"It Helps Me Feel More Comfortable": Creating an Affective Public to Build Confidence on Instagram

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Abstract: Because Instagram activism is subtle and because social media usage is constantly changing, feminist media scholars continually need new mechanisms for recognizing and representing it. Via an ethnographic study of Instagram usage in a college women's fitness group, I argue that Instagram can be used to create an "affective public," or a community of people united online by a common emotion (Papacharissi). This affective public offers writers confidence, which inspires them to collaboratively and publicly imagine how the seemingly strict rules of a composing platform might be altered by a community that bonds together with shared emotions and hashtags, which I identify as a kind of everyday activism. While confidence is often dismissed by feminist scholars as a brand of popular feminism, I contend that it can be built and spread collectively to intervene in an existing emotional structure, specifically the exhausting emotional labor expected and normalized on Instagram. My choice of ethnographic methodology in this work reflects the way I am trying to see this group as a community of users who influence and encourage each other rather than individual, isolated users. In my conclusion, I recommend that feminist media scholars use ethnographic methods to reveal community norms and standards of Instagram and more clearly portray the way group affect emerges on social media.

Despite the pervasiveness of social media as a composing practice in our everyday lives, the field of rhetoric and composition continues to have a complicated relationship with students' social media usage. Based on their survey on students' online composing practices, David Gold, Jathan Day, and Adrienne E. Raw note the high popularity of photo-sharing social media sites like SnapChat and Instagram and optimistically suggest that these sites "may serve hitherto undervalued writing goals" (30). Tonally, however, Gold, Day, and Raw seem disappointed with students' social media usage. They characterize students' usage as "narrow," and they contrast students' frequent writing to friends and family as distinct from "civic, professional, or creative purposes" (6). They write that the "idealized purpose" for social media is "debate and deliberation," but students self-reported "less frequently engag[ing] in deliberation about controversial topics of the sort we encourage in academic writing and hope to promote in public sphere settings" (13). The article implies that students do not use social media for being an engaged citizen, articulating their beliefs, or taking a stance on a controversial topic. In a 2019 article titled "Writing to Assemble Publics: Making Writing Activate, Making Writing Matter," Laurie Gries praises the recent work of "student activist campaigns" but focuses on activism that involves assembling large groups of people together in a physical space, like demonstrations and walkouts (329). In both articles, we can see an unstated elevation of rhetoric that is explicit, word-based, rational, and public. We can also see an approach to students' social media usage characterized by fear instead of curiosity or optimism. Gold, Day, and Raw's article is titled "Who's Afraid

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of Facebook?" in a similar vein to Elisabeth H. Buck's article "Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—Oh My!" which equates these social media platforms to "lions, tigers, and bears."

Students' social media practices are important not just because students spend a lot of time on them; these practices are important because social media can be a site of activist work. Crystal Kim and Jessica Ringrose note that the activism of young women on social media is often met with "indifference and skepticism" because it does not look like the traditional activist practices of older adults, namely, "sustained in-person action, group solidarity, publicly strategic efforts, and a collective intent on achieving institutional change" (49). In her study of young women's feminist blogging, Jessica Keller notes that we still need better frameworks for recognizing the activist practices of "education, community-building, and making feminism visible" in online composing (72).

Activism on Instagram specifically can be easy to overlook because it capitalizes on social media's "intimate screen," meaning it is subtle and focused on everyday life rather than large-scale protests or demonstrations (Alexander and Hahner 224). For example, rhetoric scholars have studied how social media activists have used the everyday-ness of Instagram to advocate for adopting children with special needs (Alexander and Hahner), self-acceptance of women over 50 (McGrath), and reproductive rights (Carlson). Communication scholars have studied Islamic fashion Instagrammer Leah Vernon, a self-identified fat, Black Muslim woman whose posts offer a feminist intersectional critique of "typical" uses of Instagram (Peterson), as well as pop star Lizzo, who uses her Instagram to assert her identities of blackness and fatness in the pop star and fashion world (Pickett Miller and Platenburg). Kara Poe Alexander and Leslie Hahner describe these kinds of digital activism as "not the mass spectacle of the public screen but rather an approach that impacts the viewer through familiarity and intimacy with [the social media user's] life" (226). In these cases, Instagram "activism" functions by normalizing and giving visibility to daily lives or experiences that might otherwise be invisible or even taboo.

Notably, however, these previous studies of political or activist uses of Instagram focus on professional Instagram influencers with thousands or even millions of followers. These studies, then, tell us less about the way everyday people, like the college students in our classrooms, might use Instagram for political or activist purposes, much less how the composers themselves might understand and articulate their purposes. How might social media "activism" look for a busy college sophomore who mostly scrolls on Instagram and posts infrequently? How does a first-year college student navigate a desire to stand up for a political cause on social media with her anxieties about what her brand-new friends at college will think of her? What do "politics" and "activism" even mean in these situations?

Because Instagram activism is subtle and because social media usage is constantly changing, feminist media scholars continually need new mechanisms for recognizing and representing it. Via an ethnographic study of a college women's fitness group, I argue that Instagram can create an "affective public," or

a community of people united online by a common emotion that allows women to imagine what Instagram could be like if it wasn't ruled so pervasively by influencer culture (Papacharissi). The affective public offers writers confidence, which inspires them to collaboratively and publicly imagine how the seemingly strict rules of a composing platform might be altered by a community that bonds together with shared emotions and hashtags, which I identify as a kind of everyday activism. While confidence is often dismissed by feminist scholars as a brand of popular feminism, I contend that it can be built and spread collectively to intervene in an existing emotional structure, specifically the exhausting emotional labor expected and normalized on Instagram. Because women have so many toxic social media experiences, I find the CHAARG Instagram account worthy of study as a microcosm of the way young women actively navigate an emotionally fraught digital landscape and create content that builds confidence for the anxieties other women experience as they do so. My choice of ethnographic methodology also reflects the way I am trying to see this group as a community of users who influence and encourage each other rather than individual, isolated users. In my conclusion, I recommend that feminist media scholars use ethnographic methods to reveal community norms and standards of Instagram and more clearly portray the way group affect emerges on social media.

This study focuses on the construction of the Instagram account of a college women's health and fitness group called "CHAARG," which stands for "Changing Health, Attitudes, and Actions to Recreate Girls," a national organization with chapters on 111 college campuses ("About CHAARG"). I first discuss the social media presence of this group as a whole and a "typical" post to explain the kind of activism work this group does. Then I discuss the methodological choices I made to understand this group's unique form of activism. To situate the Instagram activism of CHAARG, particularly for readers who may not spend a lot of time on Instagram, I explain how young women feel that only "perfect" images belong on Instagram—a finding from my interviews that is supported by other research on how young women view Instagram. Via six interviews and two follow-up interviews with women associated with my university's CHAARG group, I show how this group of young women envision themselves as strategically using Instagram to push back on the pervasive effect of Instagram influencers who post perfectly crafted images and captions. I present data from my initial round of interviews in 2020-2021, and then, to trace the emotion of confidence built in the affective public, I present data from two follow-up interviews a year later, along with images from one user's account and an interviewee's personal statement for physical therapy school. CHAARG presents an opportunity and exigency for the women I interviewed to carve out a space for themselves. Their anxieties about Instagram perfection are somewhat alleviated by the goal of spreading the positive message of CHAARG.

I do not contend that the CHAARG Instagram is on the same level of activism as professional Instagrammers. I also do not argue that the CHAARG Instagram is some kind of feminist utopia. Many of the posts have a problematic rhetoric of individualism and could certainly do more to directly address the institutional, cultural, social, racial, and economic barriers to women's health and fitness. Neither does the CHAARG Instagram ignore, disrupt, or upend the standards of Instagram. Nonetheless, I attempt to privilege these women's own conceptualizations of their activism, suspending my own judgments about whether their Instagram posts are "activist" or "not activist enough," and I ask my readers to do the same. I am

inspired by Hannah Taylor's 2022 *Peitho* article about the BodyShame conference, which featured women discussing their affective experiences of shame. Taylor explicitly resists the "critical turn" that would show that the research participants did not, in fact, question the larger structures that cause shame because Taylor's goal is "to meet the women where they are and grapple with their experiences as they see and describe them." Similarly, my use of ethnographic methodology to capture these women's orientation to their activism serves to understand their style of social media activism from their point of view.

Methods

Walk into a rec center on any university campus, and one is likely to encounter two groups: (1) young women trudging slowly on the elliptical machines, typically bent over in a kind of prostrate suffering and (2) fit young men (sometimes called "gym bros") dominating the space of the weights and other fitness equipment. According to the national organization's website, CHAARG's goals are to "liberate girls from the elliptical + show them that fitness can [+ should!] be fun… + that working out is better with friends!" ("About CHAARG"). Each campus' CHAARG chapter has its own Instagram account, usually run by an executive team member, but, significantly, individual members are encouraged to create an Instagram account separate from their personal Instagram account specifically to document their experiences with CHAARG and wellness in general. For example, if a user's personal Instagram account is @firstname_lastname, their CHAARG Instagram account would be @firstname_lastname_inchaarg. Unlike member's personal accounts, which are kept on private settings, their CHAARG accounts are set to "public" so they can be found by members searching the hashtag #inchaarg anywhere in the world. The Instagram accounts of the CHAARG chapters showcase individual member accounts, pictures of members eating healthy food in small groups, and posts reminding members about workouts (which would normally be done in person, but because of restrictions due to COVID-19, were being done on Zoom at the time of this research), including hip-hop dance, yoga, meditation, and strength training.

I conducted this research during the 2020-2021 school year, when COVID meant that a lot of the group's community-building work took place on the Instagram account. Because student organizations were prohibited from meeting in person on campus, the CHAARG Instagram account was the primary hub for recruiting members, explaining the group's philosophy, and alerting existing members to upcoming events. Through the Instagram account, potential members learn about the group, and current members connect to each other, become invested in the group, find out what the group is doing, and even participate in the group through filling out template posts for their own social media feeds.

The use of hashtags and tagging other accounts allows interlinking between members of a certain university's CHAARG but also among members of CHAARG groups nationwide. Members of my university's group post photos of themselves working out or group photos post-workout linked with the hashtag #[university]inchaarg but also with the hashtag #inchaarg to link their accounts to the national group. There are also CHAARG-specific hashtags for different activities, such as #SweatySelfie for a picture taken imme-

diately following a workout, #CHAARGRunClub for a photo of a run, or #CHAARGEats for food.

Image 1 presents a typical post that one might see on an individual member's CHAARG Instagram account.[1] A typical post features a photo of the CHAARG member with another CHAARG member (or sometimes a photo with the whole CHAARG group) during or just after the workout, sweaty with messy hair, and a caption that comments on the difficulty of the workout and a sense of pride that the member has completed it. The user may also include a screenshot of stats from her fitness watch.

Figure 1: A typical CHAARG Post

Caption: Completed my first Orange Theory workout today! I got my sweat's worth! [three orange emojis]

After hearing students in my class speak glowingly about CHAARG and the way the group was effectively building community for them in the isolated time of fall 2020, I wanted to learn more about them. Perhaps most significantly for researching social media usage, CHAARG Instagram accounts are spaces where young women are actually creating social media content, as opposed to just reading or commenting. Gold, Day, and Raw note that students were highly likely to read social media feeds, somewhat likely to respond to others' posts, and unlikely to write their own content. They note that "digital 'participatory' culture may not be as participatory as we imagine" (11). Suggesting additional research into the rhetorical environment of social media (11-12), their article asks: why are students so eager to read, consume, and discuss social media but so hesitant to post themselves? I had wanted to conduct research on Instagram for some time but was hesitant to interview students about their personal Instagram accounts; CHAARG offered the opportunity to interview students about content they had created for a public audience.

After receiving IRB approval from my university, I interviewed six undergraduates who were members of the CHAARG community in interviews lasting 30-60 minutes. All identified as women and used she/her pronouns. One identified as Asian, one identified as Asian-Pacific Islander, and four identified as White. Four women were on the executive leadership team: one was the founder and current president, two oversaw

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1   To protect the privacy of my interviewees, the images I use in this article are not their images but are instead re-created by friends of mine (not students). I received approval from my university's IRB to include these "dramatic re-enactments" in this final manuscript.

the group's social media accounts before and during COVID (2019-2021), and one oversaw membership and recruitment. I selected these women to interview because they were leaders in the group and active on their personal CHAARG Instagram accounts. My two other interviewees were first-year students who were new to the group and found out about it via Instagram. I interviewed these women to understand how newcomers perceive the group. All were currently enrolled students at my university, a mid-size Catholic liberal arts college in the Midwest. One year after these initial interviews, I re-interviewed both the founding president and the founding social media chair—who had at that point moved up to become the new president—to understand their continuing work on Instagram.

I asked my interview participants about how they came across CHAARG and how they became involved. Then I moved to specifically asking questions about the group's CHAARG Instagram account and their individual CHAARG Instagram accounts in contrast to their personal Instagram accounts. To talk about specific Instagram posts, I borrowed from Julie Warner's methodology, selecting specific posts from the university chapter's CHAARG account or their personal CHAARG accounts that "break with the norms of use for that platform" to "provoke participant discussion around the norms of use and the cultural models that guide participation in these spaces" (169). As I'll discuss in the next section, "The Exhausting Work of Instagram," Instagram is dominated with images of "influencers," typically white, conventionally attractive cis women in exotic locations. I thus asked my participants to talk about the composition of Instagram posts that did not fit this model, and I asked my participants to select specific posts that were personally meaningful to them and talk about the composition of those posts. I also acknowledge the small sample size of this study. To strengthen small interview sets, qualitative researcher Kathy Charmaz recommends mixing in other qualitative methods—like observational, archival, and documentary research (107). I do so by adding in follow-up interviews with two of the more involved members and an analysis of the personal statement for physical therapy school written by one of my interviewees.

Once I had completed all my interviews, I segmented each interview into "topical chains," or discursive units of text that mark where a speaker understands her words to be about a certain topic, essentially 1-3 sentence units differentiated by topic (Geisler and Swarts 79). I then used grounded theory coding to create four categories (Charmaz 113): (1) Instagram ideology—beliefs about what Instagram is and/or what it could be as a medium for communication; (2) community building and participation—stories or ideas about building a community or being part of one; (3) beliefs about bodies—ideological beliefs about women's bodies, either the speaker's own beliefs or those she found on the Instagram; and (4) the CHAARG Instagram—choices about what to put on the Instagram or reflections about the Instagram.

In the interest of transparency, I want to say that my work is the product of attempting to conduct research in the peak era of COVID: fall 2020 through spring 2021. All interviews were conducted on Zoom, which in some cases inhibited my ability to build rapport with my interviewees. I would have liked to interview more participants and conduct longer interviews, but I wanted to be conscious of Zoom burnout and the stress of time management during 2020 and 2021. Fortuitously, however, without our campus' annual

student involvement fair, frequent tabling or other in-person recruitment methods, the Instagram account carried the task of recruiting women to CHAARG in a way it would not have in a regular year, leading the women to be even more reflective and strategic about how it was used.

The Exhausting Work of Instagram

To those who don't spend a lot of time there, it is easy to dismiss Instagram as a waste of time or something that people don't take very seriously. In her study of social media influencers, however, Brooke Ellen Duffy stresses the effort and energy Instagram requires for young women. Duffy's study found that many young women approach social media as a kind of "aspirational labor," promoting content "with *strategy, purpose,* and *aspirations of career success*" (48, emphasis in original). The influencers in Duffy's study are responsible for the exhausting endeavor of "building and maintaining one's social networks, curating one's feeds with a digital cocktail of informative, yet thought-provoking, and witty content; and ensuring the consistency of one's self-brand across the sprawling digital ecosystem" (11). Even more exhausting is that you can't make it look or feel like work: Duffy notes these influencers must use their Instagram fame to sell products and services to their followers while remaining "authentic" and "real" (6). For the young women I interviewed, Instagram is dictated by social media influencers: conventionally pretty, cis, young white women who post flattering photos and videos of themselves ostensibly in their daily lives.[2]

One interviewee, Emily, specifically noted the way influencer culture had already trickled down into the Instagram accounts of sororities on campus:

> Things have gotten more like influencer-based and everyone wants to seem perfect. . . Going through sorority recruitment right now it seems like sorority Instagrams, they're like, "Look at how great our members are and how pretty they are and how involved they are."

While none of the young women I interviewed identified as influencers, the way they talked about their personal Instagram accounts reflects rules common to influencers. But instead of selling products or services like influencers do, they were selling themselves as friends. Emily described her personal Instagram as a kind of advertisement for her friendship: "I feel like for my main Instagram account it's like almost as my commercial, like if you're gonna follow me and you want to be friends with me here I am." Monica described her personal Instagram as similar to a modeling portfolio: "Mine's almost like a just a portfolio of just me looking my best at random locations." Monica later explained that "most people, including myself, actually we use our Instagrams to just put forth the most ideal like perfect version of yourself and it's all filters, angles everything that you would think of [to make it] most appealing to the world."[3] Instagram works as a kind

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2   For those unfamiliar with influencer culture, see the following Instagram users as examples: @louisemontgomeryblog and @charlidamelio. For fitness influencers specifically, see @millyg_fit, @kk_fit_, or @jordynt_fit, though these images can be upsetting to those struggling with eating disorders or body dysmorphia.

3   Notably, a study published in the journal *Body Image* in 2021 found that women aged 17-40 experienced "significantly higher negative mood and body dissatisfaction" viewing influencer images ("thin, attractive, white female[s]…in artistic, lifestyle, and travel selfies") than a control group viewing nature images (Lowe-Calverley and Grieve 1). This negative mood and body

of textbook for teaching women how to recognize the ideal physical appearance both in reality and how it should appear on social media. Perhaps anticipating Instagram influencer culture back in 1993, Susan Bordo writes, "Culture not only has taught women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical 'improvement;' it also is constantly teaching women (and, let us not forget, men as well) how to *see* bodies" (57). For the women I interviewed, scrolling on Instagram created such high expectations for what Instagram-worthy images should look like that they felt like they could not post at all. This is likely why, as Gold, Day, and Raw found, students resist composing in these spaces over concern about how "intended readers" might react (20). If your Instagram is literally an advertisement for being your friend, it's easy to default to just not posting anything at all for fear that you might post the wrong thing. This was particularly true during COVID in 2020-2021, where students had to rely on social media even more to get to know people they couldn't meet face-to-face.

> Significantly, the two first-year students I interviewed, who were the most socially vulnerable as they were new to campus, told me they posted the least on their personal Instagram accounts. Two first-year students as well as one upper-class student told me that they are "not a social media person." I initially thought this meant that they didn't have accounts at all, but when I asked further questions, I realized this meant only that they didn't post often. They all had Instagram accounts and spent significant time looking at and reading Instagram.

> Annie: I'm not a super huge social media person . . . but I really like to see what other people [are] doing.

> Faith: What do you mean by "social media person," like what does that mean?

> Annie: I'm not a big sharer so I really don't post a ton. This sounds bad, but I like to use my social media to see like what my friends are doing and I like to keep in contact and like see what others are doing more than post myself.

Annie thinks it "sounds bad" that she "likes to see what other people [are] doing" on Instagram profiles but does not consider herself enough of a "big sharer" to share her own images. Perhaps because she is self-conscious about whether she matches up to the standards of images on Instagram, Annie chooses to remove herself entirely. David Gold, Meredith Garcia, and Anna Knutson note "the anxiety of present audiences" on social media which students sometimes address by "avoiding audiences" entirely. This lack of confidence disproportionately affects women: Jen Almjeld observes a "digital gender divide" where men feel more empowered and experienced with technology, meaning that "women and girls internalize certain spaces and technologies as off-limits" (57). Rather than try to keep up with the exhausting standards of Ins-

dissatisfaction persisted *whether the Instagram accounts they were viewing had a lot of followers or not.* So even if one avoids major, highly paid influencers (>100,000 followers), if a friend from high school posts similar kinds of images to her 300 followers, the viewer's mood will still be negatively affected (Lowe-Calverley and Grieve).

tagram influencers, it's easier to just disappear entirely.

Finding Purpose in the CHAARG Instagram

CHAARG, however, presents an opportunity and exigency for the women I interviewed to carve out a space for themselves. The women I interviewed were happy to take up CHAARG's mission to influence the way women feel about their bodies via their CHAARG Instagram accounts. Emily notes that on her personal CHAARG account, she posted a photo of her with her leadership team because she was proud of the team's work, even though she did not feel confident in the way she looked in the photo:

> So [I thought] maybe I will post this photo, maybe even though it's been a long day. Like I'm wearing a scarf with that outfit like, what in the world was I thinking? Like I can take that photo and be like, yes, this is a good moment and I want to share this with people. So I think instead of just like looking for an aesthetic content or perfection it's now more of, I guess, like the meaning or like the purpose behind a post.

The central anxiety of "Is this photo perfect enough to be on this platform?" is alleviated on the CHAARG Instagram account because the goal is not perfection but rather to spread the positive message of CHAARG. Recognizing that most Instagram photos are posted solely for their "aesthetic content or perfection," Emily feels empowered to post a picture of herself and her friends because she sees the way the photo could spread the message of the group. Monica also found a similar sense of purpose in her CHAARG Instagram: "[My personal Instagram] is almost like a just a portfolio of just me looking my best at random locations so that's definitely not what my CHAARG is. There's definitely like more purpose to my CHAARG posts and their aim is to spread a message as opposed to just I look pretty."

Nicole found purpose in posting on her CHAARG account because she knew that the people who followed that account (as opposed to her personal account) were interested in her "fitness journey." It therefore alleviated some of her stress about whether or not her audience would find her posts interesting:

> The majority of the people who follow you on your CHAARG [account] are other CHAARG girls whether they're like in your chapter or not. I feel like you already know the vibe of who is seeing you. So you feel more comfortable and I feel like there's something because it's so fitness-based that makes you more comfortable because once you're comfortable like showing yourself working out. There's just this gratification and this like self-assurance. And especially, for me, the biggest thing for me, I think, is I really like focusing on all aspects of health. So as much as I like doing that on my own personal account, not everyone is going to . . . not that they won't appreciate, but they're, you know, like it might just be empty space or another story. You know, at least on CHAARG you know like, yes, like girls want to know about like your goals, your fitness. So it's like you have this audience that's already interested in this aspect of your life. And it's like, so relaxing, fun.

Concerned that her social media can appear either meaningless ("empty space") or thoughtlessly consumed (just "another story"), Nicole thinks her posts on her personal CHAARG Instagram account belong there because she is building a community or inspiring someone. By offering an alternate mode of using Instagram, CHAARG provides these women a new way of experiencing emotion on social media: What if, instead of a portfolio of pretty pictures of me, this was a space that reflected my community, my values, or other things I care about? This sense of purpose, in turn, makes users feel like they belong in the space. Gold, Garcia, and Knutson note that digital anxiety may arise for students because of "permeability," when "a message crafted for one audience in response to one rhetorical situation will be consumed by another audience outside the original context, generating an entirely new and unanticipated rhetorical situation that invites—or demands—further response." Rather than try to please the broad audience of her personal Instagram account, Nicole finds purpose in being able to post for the narrowed audience of her CHAARG Instagram account, an audience whom she knows will find meaning in her content.

Building Confidence Via an Affective Public on the CHAARG Instagram

I identify the everyday activism of CHAARG as creating an affective public that collectively pushes back on the seemingly intractable rules of Instagram as determined by influencer culture, and affectively, builds confidence in users to post more freely. My university's CHAARG Instagram—with its group account, individual member accounts, and use of hashtags to connect accounts across universities—forms what Zizi Papacharissi terms an "affective public," or "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (125). In Papacharissi's explanation of the workings of affective publics, social media allows us to go beyond simple declaration of thought to infuse our thoughts with affect; this infusion of affect into an everyday statement can be "a potentially powerful political act" (114). Social media allows people to unite with other people who don't just think the same way, but who *feel* the same way. Using the Arab Spring as an example, Papacharissi writes, "These people felt their own way into that particular event by contributing to a stream that blended emotion, drama, opinion, and news in a manner that departed from the conventional deliberative logic and aligned with the softer structure of affect worlds" (117). Papacharissi is less interested in whether this kind of Twitter activism "works" and more interested in the way the emotions that Twitter allows for unites people who share a common political sentiment.

Papacharissi's definition of an affective public is useful because it demonstrates a way that collectives use social media to intervene in existing structures of emotion. On Instagram, where viewers have internalized rigid genre requirements about the kinds of images that are acceptable to post, CHAARG offers users a social media space connected to others via hashtags and shared goals: spreading the positive message of women's right to take up space in gyms and fitness centers, posting photos that aren't perfectly posed, and creating a receptive audience that supports you and is interested in the content you create.

I want to take a moment to pinpoint what I mean by "confidence" here. In *Empowered: Popular Feminisms and Popular Misogyny,* Sarah Banet-Wiser critiques the emphasis on confidence in popular feminism because it does not challenge structures of inequality: "Confidence is positioned as the primary, if not the only, resolution to gendered inequalities, and it is a resolution that depends on individual men and women, not on cultural and social structure" (93) As a result, confidence is an "empty resolution that is more about individual attitudes than challenging structured inequities" (94). That's certainly true if confidence is defined as an *individual* emotion, but as feminist rhetoric scholars, we know emotions are always shaped along systemic lines. In fact, feminist rhetorical scholars have long argued against the denigration of emotion in argument, contending that emotion is a key component of how we become invested in ideas, people, communities, and world-views, and that emotion "creates an economy of feeling that constitutes and transforms who we are and what we do" (Micchice 42).

Therefore, I find it important to not dismiss confidence as an individual feeling but to instead take it seriously as a collective emotion transmitted via the social media accounts. Specifically, the CHAARG Instagram gives the women the confidence to actually post (rather than just lurk) and to imagine a world beyond the rigid genre requirements of Instagram. As such, the women engage in what Papacharissi calls "public dreaming," or "a collaborative imagining of other ways of engaging the platform" beyond its common genre uses (111). Monica, the current vice president of media, seems to be aware of the importance of "public dreaming" when creating the CHAARG Instagram, particularly in the time of COVID when the Instagram account had to get first-year students to wonder about what their participation and involvement in CHAARG might look like. The main account for CHAARG at the university reflects the personal "journey" of the vice president of media, rather than just reflecting group activities or announcements. I asked Monica about the significance of that personalization:

> It's just supposed to be, we're all like in this like journey together and it would help to have someone to like maybe base it off of. And just to give you a good look at like what everyone else's or they are all at and maybe to just find some sort of inspiration from that, as opposed to just it being like, here's when our next event is. But you can see like "Oh Monica is, like, she's making friends in the group and I can make friends too."

It might appear that Monica's Instagram use is just to make friends, but her quote above demonstrates the connection between community formation and activism. By combining a sense of purpose with building community, Monica creates a group of allies who can bond together over fitness in a positive way, dissipating some of the negative emotions surrounding the appearance of young women on Instagram and the way they feel about fitness and their bodies. Monica sees her Instagram use as an opportunity for inspiring other women and giving them the confidence to dream about what their own "journey" in the group might look like.

And it seems to work. Mia, a first-year student who found out about CHAARG from the Instagram, picks up the sense of wonder Monica was trying to create and imagines herself in solidarity with other wom-

en attempting to belong to the male-dominated space of the campus rec center:

> I think that having like a group of girls, where we could even if, like we all didn't know what we were doing to like have people to struggle with together and kind of learn with together made it a lot more fun to do, and it was a lot more comfortable to do it when you're doing it in a group of people who are struggling versus just by yourself.

The CHAARG Instagram account inspires Mia to dream about fitness as a community building activity where women have fun by "struggling" together. Drawing from Erving Goffman, Luna Dolezal notes that women are socialized to see their bodies from the perspective of an outsider, meaning that "the body's appearance and comportment is self-consciously regarded as an object for a present or imagined third-person spectator" (364). Instagram naturally invites the gaze of a third-person spectator as the Instagrammer imagines how others will interpret their photo and caption. In the above quote, Mia sees her body as third-person spectator would and is worried she won't look like she belongs in the space. But looking at the CHAARG Instagram account leads her to imagine and wonder about how "a group of people who are struggling" together would make working out more fun, giving her the confidence to take up space.

Growing Confidence: The Affective Public One Year Later

I conducted the initial round of interviews in late 2020 and early 2021. From this first round of interviews, I could see how the CHAARG Instagram functioned as an affective public that built confidence regarding posting on Instagram. I still wanted to know, however, if this confidence persisted and if and how it shaped the women's identities. In their work on writing after college, Jonathan Alexander, Karen Lunsford, and Carl Whithaus found that "confidence" came up regularly when participants described how they felt about their writing in the professional world after college (572). Would the confidence built from the affective public of the CHAARG Instagram stick around? A year after my initial interviews, in spring of 2022, I re-interviewed the founding president of CHAARG, Emily, and the former vice president of CHAARG, Monica, who had now become the president. Because I only have two interviews for this section, I did not code these interviews with my scheme but instead switched to a case study methodology to track the individual trajectories of members rather than patterns of language across interviews. To account for this limited data, I include several images from the Instagram accounts and one interviewee's personal statement for physical therapy school.

In this second interview, I asked Emily to look at her CHAARG Instagram and point out a post that was personally significant.

Figure 2: "I did feel confident"

Figure 3: "Just a photo of me at the library"

Caption reads: "Shout-out to [my sister] for helping me in the #chaargrunclub 10K yesterday—talking, playing music, and making sure I got that #sweatyselfie at the end…birthday girl kept me going! [Celebration emoji; Running emoji]

Emily: Okay, I have two. So the first one is this one, which is just like a photo of me at Joslyn Castle. … This is an example about how this photo [see Image 2] has nothing to do with like fitness at all. . .. But it was just like a photo I felt really confident in and I didn't feel like posting that on my main account and having so many people see it, but I still wanted to share it

This excerpt demonstrates some of Emily's growing confidence in posting on social media. She expresses relief in posting a photo that doesn't make her "worry about anyone perceiving me in a sort of different way." Emily's "confident" photo (Image 2) is much more typical of what one would see on an Instagram influencer account: hair and makeup done, posed in a flattering position in an interesting locale. Despite the fact that this image lives up to the standards of her regular Instagram account, Emily does not post it on her main account just on the off chance that it will result in someone "perceiving [her] in a different sort of way,"

demonstrating how audience anxiety creeps in even for photos seemingly perfect for the rigid standards of social media. Emily still feels cautious about how the third-person spectator will perceive her. And yet she posts it on her CHAARG account because she wants to "share it with people." She juxtaposes it with a "not so confident" image of her at the library (Image 3), perhaps to offset looking overconfident and perhaps because she knows that the CHAARG Instagram is a welcome place for a more relatable self.

Figure 4: "I'm about to throw up"

Caption reads: "Shout-out to [my sister] for helping me in the #chaargrunclub 10K yesterday—talking, playing music, and making sure I got that #sweatyselfie at the end…birthday girl kept me going! [Celebration emoji; Running emoji]

Emily goes on to explain another meaningful post (Image 3):

> Okay, and then [there is] this post one where I'm literally about to throw up. My sister [posed in the foreground] is way more fit and has way more capacity to do anything [athletic-related] than I have and over Thanksgiving we did a 10K and she was the one who's like, "You have to post this on your Instagram," even though I was really literally like heaved over on the bike trail, and I think it shows growth because I would never post that on my main account. It's also people in my life right now seeing, like noticing when I'm posting and noticing when I'm growing, she's like "People need to see this."

Even though Emily finds the bike trail photo unflattering, she still feels it's worthy to post because it "shows growth," both in terms of her actual fitness and in terms of confidence in posting what's going on with her on Instagram. That said, Emily is also demonstrating the pervasiveness of looking at her Instagram with an internalized audience or "third-person spectator" view: when she says she "feels confident" in a photo, what she means is she feels confidence in posting the photo on social media. Emily is appreciative that her sister has picked up on the confidence-building work of the CHAARG Instagram and encourages her to post the picture not because it's a perfect photo but because it shows "growth."

In my follow-up interview with Emily, she noted the way her confidence grew because of her interactions with the CHAARG members and how her personal CHAARG Instagram account increasingly reflected that confidence. She mentioned that she had written about her work with CHAARG in her personal statement for physical therapy school, which she graciously shared with me and I received IRB approval to use. She states explicitly how the confidence she built in her work with CHAARG transfers to her ambitions for physical therapy school:

> "Believing that owning your fitness is owning your life" is CHAARG's motto and has also become my own. "Changing Health Attitudes to Recreate Girls" is a student organization I brought to campus that started as a way to give college women the confidence to exercise. It went on to transform my college experience. It has given me the strength and resources to overcome academic obstacles and become an ally to those who can benefit from our events. It has sparked my passion for comprehensive wellness and inspired me to turn my passions into purpose. Most of all, this organization has invigorated and prepared me for the field of Physical Therapy.

It would be presumptuous to draw a direct line from confidence built on Instagram to confidence built in one's personal life or career choices, but Emily's personal statement certainly speaks to the fluidity of confidence to transfer between online and offline worlds and the useful work of an affective public to collectively shape individual's mentalities and life choices. Particularly because current generations experience a "context collapse" and "seamlessness" between online and off-line worlds (Warner 168; boyd), it makes sense that confidence might flow naturally between the two. Emily's language later in the personal statement speaks more specifically to the power of the affective public: "My team and I, after only one year of CHAARG on our campus, have built a community of over 50 committed women to workout with, encourage each other, and spark a passion for wellness in their own lives. I have grown in my confidence and am empowered by the very community we have built."

For Emily, the CHAARG group and the CHAARG Instagram provides an affective public to emotionally support women who have negative emotions about both an online space (Instagram) and a physical space (the campus rec center) which have seemingly rigid rules for participation.

In her follow-up interview, Monica told me that she was proud that 26 women in the group now had personal CHAARG Instagram accounts, up from just a handful a year ago. I asked her why she thought so many more women were choosing to create a personal CHAARG Instagram account:

> Monica: We try to advertise it as something where you can be your like authentic self and you don't necessarily have to post your like best clean, polished-up version that you would on your personal [Instagram account] with the filters and stuff like that. Now [the CHAARG Instagram] is just like something [to] relax [and] no pressure, just, I don't know a space to vent or share something fun

that you did.

Interviewer: Has that changed your views of Instagram and all? That you sort of have this place where you don't feel like you have to post, like the perfectly filtered photo?

Monica: Um, I guess, I mean I've always known that social media can be toxic and everyone shows their perfect life, where they're going what they're eating how good they look. So, if anything, I don't think it's changed my perception it just like helps me feel more comfortable. I haven't posted as much on my like regular Instagram because [my CHAARG Instagram] is still like more fun for me. And yeah the connections that I make [on my CHAARG Instagram] as opposed to like comments that you say "Oh you look good," but now on [my CHAARG Instagram], like girls will be more interactive as far as like "Oh you like ate that or made that." Stuff like that it's like the interactions too are more authentic as well.

I want to highlight a phrase Monica uses that aptly represents the effect of the affective public: "I don't think it's changed my perception [of Instagram], it just like helps me feel more comfortable." She still understands the rules of posting on Instagram, but her community built in her the confidence to imagine that it could also be something different—a "comfortable" space where she belongs. In describing the work of affective publics, Papachrissi encourages us to look past overt political statements on social media and into how play constitutes a form of political action "as a strategy for dealing with the fixity of norms" (95). Posting on her CHAARG Instagram gives Monica a means of playing with the fixity of rules on Instagram. Her CHAARG Instagram gives her a chance to play with a different kind of identity, one with more confidence in posting and one connected to other people who care about what she's doing rather than just how she looks. Papacharissi argues that imagining and performing behaviors on social media is empowering for individuals because it allows them to "rehearse and reinvent behaviors" (97). Not only has the performance of the CHAARG Instagram allowed Monica to experiment and play with the normed practices of influencer-centric Instagram, but it also allows her to see the contrast of how people respond to her differently when she does so. She notes that when she posts a flattering picture on her regular Instagram account, people merely comment on her appearance ("Oh you look good") but the CHAARG Instagram people make what she calls an "authentic" connection or have an authentic interaction with her.

Conclusion: Feminist Social Media Use and the Activism of Young Women

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss the CHAARG Instagram as a kind of "popular feminism." Characterized by an absence of collectivity and a lack of critique of social structures, popular feminism relies on confidence within an individual, proclaiming that sexism and misogyny can be overcome with an individual, can-do, "lean in" attitude (Banet-Wiser 54). As Banet-Wiser writes, "it is the responsibility of individual women and girls to love their bodies, regardless of how much, and how often culture tells us we should hate them" (74). Reading Banet-Wiser's book, I felt that her framework for popular feminism was

too simplistic to describe what was happening on the CHAARG Instagram. While the CHAARG Instagram is still technically a kind of popular feminism because of its connection to "confidence," it also offers us a more nuanced view that demonstrates (1) how confidence moves on social media via a peer collective and (2) how this emotion of confidence intervenes into the existing emotions built into social media. I thus want to suggest that feminist media scholars study social media using ethnographic methods aimed at revealing community norms and standards instead of just the practices of individual composers.

First, I have attempted to demonstrate here the movement of the emotion of confidence across a collective on social media. Though Instagram ostensibly exists for the individual user to document their life through photos and images, the ability to use hashtags, tag other people, and the ease of switching between multiple accounts allows users to build community and a collaborative visual-based culture (Leaver, High-field, and Abidin 16). Because social media moves so fast and changes so frequently, it can be difficult to capture the collaborative network behind individual social media posts, but my interviews clearly suggest that these women see themselves in community with other users, and their posts reflect this sentiment. It would be wrong to identify the emotion of confidence in any one of the women I interviewed as an individual feeling; rather, users take up the group's mission to change the way people feel about their bodies existing in a certain space and to transmit this feeling to new and existing members. They talk about imagining different ways they might exist on social media, trying out different kinds of posts, and gauging audience reaction and interaction. They encourage and inspire each other to do hard things like a difficult workout but also to post a less-than-perfect photo. This emotional labor of the group is diffused to new members of the group who in turn imagine what their participation in the group might look like, loosening the restrictive genre rules of Instagram, even if just for a moment and just for a specific community.

Aware of the way that influencer culture has come to dominate the space of Instagram, the women in this group create posts that do not fully disrupt the norm to post a flattering picture but push back and play with the idea. The collective transmittal of the emotion of confidence on Instagram renews the women's energy and enthusiasm for posting online. Papacharissi challenges researchers to think about how "the performative contexts afforded by social media reproduce social norms so that we have the opportunity to engage and reverse them through our personally political performances" (95). The CHAARG Instagram authorizes these women to try on a different social media persona that imagines just a bit more freedom on social media and gives them a purpose in posting and a supportive audience for doing so.

It is easy to dismiss the work of CHAARG Instagram as a kind of popular feminism if it's studied as an individual practice. Had I interviewed just one CHAARG member, I might have just written an article condemning the hyper-individuality of popular feminism and agreed with Banet-Wiser that the burden of confidence gets placed on "individual girls and women, while sidestepping the social mechanisms and structures that encourage girls and women to have a lack of confidence in the first place" (100). But because I approached this research as more of an ethnographic study, trying to discern how emotion moves through this collective of women, I can see it more clearly as an activist practice. I can see how these women share a

similar attitude about the toxicity of social media and its anxiety-provoking standards. I can also see how the women bond together to intervene in these emotions with a newfound confidence, imagining other, more thoughtful uses of social media and how they pass along these emotions to new members.

I thus want to conclude by suggesting that feminist media scholars study social media as the practice of a community, using ethnographic methods aimed at revealing community norms, emotions, and practices. Rather than just focusing social media research on individual users, it might be more useful for feminists to look at the peer collectives that influence an everyday user. The women I interviewed clearly saw their individual social media use as arising from the accepted cultural practices of Instagram and influenced by the way their newfound community functioned on social media. I would further suggest that ethnographic studies of social media can show how seemingly small or mundane practices can be a kind of everyday activism, uniting a community together in resistance to a dominant emotion, and claiming a space for new ways of imagining the uses of social media.

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