanhood (8)	Womanhood is Connection (8)

### **Group Experiential Theme 1: Womanhood is Taught by Women Throughout the Lifespan**

Each participant talked about learning womanhood from the women in their lives. Learning what it means to be a woman began in girlhood when participants began learning from their mothers, continued as the participants grew into teenagers and were strongly influenced by their peers and the media, and eventually began developing into their current views of womanhood which are primarily influenced by their found communities. This theme helps to identify one of the ways that young women might learn the ideas and behaviors that can contribute to internalized sexism.

#### **Personal Experiential Theme 1A: Early Exposure to Women as Caretakers**

Many of the participants discussed their early views of womanhood in relation to learning from their mothers. Woman 3 stated,

[learning womanhood] is a nurture aspect ... things you observe from your parents. Say you go into preschool, in that environment and those roles, seeing people who identify as women presenting [as feminine and as caretakers], you start to be like 'oh, this is a woman.'

Children often see women take on the role of caregiver in multiple settings, including home and school, which may inform young girls' own expectations of womanhood.

#### **Personal Experiential Theme 1B: Ideas of Womanhood Change Overtime**

Participants also discussed how their ideas of what womanhood means have changed throughout their lives, and many of them cited their close friend group as the primary driver for the shift in their perspective. Woman 3 discussed how she noticed that she was more judgmental of women when she was in adolescence, stating:

When I was younger, I definitely think I would have been like ‘Oh my gosh, she’s not attractive because she’s not wearing a dress ... or because she’s not wearing makeup.’ Or ‘Look at her talking a lot.’ I think [being around other women] changed what I thought makes an attractive woman.

In the interview with Woman 6, she stated,

not only did I have people around me that were accepting of [women in nontraditional roles], but also people who wanted [to be in nontraditional roles ... like if [my friend] is going to do all of this and still be a woman, then it’s normal.

In Woman 7’s interview, she discussed her experience of joining a sports team and understanding the power of women for the first time. She stated, “my best friends taught me how to take better care of myself. It reflects back in how you treat others ... I see how girls treat themselves and it’s often the same way they treat other people.” This conversation exemplifies how women must have positive interactions with other women in order to better understand their own experiences with womanhood and femininity.

### **Group Experiential Theme 2: Women Are Sexually Responsible for Men**

In conjunction with the expectation that women fulfill a caretaking role, participants also talked about the feelings of responsibility that come with womanhood. Oftentimes, discussions of traditional gender roles and femininity intermixed with discussions of sexualization and the cooccurring pressure to act and appear in specific ways in order to both please men and keep men from having sexual thoughts. The idea that women are responsible for men’s thoughts and actions is reinforced throughout the lifetime, and its contributions to internalized sexism are explored in this group theme.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 2A: Sexual Responsibility of Women**

Not only did the participants discuss being responsible for others’ general well-being, but they also noted how they have been taught that they are also responsible for how they are seen by

others, especially in terms of sexuality. This is especially exemplified in this recollection from

Woman 5:

And growing up being told, I can't do certain things, because, you know, I'm a girl, um, one of the most prevalent to me was my parents loved like, dressing me up, and, like skirts, and like dresses and stuff. And I loved wearing them, still do to this day, I'm a fashion major ... And I remember I was in the back of the car one day, and I had like, my legs spread apart, manspreading, because that's what I saw my dad and all the boys do at school all the time. And I remember my mom laying into me and being like, yelling at me. And she was just like, 'you need to close your legs,' you know, 'there's gonna be guys there from the family.' And I was just so confused. I was like, why do they care? Like, what does it matter? And I think that's the first time because I was like, super young back then, like five, that was the first time I realized that I would be responsible for men's actions.

Woman 7 discussed similar experiences in which being catcalled resulted in shame and lowered confidence; she reported, "[as a woman athlete], you get sexualized a lot. We get catcalled a lot, and it's hard to keep persevering and be able to still be confident in your own body. It's just objectifying." In many of the examples of sexualization that participants shared, they spoke as if they were the ones responsible for the thoughts or behaviors of men.

### **Personal Experiential Them 2B: To be a Woman is to be Sexualized**

Each woman interviewed was able to identify a time in their life when they were inappropriately sexualized. Sometimes these were experiences as an adult, and other times they occurred in adolescence and even childhood. Woman 5 discussed her experience when she started puberty:

So in late middle school ... I was one of the first girls in my class to develop boobs. That was a huge deal, apparently ... early on in middle school when no boys gave me attention. And I was known as like, oh, like, why would they have a crush on you? No, I'd just play with them and run around with them. We'd play like kickball and stuff. And then I grew boobs. And all of a sudden, it was weird. Then all of a sudden, I was [seen as] flirting with them. And that made me feel weird.

Woman 3 also recalled multiple instances of sexualization, stating “it’s easy to like, get sexualized a lot ... we get catcalled and stuff ... mentally, like, that was really taxing on me.”

### **Group Experiential Theme 3: Women are Emotional Caregivers**

Throughout interviews, participants discussed the emotional weight of womanhood and the expectation of women to be emotional caregivers. While not every participant discussed the role of emotional caregiver as inherently negative, the weight of the role was consistently noted. The pressure of adhering to these expectations stems from the patriarchal values that influence internalized sexism and the adoption of traditional gender roles.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 3A: Traditional Womanhood Means that Women are Meant to Serve Others.**

Many of the participants noted that traditional gender roles posit that women are meant to be subservient to the well-being of others, and that they continue to feel the pressure to conform the role of emotional caretaker. In many conversations, participants talked about looking up to women who are able to accommodate the people around them. For example, when Woman 8 was asked about a woman she looks up to, she stated, “[this person] makes everyone else around her happy ... she creates a good environment.” Similarly, Woman 8 discussed how women often feel the need to change how they present to the world in order to conform to the expectations of others.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 3B: Women are Seen as Emotional and Sensitive**

A consistent assumption made by participants was that women are inherently more emotional than men. Woman 2 noted that “to be a woman means to have a great sense of caring and understanding towards others,” and Woman 1 described women as “emotionally based.”

Relatedly, Woman 3 discussed how women are seen as emotional, and emotions are viewed as irrational, which contributes to the idea that women are irrational. Woman 3 stated, “[emotion] is important to how [women] reason and have decisional capacity ... [the ideal woman] shows comfortability in her emotions ... and uses reason and emotional input to share their opinions and thoughts on matters.”

#### **Group Experiential Theme 4: Biological Bases of Womanhood**

Participants discussed biological experiences as a part of womanhood as well, including menstruation and the role of motherhood. Reproduction and motherhood is a large part of traditional gender roles, and the attitudes and social expectations of motherhood are closely tied to the pressure to adopt traditional gender roles and internalized sexism.

#### **Personal Experiential Theme 4A: Womanhood Begins with Menstruation**

Perhaps one of the most obvious universal experiences among women has to do with the female reproductive system. Many of the participants cited menstruation and the female role in reproduction as crucial parts of being women. Woman 5 stated, “It’s like when you get your period, everyone would tell me ‘You’re a woman now.’ And it’s like oh, that feels kind of weird, like wow there’s blood coming out of your vagina so now you’re a woman” and discussed the implication that a woman’s body achieving puberty leads society to view her as a reproductive object as opposed to an individual.

#### **Personal Experiential Theme 4B: The Expectations of Motherhood**

Other participants also discussed how being viewed as a reproductive object allows society to assume that young girls will grow up to be mothers, as exemplified by the following quote from Woman 8:

[motherhood] is not our only purpose. Some people, like, don't have any children, and they don't feel the need to have children, and they can still have meaning in their life ... And there's women that like physically can't have children, and people view them as useless. But that's not fair.

Woman 3 also noted the pressure she has felt to become a mother; she stated, "when I was young, it was definitely the idea of like, you will marry a man relatively young, and have children. My parents were fine with career, but they were like, ultimately, you'll have children."

### **Group Experiential Theme 5: Women are Expected to "Do it All"**

The pressure to become mothers is only a small part of the expectations that women face every day. According to the ideas perpetuated by internalized sexism, a woman must fulfill many roles and expectations in order to be appreciated or seen as successful by society. Participants discussed the general pressures of womanhood and the idea that a successful woman must "do it all."

### **Personal Experiential Theme 5A: The Many Roles of a Woman**

Woman 6 was one of the participants who discussed the pressure on women to "do it all" and still maintain a sense of individuality. She stated, "I think most people also realizing that women can be in powerful roles, empowering roles and still do whatever tasks they are, I guess, assumed, because people think, oh, single mom, but she's also working. She's also providing, she's also leading." The conversation continued to examine how alongside the pressure to be mothers, career women, and well-developed individuals, women are also expected to do the bulk of the work of the feminist movement. Woman 6 shared some of her experience with being a driver for change, stating:

When I was pregnant, there wasn't a room after I gave birth where I can pump breast milk for my child. But now they're making it a rule where every building has to have it

... Just realizing that all of these changes have been made. But there's also so much more that needs to be done. And I want to be somebody that makes it better for other women, so I'm going to have to say something, otherwise, they're just going to suffer worse, or to the same level of or worse than I did. And I don't think anyone needs to go through that again. So that's why we have history, teaching us, and hopefully, women now are making history.

Each of the participants mentioned how multi-faceted womanhood is, with statements such as “we're really, like, everything” (Woman 1) and “we do the housework, we're the caretakers ... and we're also supposed to have our own hobbies and careers or we're not doing enough” (Woman 4).

### **Group Experiential Theme 6: Expectations of Women are Fueled by Media Portrayal**

When discussing major influences on participants' understanding of womanhood, every woman noted how women in media—both real and fictional—have impacted their experiences throughout their lives. The effects of media discussed were both positive and negative, and it is clear that media portrayal can play a large role in developing ideas of womanhood.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 6A: The Impact of Media's Portrayal of Women**

Participants discussed how the media has changed throughout their lifetime and how it has thus shifted their perspective of women and womanhood. Woman 1 discussed how her interaction with media has allowed her to focus on more positive aspects of womanhood, stating, “I use my consumption of media, like positive media, to influence to think [of women as versatile and powerful].” In contrast, Woman 8 provided an example of how current media influences have had a negative impact on her experiences as a woman:

I think a lot of stuff in the media [makes me feel the need to defend being a woman] ... if you've heard of Andrew Tate, that guy—and then others guys that I know watch him—they make jokes like I'm going to be in the kitchen, I belong there. And like I said, those

are jokes. But sometimes it's like, is that really a joke to you? ... It just seems like [womanhood] is attacked so much.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 6B: Positive Media Representation Impacts Women as Individuals**

While participants discussed how the media's portrayal of women impacts them as individuals, many of them also cited popular women in media as major influences on their ideas of what it means to be a woman. The women mentioned by participants included Kamala Harris, Rihanna, Joanne Bass, Selena, Beyonce, and Taylor Swift (mentioned by four participants). *The Barbie Movie*, a 2023 film produced by Universal Pictures, was also discussed by multiple participants, not only as a movie with a powerful feminist message, but also as a phenomenon that has brought women together over shared experiences. Woman 4 shared the following:

There's a lot more women-empowering media out there. Like people aren't afraid to speak about it, like the struggles of being a woman. Even just thinking about this past summer, how *The Barbie Movie* played such an influential role in society. And the two highest grossing tours right now are two women—Beyonce and Taylor Swift.

### **Group Experiential Theme 7: Traditional Femininity is Seen as Oppositional to the Feminist Movement**

Throughout each discussion with participants, there were many varying opinions on traditional gender roles and their place in society; however, one common thread between all of the opinions is the idea that a woman ascribing to traditional gender roles or presenting as traditionally feminine is viewed as oppositional to the ideals of the feminist movement, primarily in terms of rectifying gender inequality. As seen in the literature review, there are many reasons a woman might engage in patriarchal ideas, and it is important to understand the relationship between traditional femininity and internalized sexism.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 7A: Traditional Femininity is Viewed Negatively**

While none of the participants outright criticized traditional femininity, many of them made statements rooted in a negative perception of traditional feminine traits. For example,

Woman 5 stated the following:

But my mom ... she has to be a housewife, and she has to do everything for the family, she has to take care of the kids ... she feels like she has to be subservient to my dad ... It just makes me really upset, because I have such a fear of, you know, becoming what she was [when I was] growing up ... I'm afraid of becoming the person that she is... I look up to her in the way of her personality, but not in the way that she acts towards, you know, her role as a woman.

This discussion of conforming to traditional gender roles shows a rejection of traditional femininity to the point of viewing feminine presentation as being something to be ashamed of. In other words, the ideals of feminism can encourage the rejection of traditional ideas of femininity, which can lead to unfair judgment of women who may choose or prefer traditional gender roles. It is important to distinguish that one may conform to traditional gender roles due to pressure from societal norms and expectations, but another person may conform to these roles because they fulfill their desires and needs. Other participants in the study had similar ideals, as evidenced by statements such as “I don’t see the point of makeup” (Woman 3), and “she’s basically rejected every single norm that comes with growing up as a woman... and I really respect her for that” (Woman 5).

### **Personal Experiential Theme 7B: Women are Taught to Judge Each Other Based on Traditional Gender Role Expectations**

Many of the women also discussed their experiences with comparison, competition, and judgement amongst women, all of which are rooted in the idea that a woman must meet certain standards in order to be seen as successful or worthy of attention. In a discussion with Woman 8,

she shared about learning and unlearning negative judgment of women based on unrealistic standards:

We had a party where we would dress up, and I was kind of insecure about like, what I was wearing, like it wasn't the best. So then I remember I picked out this one girl, I don't really remember what she was wearing, but I was like 'oh, at least my outfit is way better than this girl's.' And then in my head I was like 'wait, why am I doing that? Other people look better than me, I shouldn't be bagging on this one girl.

She attributed the habit of comparison and judgment to "the constant feeling of like, I need to be better." Woman 5 shared how her experience with comparison has impacted her, as well:

Starting when I was young, after I realized I was getting more attention [after developing boobs], I realized that there was nothing I could do about being friends with the girls, because they no longer liked me [because I was going through puberty]. I kind of took it as like a form of revenge, I would dress up and accentuate myself, because it felt like that's what I had to do to be appreciated.

### **Group Experiential Theme 8: The Community of Womanhood**

While there are many pressures, impossible expectations, and challenges of womanhood, each participant also noted how important their community of women has been, both in developing their understanding of womanhood and in their development as an individual.

### **Personal Experiential Theme 8A: Womanhood is Connection**

Woman 8 discussed how she loves to connect with other women, stating, "I like just the random things, like talking to someone about the little things like 'have you seen this movie?' 'Oh my gosh, yes, I love this part.' And just connecting about random, little, cute things, and how some people get like so excited about the things that they're passionate about."

Similarly, Women 2 and 5 credited their communities of women for their views of what womanhood means, stating, “Really talking to other women, learning about their experiences, it makes you feel more united” (Woman 5), and “I value the collaboration I have with other women; it makes me feel powerful” (Woman 2). Woman 1 also talked about the community of womanhood and shared a story about connecting with women even outside of her circle:

Watching the Barbie movie ... it was really emotional, and it spoke to us [as women] ... there were three generations [of women] there—a mom, a grandma, and a daughter—and they were all like wearing pink and taking pictures together. It made me emotional! ... we went up to them ... and we had a really nice talk with the grandma. She was like, ‘you know something? ... the power of womanhood and us coming together is something that men will never get.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION**

### **Research Question and Findings**

At the beginning of the study, the following hypotheses were posited:

- Young adult women will have similar beliefs and attitudes surrounding what it means to be a woman.
- Young adult women's perceptions of womanhood will be similarly influenced by common external factors that stem from society's sexism and misogyny and lead to behaviors of internalized sexism.

Based on the results derived from participant interviews and the subsequent IPA analysis, both hypotheses are supported by the collected data. The first hypothesis is supported by the similarities in how participants discussed womanhood and its impact on their lives. The second hypothesis is similarly supported, as many factors identified as influential in the development of understanding womanhood were mentioned by most participants.

### **Interpretations of the Results**

The results of the present study present multiple topics that warrant further examination. Women's influence on other women is a critical part of the development of womanhood, as is the expectations of "doing it all." The depiction of women in popular media is similarly influential, as representation of various roles and presentations can both inspire and limit a women's understanding of womanhood.

### **Women Leading Women**

Each participant in the present study discussed how their own views of womanhood have been molded by other women in their lives—and many also noted how the influential women in

their lives have changed over time. While women's psychology continues to research many topics within the scope of women's experiences, there is very little empirical data that discusses how womanhood is learned; however, there is research that discusses the function of various perspectives and engagements within womanhood that can help to understand how women lead other women.

The participants in the present study shared similar experiences in that they were typically raised in a household that upheld relatively traditional gender roles, specifically where the mother was considered the primary caretaker, and the father was the primary breadwinner. Research has shown that many women, particularly older women, engage in these more traditional roles in order to establish clear expectations of behavior and outcomes, as well as to provide structure and organization to those around them (Weiss et al., 2012). In the context of discussion with participants, it is possible that the women who they were initially learning from—typically mothers and caretakers—were at least partially conforming to traditional gender roles in order to maintain structure within the household.

Many of the participants discussed how their views of womanhood shifted to become more flexible over time—as well as who contributed to that shift. Common figures who modeled womanhood for participants were friends, extended family members, and sisters. It is possible that these women were often more psychologically open due to a variety of factors, which makes them less likely to conform to traditional roles and instead engage in individualistic self-expression (Weiss et al., 2012). While the research is still very limited, it is clear that women learn how to experience women from the other women around them.

### **“Doing it All:” Womanhood and Motherhood**

As participant interviews were conducted, it became clear that it is nearly impossible to extricate the physical and biological experiences of menstruation and motherhood from the conversation of womanhood. The discussion of biological womanhood is a delicate one, as it is important to recognize that there are many people who identify as women who do not have the same physical characteristics or experiences as cisgendered women; in this study, the identities and reported characteristics of participants the experiences reflected herein are of cisgendered women with menstrual and reproductive experiences.

Many participants discussed how menstruation is socially viewed as a girl’s first step into womanhood. It is not accidental that womanhood is traditionally seen as beginning when a young woman is physically able to become pregnant. Women are historically viewed as little more than reproductive vessels, and this continues to be prominent in today’s society, as exemplified by the 2022 Dobbs decision (McFee, 2024). Participants discussed how their first menstruation created a sense of pressure to be suddenly different or more mature, simply because their bodies have changed. This pressure continues throughout women’s lives, and morphs from pressure to mature quickly into pressure to become a mother.

As noted by participants, the pressure doesn’t end with achieving motherhood—which can be a difficult task by itself. Mothers are expected to not only be homemakers and their children’s primary caretakers, but also meet the societal demands to maintain professional, social, and personal identities (Wenhold & Harrison, 2020). Although truly “doing it all” is impossible, many women manage to juggle each role with relative success; however, this can lead to burnout, health issues, and perpetuates the idea that women can only be accepted by

society if they can present with the appropriate balance of being feminine, smart, caring, resilient, and adaptive.

### **Femininity vs. Feminism**

When discussing feminism, many of the participants also voiced their experiences with femininity. Overall, traditionally feminine traits and roles seemed to be perceived as oppositional to feminism rather than as something that can be appreciated within the lens of feminism. This phenomenon was best exemplified in participants' identification of women they do and do not look up to. Examples of women participants look up to included women in media and power—such as Kamala Harris, Rihanna, and Joanne Bass—as well as women in participants' personal lives. Nearly all participants described as women as role models who did not adhere to traditional gender roles, but instead rejected these roles in favor of ambitious careers, more masculine presentation, or nontraditional household norms. While these attributes are undeniably admirable and an important representation of the many ways a woman can present herself, it is equally important that women who do choose a more traditional lifestyle to be similarly admired and celebrated.

Unsurprisingly, when asked about women who participants do not consider role models or do not aspire to emulate, much of the discussion focused on women who present as traditionally feminine and fall into similarly traditional roles. This response pattern shows how internalized sexism is present even within feminist contexts. The aim of feminism is gender equality, which does not mean the eradication of traditional gender roles. Much of popular feminism views feminine presentation as oppositional to the feminist movement, when it is

instead a valid expression of self when it comes from a person's intrinsic values instead of external pressures.

Femininity is not oppositional to the feminist movement, and in fact can be seen a celebration of the success of feminist movements so far. While there are still many challenges and double standards, it is much more common to see women in professional settings present in feminine attire than it was a decade ago, and femininity is gaining popularity as media trends continue to skew toward universal experiences of girl- and womanhood (Princiotti, 2023).

### **Women in Today's Media**

At the time of data collection, much of popular media was centered around women and feminism—including *The Barbie Movie*, Taylor Swift's The Eras Tour alongside Beyoncé's Renaissance Tour, and viral TikTok trends such as "this is girlhood" and "girl dinner" (Princiotti, 2023). There were multiple mentions of these pop culture movements throughout the interviews, which invites a more thorough examination of the influence of modern media on women's views of womanhood and feminism.

As seen in the participant's interviews, it is nearly impossible for a woman to reflect on media influence without mentioning Taylor Swift's The Eras Tour, which began in March 2023 with concerts through December 2024 (Wikipedia, 2024). While Swift has long been a focus of pop culture—including many critiques of her appearance, talents, and personal life—her most recent tour has recentered her as a "mass cultural movement" (Horton, 2023). An article from *The Public Discourse* posits that Swift's popularity stems in part from her paradoxical—and therefore realistic—discussions of feminism, noting that many of her lyrics "[grasp] at an imaginary world, in which there are no consequences, obligations, or imperatives toward virtue

... what [Swift] calls for is paradoxically both unattainable—a fantasy world—and too low an aim” (van der Linden, 2024).

When it comes to determining why Swift has garnered the attention, support, and admiration from her fans, the most common conclusion is that Swift’s music is not only relatable, but also representative of women’s experiences in a way that is unique from typical media representation (Sales, 2023). A BUST article specifies Swift’s lyrics such as “all I think about is karma” (T. Swift, 2017a), “if a man talks shit, then I owe him nothing” (T. Swift, 2017b), and “no one likes a mad woman” (Taylor Swift, 2020) as “fulfilling a need for women to express revenge” (Sales, 2023, p. 7). Overall, it seems there are many facets of Swift that fans are able to relate to as well as look up to, as they are able to see both “an incredibly strong woman who’s not going to take shit from anyone else” (Sales, 2023, p. 3), as well as “a woman who is able to cry, admit she’s wonderstruck, or be vulnerable in front of the world, [which is] more feminist a stand than some of her singles” (Natividad, 2023, p. 14).

The *Year of the Girl* certainly had a profound impact on not only women’s representation in media, but also on society’s view of feminism (Princiotti, 2023). It is clear from the participants’ discussions that media representation impacts not only how women idealize beauty and body image, but also how they view their place in the world and the things they can achieve. It is important to continue to push for continued representation, as well as to diversify the women we see and their roles.

### **Implications**

This study acts as a preliminary examination of how internalized sexism develops and influences women’s experiences. Using Lewis’ single model of sexism as a lens, it is clear that

the elements of patriarchy, psychosocial and behavioral outcomes, intersectional identities, and individual, institutional, and cultural sexism relate to each other to create not only sexism as Lewis defines it, but also as drivers for the development of internalized sexism in women throughout their lifetimes (Lewis, 2018). This information provides a strong framework for understanding how sexism and internalized sexism relate to women's psychology.

The study's results can also be used clinically when working with women who may be struggling with gender roles or expression or are having difficulties in their relationships with other women. Interventions based in feminist psychology—such as understanding social placement and empowerment—can be utilized to help individuals understand their relationship with internalized sexism as well as with gender in general.

### **Limitations**

There were various limitations of the present study that need to be considered. While the use of IPA methodology is well-studied and an accepted method of qualitative analysis, it is important to remember that it incorporates the subjective opinions and experiences of the researcher, which means that inter-rater reliability can be difficult to achieve as it impossible to remove bias from the interpretative process. IPA also requires a small sample size, which makes it difficult to generalize the results across the population.

Although womanhood is a topic often referenced in women's psychology research, as well as discussed in many facets of popular culture, there is a significant absence of research that focuses solely women's experiencing of womanhood, especially in relation to identity. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret the data of the present study within the context of previous research findings.

In the present study, 75% of the participants were white women, meaning that while the researcher—who is also a white woman—strived to keep the data analysis rooted in intersectional feminism, there are likely many intersectional experiences of womanhood that were not adequately represented by this study. Intersectional identities that may not have been appropriately represented include, but are not limited to, women of color, women without access to reliable internet or technology, and women living outside of the United States.

Another potential limitation is using a cross-sectional design, as it may not accurately capture the developmental focus of the study given that participants may not be willing or able to give a full and honest recollection of their histories. Similarly, the results are only representative of the time of data collection and may not be applicable across time.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study is an early exploration of internalized sexism and its development, and it is important to continue to research the implications of the topic in terms of women's psychology and development. Future research should continue to examine the lived experiences of womanhood and its effects on women and their relationships. It is also important to continue to broaden the demographics of research participants in order to ensure the research is representative of intersectional identities. Specific populations that would benefit from more representation in the data include women of color, women of low socioeconomic status, and women outside of the United States. Intersectional feminism calls for equity for all women; therefore, it is also important to ensure that the experiences of transgender women are represented in the discussion of womanhood and its influence. Other future directions for similar research could include expanding on the influences on women's views of other women found in

this study—such as media portrayal, learning from other women, and the relationship between femininity and feminism.

### **Conclusion**

Internalized sexism affects all women, and understanding its course and development is a crucial part of learning to recognize and correct it. The results of the present study suggest that by changing the societal factors and external pressures of internalized sexism it is possible to eradicate its impacts early in a young girl's life. Continued research on the topic will be crucial in determining best practices to intervene with young adult women.

This study represents an attempt at exploration of the 21<sup>st</sup> century examination of internalized sexism and its impact on women. Women are impacted by sexist issues throughout their lives, including those perpetuated by other women, and there are similarities in women's development of their understanding of womanhood. However, the women who participated in this study also exemplified how women can overcome the many pressures of sexism—internalized and otherwise—and recognize the importance of embracing womanhood, community amongst women, and empowerment. After all, empowered women empower women.

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**APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT FLYER**

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNALIZED SEXISM

## IN SEARCH OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participants must be women  
assigned female at birth  
between the ages of 18 and 22.

Please contact Kylie  
Schwabe at  
[kschwabe@antioch.edu](mailto:kschwabe@antioch.edu) for  
details.



## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

### Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to examine the development of internalized sexism in young adult women.

You are being asked to participate because of your indicated interest in participating in this study by responding to associated recruitment material.

If you participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in a video-recorded, individual interview. The interview will cover topics related to your past and current experiences of womanhood.

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. Your participation will contribute to early research on internalized sexism.

Your participation will take approximately 1 hour and the interview will be conducted via a telecommunication platform.

Upon completion of the interview, you will be entered into a drawing to win a \$50 Target gift card.

Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate at all, or choose to stop your participation at any point in the research, without fear of penalty or negative consequences of any kind.

The information/data you provide for this research will be treated confidentially, and all raw data will be kept in a secured file by the investigator. The results of the research will be reported as aggregate summary data only, and no individually identifiable information will be presented.

You also have the right to review the results of the research if you wish to do so. A copy of the results may be obtained by contacting the principal investigator at the email address below:

Kylie Schwabe at

There will be no direct or immediate personal benefits from your participation in this research.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and Certified by the Institutional Review Board, Antioch University, Seattle. For research-related problems or questions regarding participants' rights, I can contact Antioch University's Institutional Board Chair, Melissa Kennedy, PhD at

The primary researcher conducting this study is Kylie Schwabe a student researcher. If I have questions later, I may contact Kylie Schwabe at

1. I have read and understand the information explaining the purpose of this research and my rights and responsibilities as a participant. My signature below designates my consent to participate in this research study, according to the terms and conditions outlined above.

Yes

No

2. In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview video-recorded.

Yes

No

3. Please provide your name, preferred name, and phone number. Completing this step serves as your electronic signature.