An Exploration of Social Comparison on Instagram

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This Thesis is entirely my own work, and has not been previously submitted to this or any other third level institution.

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1.0 Abstract

Social comparison is a common side effect of Instagram use and the literature points to comparisons as the source of considerable negative effect for Instagram users. However contradictory findings suggested that social comparison can elicit feelings of inspiration and can be a positive thing. This mixed methods study sought to explore the factors which contribute to social comparison on Instagram and identify the barriers against negative affect. The literature revealed three distinct vulnerabilities which can contribute to negative interpretation of social comparison information - passive use, Social Comparison Orientation (SCO) and self-esteem. A mixed methods approach was employed to explore the topic in depth. 10 participants took part in the qualitative focus groups to explore the factors that influence social comparison. 128 participants responded to an online survey to analyse the effects of passive use, Social Comparison Orientation and self esteem on social comparison. The results found that personality and self-consciousness predict negative interpretations of social comparison information on Instagram. Feed curation and self-awareness were the primary barriers to social comparison. The quantitative data revealed a moderate correlation between passive use, self esteem and SCO on social comparison. These results point to a need for more granular Instagram features to address personalities who are more vulnerable to negative outcomes of social comparison on the app.
2.0 Introduction
Research is divided on the emotional impact of social media on users. A number of studies point to the positive outcomes of social media, such as social connection, lower loneliness levels and increased social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; McEwan, 2013; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Deters & Mehl, 2013; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). On the other hand, a large share of the literature outlines negative consequences, including anxiety, depression, loneliness and low self-esteem (Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). Despite inconsistent findings, the one certainty is that social media use is increasing (Pew Research Centre, 2017) and it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the depth of different user experience and the consequences thereof.

Online image-based social networking platform Instagram is currently the fastest growing social channel, with over 1 billion active monthly users worldwide (Wagner, 2015; Constine, 2018). Instagram allows users to share, comment and caption photos, and browse the profiles of others. The app also enables users to digitally alter and filter their photos to create an idealised version of themselves. In a 2017 study of 1500 young people, Instagram was named the “worst social media platform for wellbeing” (RSPH.org, 2017). The report outlined factors such as users adopting a “compare and despair” attitude when exposed to large volumes of enhanced images on the site. Previous research into Instagram use determined that the site stimulated negative comparisons (Frison & Eggermont, 2017) by exposing users to a high concentration of comparison opportunities and the considerable positivity bias of site content (Vogel et al, 2014; Chua & Chang, 2015; Chou & Edge, 2012).

Social comparison is a common denominator in many of the reported negative outcomes of Instagram use (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015; de Vries et al, 2018; Stapleton, Luiz & Chatwin, 2017; Yang, 2016, Chen et. al., 2016). Accessibility of information on friends and other targets of personal relevance make social comparison likely to occur on social media (Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016, Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Vogel, Rose & Roberts, 2014 ; Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2015). However research into social comparison on Instagram
has produced mixed findings, with studies citing a broad range of outcomes such as inspiration, motivation and reduced feelings of loneliness (Meier & Schafer, 2018; Yang, 2016; Yang & Robinson, 2018) to decreased wellbeing and depressive symptoms (Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Yang & Robinson, 2018; Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). These inconsistent findings indicate a greater depth of user experience, suggesting both positive and negative outcomes of social comparison. Research into social media is often polarising, labelling platforms either good or bad but the reality is a lot more nuanced. For this reason, it is necessary to take a holistic view of Instagram use to form a comprehensive picture of social comparison processes, the pathways to positive effect and the behaviours which may prove damaging.

Three distinct vulnerabilities are evident throughout social comparison literature which have been shown to contribute to negative effect - passive use, Social Comparison Orientation and self-esteem. There is a consistent trend in the literature identifying passive behaviour patterns as the source of negative effect on social media (Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja & Buxmann, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015). Research has linked social comparison to passive social media browsing, rather than active user behaviour (Wang et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2015) which may go some way in explaining the discrepancy in the literature. Passive user behaviour carries more of a risk as it bypasses the social connection afforded by active use (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015). Social Comparison Orientation is a specific personality type who have a tendency towards comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 1999). They are also more likely to seek out comparison information, experience negative effect and use social media for social comparative functions (Lee, 2014; Vogel et al., 2015). Furthermore, self-esteem levels can dictate how social comparison information is interpreted and lead to feelings of inadequacy and negative emotion (Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja & Buxmann, 2015). These results highlight the need to isolate specific user behaviours and characteristics as they may predict and amplify negative repercussions. Furthermore, it is possible that users not influenced by any of these vulnerabilities may be positively affected by social comparison, or may not be affected at all. Mao (2014) highlighted the importance of both qualitative and quantitative social media research due to the vast range of user experiences when dealing with social media. As the
literature shows, users can be positively and negatively affected by social comparison on Instagram and this study will take an expansive approach to data collection to attempt to source the root of these distinct user experiences.

The first aim of this study was to examine the factors which influence social comparison on Instagram. Qualitative focus groups were held to analyse the depth of experience in this area and surface themes. The second aim of this study was to examine the intersection of how passive user behaviour, Social Comparison Orientation and self-esteem influence the outcomes of social comparison on Instagram. This was achieved through quantitative analysis. The convergent parallel mixed methods design of this research (Creswell, 2003) will contribute broad insights and specificity of user data to the literature, filling a critical gap as a mixed methods study has not been done on this topic. The integration of this research will help to illuminate the experience of social comparison on Instagram and identify risk factors for negative effect. This can help to inform future app redesigns and prompt the introduction of features to minimise detrimental outcomes.
3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Social Comparison on Social Media

Festinger (1954) outlined social comparison as a process by which individuals evaluate themselves and others in order to gain a deeper understanding of the self. Comparisons are often centred around opinions, abilities (Festinger, 1954) and personality (Thornton & Arrowwood, 1966). Social comparison can be upward, comparing oneself to people viewed as superior, or downward, which involves comparison with people deemed inferior (Wood, 1989; Wills, 1981). Festinger (1954) outlined that people tended to have a “unidirectional drive upward, comparing themselves to people who they deem superior.” Corcoran, Crusius and Mussweiler (2011) refuted Festinger’s claim suggesting that people may seek social comparisons as motivation for self-improvement. Buunk, Collins and Taylor (1990) reported that comparison direction is not an inevitable pathway to positive or negative effect. Social comparison information can be interpreted in various ways, namely via the process of assimilation or contrast (Mussweiler, Ruter & Epstude, 2004). When assimilation occurs, the comparison target becomes a figure of inspiration and a source of motivation (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Conversely, when an individual engages in contrastive comparisons, their focus is on the disparity between themselves and the target, which can often lead to negative effect when upward comparisons are made with a contrastive lens (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). It stands to reason that social comparison literature on social media has thus far produced inconsistent findings due to these variances in interpretation. Social media can facilitate upward comparisons as people tend to present themselves in an exaggerated light on social media (Walther, 2007). Constant exposure to positive social content can create the impression that others are doing better, as users tend to post only highlights from their own lives (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2016; Chou & Edge, 2012). This positivity bias, coupled with large volumes of information about others can facilitate negative upward comparisons (Sabatini & Sarracino, 2015).
3.2 Social Comparison on Instagram

Social comparison on Facebook has been widely studied and found to have negative consequences for users (Appel, Gerlach & Crusius, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Feinstein et. al., 2013; Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Lee, 2014; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016; Steers et. al., 2014). As the most prominent precursor to Instagram, studies on Facebook inform current knowledge of social media and social comparison. However Instagram has the potential to elicit even more social comparison based on the sites strong emphasis on image, overly positive content and site specific affordances such as the scrolling interface design (de Vries, Moller, Wieringa, Eigenraam & Hamelik, 2017). Mao (2014) reported that site specific affordances can impact users in both positive and negative ways. Instagram’s design aesthetic employs a scrolling feed of images which users can browse, with no definitive endpoint, which may facilitate passive browsing.

Multiple studies have shown a link between passive SNS use and the negative effects of social comparison (Wang et. al., 2017; Chen et. al., 2016; Vogel et. al., 2015). Passive users or “lurkers”, tend to observe photos and browse profiles without actively engaging with other people (Frison & Eggermont, 2017; Tosun, 2012; Pagani et. al, 2011). Active use by comparison, involves chatting with friends, commenting on photos and engaging with others (Yang & Robinson, 2018; Deters & Mehl, 2013). The average user will generally engage in both passive and active behaviour to varying degrees however these usage patterns have very different repercussions. While active use has been associated with social connection and wellbeing (Myers, 2000; Verduyn et. al., 2017), passive use is regularly linked to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Verduyn et al., 2015 ; Shaw, Timpano, Tran, & Joormann, 2015; Frison & Eggermont, 2017). Reducing uncertainty and social comparison are noted motivations for engaging in passive use (McEwan, 2013). Accordingly, Chen et. al. (2016) reported that users passively browsing social media were more likely to engage in negative social comparison and experience negative effect. Contrary to this, de Vries & Kuhne (2015) and Lup et. al. (2015) found no distinct association between passive SNS use and increased upward comparison however given the depth of literature pointing towards the detrimental effects of passive use,
further examination is warranted. This distinction between user behaviours may help to explain the inconclusive findings throughout Instagram research. Recommendations by Frison and Eggermont (2016) and Lup, Trub and Rosenthal (2015) stress the importance of identifying the interplay between passive user behaviours and individual characteristics in order to form a robust understanding of Instagram use.

3.3 Social Comparison Orientation and Self-Esteem

Certain personality types are more vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison than others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006). Social Comparison Orientation (SCO) is the “inclination to compare one’s accomplishments, one’s situation, and one’s experiences with those of others” (p. 16) and can be characterised by high social orientation, neuroticism, low self-esteem, along with high levels of self-consciousness and a less stable self-concept (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006). Social comparison orientation can have a powerful impact on individual psychological well being. Vogel et. al (2015) reported that those high in SCO experience social media differently than those with lower levels. High SCO individuals are also likely to make more social comparisons on social media, resulting in negative affect (Yang & Robinson, 2018; Lee, 2014; de Vries & Kuhne, 2017; Wang et. al., 2017; Vogel et. al., 2015). Similarly, Lee (2014) found that those high in SCO reported increased negative feelings, self-perception and lower self-esteem after partaking in social comparison on social media. Yang (2016) also posited that SCO negates the positive outcomes of Instagram use due to the negative consequences of comparisons. As research has demonstrated, individual attributes and personality traits can affect a user’s experience with Instagram.

Chronic and temporary exposure to upward social comparison targets on social media has been associated with low self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin & Morris, 2011; Lee, 2014; Vogel et. al, 2014). Self-esteem refers to one’s self-concept and perception of self-worth (Vogel et. al., 2014). Research has shown that people suffering from low self-esteem are particularly susceptible to the negative outcomes of social comparison, perhaps due to feelings of personal uncertainty (Wayment & Taylor, 1995; Bazner, Bromer & Hammelstein, 2006). Those low in self-esteem
may also react to negative social comparison in maladaptive ways, such as ruminating on painful emotions (Hames et al., 2013; Feinstein et al., 2013). Poor self-esteem is a marker of the SCO personality type, making this group particularly sensitive to comparison. Selective exposure theory explains why negative cycles may perpetuate for SNS users with low self-esteem (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerclick, 2014). People who have a poor self-concept will already assume that others are doing better and will look for information on social media which confirms this viewpoint. Negative interpretations of comparative information can often be traced back to users self-esteem levels which may help to explain the mixed findings across social comparison literature.

### 3.4 Current Study

Research is consistent in identifying social comparison as the root of many negative consequences of Instagram use (Verduyn et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2015; Frison & Eggermont, 2017). However not everyone suffers negative outcomes when using Instagram (Meier & Schafer, 2018). Studies have identified passive browsing, SCO personality type and low self-esteem as behaviours and user attributes which may influence how social comparison information is negatively interpreted on Instagram. But it is possible that the literature may have missed out on key elements which can contribute to the positive aspects of social comparison. While Instagram browsing may be detrimental for some (Frison & Eggermont, 2017), it combats loneliness in others (Yang, 2016). Behavioural factors and individual attributes must be considered to form a more comprehensive understanding of social comparison on Instagram.

This first aim of the study will gather individual perspectives from Instagram users via qualitative focus groups to consider the relationship between social comparison and Instagram use. The mixed methods approach will allow for further exploration and probing of user experience. The qualitative research aimed to gain a clear understanding of the different mechanisms at play when making social comparisons.
The second part of the study looked at the effects of SCO and passive user behaviour on social comparison, and how self-esteem dictates the level of social comparison and passive user behaviour. Individuals high in SCO are more likely to compare themselves on social media, actively seek out comparative information and are highly vulnerable to negative effects. It is imperative to dig into how this group behaves versus a group low in SCO to figure out commonalities and how they engage with Instagram.

The following research questions were inspired by the literature and developed to encompass a broad scope:

RQ1: How does social comparison influence Instagram users?

This research question was addressed during the qualitative focus groups to surface themes.

RQ2: How does SCO and self-esteem influence the outcome of social comparison on Instagram?

Individuals high in SCO have a drive to compare and a propensity towards negative outcomes and this vulnerable population may arguably skew research aiming to shed light on social comparison practises. It is vital to isolate and measure for Social Comparison Orientation in order to accurately assess the emotional results of social comparison on Instagram. This lead to the development of the following hypotheses:

H1 - Self Esteem and passive Instagram use will have an effect on social comparison

- Higher passive use will result in lower self esteem
- Lower self-esteem will result in higher social comparison

H2 - SCO and passive Instagram use will have an effect on social comparison

- Higher SCO will result in higher social comparison
• Higher Passive Use will result in higher social comparison
4.0 Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate both positive and negative outcomes of social comparison on Instagram and distill these findings to highlight risk factors and barriers to negative affect. Studies so far have largely been experimental and quantitative. Despite a comprehensive body of literature on this topic, qualitative data was lacking. Previous studies by Lee (2014) and Wang et. al (2017) highlighted the intersection of SCO with social media user behaviours on Facebook and Weibo. Given the popularity of Instagram, it was important to analyse this element via the Quantitative data. In order to explore such a wide scope, this study followed a convergent parallel mixed methods design. The qualitative and quantitative research was conducted independently and the data was integrated at the interpretation phase (Creswell, 2003). In a paper by McKim (2017), the author outlined the added value of a mixed methodology in providing comprehensive experiential data and broad insights into the topic at hand. Quantitative data can only reveal so much and a mixed methods design can strengthen the story of the research (McKim, 2017). This is necessary in social comparison research, as the mixed findings in the literature suggest a gap in understanding. Hollstein (2014) also argues that a mixed methods approach can enhance the quality of the data and that the integration of datasets can deepen understanding of a complex topic. The data will be integrated to analyse whether the qualitative themes align with the three vulnerabilities outlined in the literature and will help to reveal pathways to positive and negative affect which may be missing from the literature.

This study encompassed both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to explore social comparison in depth. The qualitative section was completed first, followed by the quantitative research. Both methodologies will be outlined separately.
4.1 The Qualitative phase of the study

4.1.1 Design
The qualitative research was carried out through a series of focus groups. The qualitative data informed the first research question. Focus groups were selected in order to surface a wide range of experiential data which may not have been identified through the literature. The focus groups were semi-structured with 5 prepared open ended questions and ranged from 30-40 minutes in duration. A pilot study was run to test the questions and estimate timing.

4.1.2 Participants

15 participants were recruited for the qualitative focus groups via an email sign up sheet. 5 participants were unable to attend the sessions. A total of 10 participants attended the focus groups. Participants were all female and aged between 25-37. The participants identified as Irish (80%), Dutch (10%) and Austrian (10%).

4.1.3 Materials

The focus group questions were informed by the literature and were kept general so as to eliminate bias. The focus groups followed a semi structured format, with five qualitative questions introduced to generate discussion (see Appendix A).

4.1.4 Procedure

Participants were briefed ahead of the focus group and were assured that all responses would be anonymised. The three focus groups were filmed via Web Ex and recorded to allow for clear playback and effective transcription. The initial qualitative question “Do you ever compare yourself to others when browsing Instagram?” was introduced to spark discourse and participants were invited to share their observations. Recordings were transcribed and coded via open coding. The qualitative data was analysed using a six step thematic analysis, as
outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was employed due to the wide ranging responses and experiences that emerged from the qualitative data. Thematic analysis offers a fluid and flexible approach and enables a deeper understanding of common patterns among Instagram users.

4.2 The Quantitative phase of the study

4.2.1 Design

The quantitative research was comprised of an online survey package, including 4 separate scales to measure passive Instagram use, upward social comparison, Social Comparison Orientation and self-esteem. The quantitative analysis focused on the relationship between these four factors and spoke to the second research question.

4.2.2 Participants

132 participants took part in the quantitative survey (26.6% Male, 73.4% Female). Participants were aged between 18-54. Participants were sourced via online convenient snowball sampling. Participants were sourced across a wide age demographic to assess general usage patterns across a broader population. All were required to have an active Instagram account in order to take part and 5 participants were removed from the study as they did not meet the required criteria.
Fig. 1 - Breakdown of Quantitative participants by Gender
4.2.3 Materials

The quantitative materials consisted of an online survey package, created and distributed using Google Forms. The survey package contained an information sheet, consent form, user demographics, a de-brief and the following scales:

Passive Instagram Use Scale

A Passive Instagram use scale was developed to assess participant’s primary Instagram behaviours. The scale was adapted from measures used in a previous study by Verduyn et al. (2015). Measures included - “I am very active on Instagram,” and “I often comment on friends’ pictures.” Participants rated how true each statement was for them on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = “completely not true” to 5 = “completely true.”

Fig. 2 - Breakdown of Quantitative participants by Age
The mean score was calculated for the 5 points with higher scores indicating higher levels of passive SNS use (negative scale items were reverse coded). The Cronbach’s alpha for the sample was 0.79.

**Upward Social Comparison Scale**

This scale measures the level of upward social comparisons made by participants and was adapted from a measure by Buunk & Gibbons (1990). The scale consisted of three questions and was adapted for Instagram use. See Appendix F for questions. The results were recorded on a 5 point Likert Scale with 1 being *Never* and 5 being *Very Often*.

**Social Comparison Orientation Scale**

The 11 item Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006) was used to determine how liable participants were to social comparisons. The scale featured questions such as “I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life”. Participants were asked to mark how applicable each statement was to them personally on a Likert Scale of 1 to 5 (1 being Not at All, 5 being Very Much).

The scale has high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.83$) and sound criterion based validity.

**Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale**

In order to measure baseline trait self-esteem levels, the Rosenberg Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was employed. See Appendix F for scale in full.

High self-esteem levels were indicated by a higher score on the scale. This established scale was found to have adequate consistency ($\alpha = 0.89$).
4.2.4 Procedure

The quantitative survey was sent to participants via an online link and shared on social media. Participants were fully briefed and advised that all data would be anonymised and they were free to withdraw data at anytime. They were also free to omit questions they did not wish to answer. Survey data was collected and analysed via a Regression Analysis.

3.3 Ethics

This study was approved by the Ethics board in IADT. All participants were fully briefed ahead of both the qualitative and quantitative studies. All data collected was anonymised and no identifiable information was included in the research.
5.0 Results
The results section has been organised to address the first and second research question separately.

5.1 The qualitative phase of the study

Qualitative data was coded using open coding and analysed for themes, informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method. This data addressed the question *How does social comparison influence Instagram users?*

First of all the qualitative participants were asked about their comparative tendencies, as outlined in Fig 3. Four themes were identified including risk factors for comparison such as Mood Fluctuations, Personality and barriers to comparison, Feed Curation and Self Awareness. A sub theme Concern for Younger Users also emerged from the data.

*Do you compare yourself to others on Instagram?*

![Pie chart showing social comparison levels](image)

*Fig 3: Breakdown of qualitative participants social comparison levels*
5.1.1 Mood Fluctuations influenced social comparison

Mood fluctuations were seen to play a key role in the interpretation of social comparison information on Instagram. Several participants mentioned that their particular “humour or headspace” would generally determine whether or not they were negatively affected after viewing content on Instagram. Similarly, negative mood may lead to passive Instagram habits, as one user documented leaning on the app “as an out”, or a distraction for negative mood. This was evident in one participant’s report that she uses Instagram “hoping that it will make me feel better”. Another participant noted that she purposefully avoided using Instagram when in a bad mood, as she anticipated a negative reaction.

“When I’m not feeling well I’m trying to avoid social media anyway”. [CF, Focus Group 3]

This demonstrated an awareness of triggers, an anticipation of negative outcomes and the power of Instagram to influence feelings.
Two participants highlighted “the time of the month” as being a vulnerable time for comparison and that they may be more prone to emotional reactions when viewing Instagram content. Furthermore, one participant made sure to avoid Instagram when “hungover” [SM], perhaps due to heightened anxiety or emotions which may affect the interpretation of the images viewed.

“I know I wouldn’t have the capacity to self-regulate ”. [SM, Focus Group 2]

These avoidant behaviours show the power that Instagram has over emotions and subsequent mood. There are many variables which can affect overall mood and participants cited that comparative practises can depend on “how successful I feel”, “feeling of value or self-worth” and that these fluid states can determine how one interprets Instagram content. Even those participants who did not report high levels of upward social comparison revealed that they too have days where they “feel shit” and compare more, or experience more negative feelings after viewing Instagram.

Social comparison seems to be a universal process and the majority of participants were affected by it in one capacity or another. But it was evident that some experienced significantly more negative impact than others.

5.1.2 Personality influences social comparison

“It’s based on your personality, some people are definitely more susceptible to that than others. But yeah of course you compare yourself” [AK, Focus Group 1]

The influence of personality on social comparison was a primary theme that surfaced during the focus groups. Several participants noted that certain personalities have a stronger inclination towards comparison than others. Indicative of the Social Comparison Orientation personality type, participants who were self-conscious and used negative self-talk when making comparisons appeared to engage in more comparisons and experience more negative
consequences than more self-assured participants.

“Maybe I’m just self-conscious, I don’t know what it is” [LO, Focus Group 3]

Being conscious of one’s self appeared to trigger an extreme awareness of others. Body image was a notable criteria that people compared themselves on. When faced with images of others on Instagram, a self-conscious participant revealed a negative inner monologue which was highly critical.

“Back in college you were probably skinnier than that person, you were fitter than them back then, you were better looking than them, you’ve lost that, you’re so shit, why have you lost that” [SM, Focus Group 2]

Self-talk, as illustrated above, was evident throughout the transcripts and demonstrated extreme emotions, either highly positive or intensely negative. This has the potential to create a negative spiral and is reflective of literature which highlights the negative ramifications of social comparison.

While two participants demonstrated characteristics of the Social Comparison Orientation, two other participants highlighted examples of friends who engaged in detrimental social comparison, suggesting that this personality type is commonplace.

“Seeing all her friends with babies, at weddings, she said “this is not good for me” so she took herself off it” [BV, Focus Group 1]

One of the participants who displayed SCO characteristics noted that she finds it “so frustrating because I suppose that’s the thing everyone has Instagram on your phone, flick through it and like for me it’s just an out, I’m bored, I want to feel better or I want to just like, take two
seconds and then when you do get a negative feeling about whatever you’ve seen, it just casts a deeper negativity on yourself in my opinion”. [LO, Focus Group 3]

This suggests that using Instagram in a passive way may be a distraction and that this can elicit stronger negative feelings. This participant was the only participant to report negative outcomes of Instagram use in general and was also one of the most negatively impacted by comparisons. This suggests a relationship between passive use and comparisons.

The same participant also highlighted removing the app from their phone to “figure out if I felt any better”. This preventative measure appeared to stem from an over reliance on Instagram.

As per the literature, certain personality types are more susceptible to passive browsing which can lead to negative repercussions. This may be down to the mindless nature of the activity which may leave users vulnerable to intrusive thoughts and negative emotions such as jealousy, spurred by social comparison. However by intentionally selecting feed content and engaging with Instagram to further personal interests and learn new skills may be a deciding factor for experiencing the app in a positive way.

“I would try to create the feed that I learn something from it and it inspires me and it gives me a positive feeling instead of you know, feeling further down”. [CF, Focus Group 3]

5.1.3 Self-Awareness as a barrier to social comparison

The age demographic of the focus groups were between 26-38 and this more mature user group appeared to have a strong understanding of themselves. For the majority of the group, self-awareness was the primary barrier towards negative social comparison. Although most still fell victim to comparison at times, largely, participants were able to distinguish themselves and
their goals from that of others on Instagram and could separate the images from real life. One participant noted that Instagram images are:

“A picture on the wall - you look at it because it’s pretty but that’s all, you think it’s beautiful, that’s all it is.” [CB, Focus Group 3]

This is a very healthy way of engaging with content on Instagram and demonstrates a separation of self from the images on the platform.

Knowledge of one’s own interests and strengths, along with satisfaction with one’s own circumstances also appeared to circumvent any negative effects of social comparison.

“It doesn’t feel like it’s deliberate but it was a deliberate effort on my behalf to only follow people who like give me good news or fill me up in some way when I’m looking at Instagram instead of just people who have gorgeous clothes and gorgeous hair and gorgeous boyfriend” [EC, Focus Group 2]

The older age demographic present in that study may also have impacted the results as older users may be less susceptible to peer influence and may be more sure of themselves. Strategies were initiated by several participants to avoid or deactivate their Instagram account in order to protect their well-being.

“I decided to go off all social media accounts just for Lent, for four or five weeks, just to figure out for myself do I feel better, do I feel any different and so far it’s been very positive for me”. [LO, Focus Group 3]

“I made a point of purging my Instagram… I just purged a load of people who were negative for my mindset” [EC, Focus Group 2]
This shows an awareness of their own reactions and demonstrates the effectiveness of having a strategy in place to address these negative impacts.

5.1.4 Feed Curation

Feed curation was an effective strategy to guard against negative social comparison. Participants identified problematic accounts and unfollowed content or profiles which inspired negative comparisons. This was a commonplace practise across the board and appears to act as a buffer to negative comparison. However it does allude to the fact that if left unchecked, social comparison could become a problem.

“I’m 37, I don’t need this in my life. But I suppose if I did have all that stuff coming up in my feed, it would make me feel quite shit about myself. Because I don’t look at it I don’t see those people to compare myself to. Most of the things I follow are my actual friends or funny pages or art so I kind of keep it a safe space for me” [LR, Focus Group 1]

These preventative measures appear to create a more positive user experience while using Instagram. Two of the participants cited inspiration as a positive side effect of carefully curating their feed. A list of feed curation themes included body positivity pages, fitness accounts, kombucha, DIY and tiny homes pages. These were all areas of interest for the participants and largely seemed to elicit inspiration and positive feelings.

“I try to curate the Instagram feed, or follow the people I like, follow the people that I think might inspire me to help me create something better. Like say I want to get into gardening so I would follow, like I would try to create the feed that I learn something from it and it inspires me and it gives me a positive feeling instead of you know, feeling further down”. [CF, Focus Group 3]

However one participant who veered strongly towards social comparison saw fitness as one of her primary areas of interest. Despite following accounts where people were competing in
races, she saw this as a comparison target and potentially felt bad after viewing this content. Furthermore she highlighted the fact that she was more likely to compare herself with friends than with celebrities and this may present a problem in terms of feed curation.

“If they have completed a race that I know I’m not fit enough to do right now or whatever then it would lead me to compare myself to them” [SM, Focus Group 2]

A different participant who claimed to not engage in social comparison, outlined that she purposefully did not follow friends and family particularly to avoid this issue.

“I kind of pick and choose who I follow and because I don’t have any ties to them, in terms of, like they’re not my friends, I won’t offend someone if I unfollow them”. [EM, Focus Group 2]

Although this is an extreme strategy, this participant engages in significantly less social comparison than the first participant and is not negatively affected by social comparison to the same degree. These contrasting experiences demonstrate the impact of tailoring the feed to minimise negative consequences.

5.1.6 Sub Theme : Concern for Younger Users

There was a significant concern for younger users expressed throughout all three focus groups. Namely, fear and anxiety of the potential impact of Instagram comparisons, curiosity as to how younger users experience the Instagram platform and admissions that participants themselves would not have coped well with the platform at 16. Several participants enquired about education opportunities and how these could best serve Gen Z. Despite these concerns, all anecdotal examples of young users mentioned during the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive.

“Judging by the way I think she [participant’s niece] uses Instagram I think it’s quite healthy and I just think it’s seen as just another way to talk to your friends, to put yourself out there”.
This again, points to the fact that reports of Instagram being the “worst platform for wellbeing” may not be accurate and points to areas for future research.

5.2 The quantitative phase of the study

**RQ2: How do SCO and self-esteem influence the outcome of social comparison on Instagram?**

The results of the quantitative survey investigated the effect of passive Instagram use, Social Comparison Orientation and self-esteem on upward social comparison.

5.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

![Bar chart showing mean total self-esteem by gender and age groups.](chart.png)
Fig 5: Breakdown of quantitative results by Gender, Age and Mean Self Esteem levels

![Bar chart showing breakdown of Mean Total Social Comparision by Gender and Age](image)

Fig 6: Breakdown of quantitative results by Gender, Age and Mean Social Comparison levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>2.494</td>
<td>99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
<td>14.86</td>
<td>3.933</td>
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<td>Total SCO</td>
<td>32.88</td>
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Fig 7: Descriptive Stats for total Social Comparison, Passive Use and SCO
5.2.2 Data Analysis

Table 1: Hypotheses and Results

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Test Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Self Esteem and passive Instagram use will have an effect on social comparison</td>
<td>Statistically significant $F(2,99) = 23.290$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variance of social comparison ($r^2 = .327$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: SCO and passive Instagram use will have an effect on social comparison</td>
<td>Statistically significant $F(2,99) = 21.574$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance of social comparison ($r^2 = .310$)</td>
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Self esteem and passive Instagram use were used in a standard regression analysis to predict social comparison. The correlations of the variables are shown above in Table 1. All correlations were statistically significant. The prediction model was statistically significant $F(2,99) = 23.290$, $p > .001$ and accounted for approximately 33% of the variance of social comparison ($r^2 = .327$). Social comparison was primarily predicted by self esteem levels and to a lesser extent, passive Instagram use.
To test the second hypothesis, Social Comparison Orientation and passive Instagram use were tested in a second regression analysis as predictors of social comparison.

Correlations from the second analysis were again statistically significant. The prediction model found $F(2,99) = 21.574$, $p > 0.001$ and accounted for approximately 31% of the variance of social comparison ($r^2 = .310$). Social comparison was impacted by levels of SCO and passive Instagram use.
6.0 Discussion

This study sought to identify the factors which influence social comparison on Instagram, and examine the effect of passive Instagram use, Social Comparison Orientation and self-esteem on social comparison.

The qualitative focus groups revealed several factors which influenced social comparison. In terms of negative outcomes, personality was seen to have major impact on social comparative tendencies. The Social Comparison Orientation personality laid out by Buunk & Gibbons (2006) was evident throughout the qualitative data, with two participants displaying characteristics of SCO. Interestingly, they also appeared to engage in more passive use, which validates research by Lee (2014) and Vogel et al (2015) who found that SCOs are more likely to use social media for comparative purposes and more likely to engage in passive browsing.

Two qualitative participants expressed frequent comparative tendencies, uncertainty in themselves, a drive for self evaluation and identified as self-conscious. There was a very clear distinction between the comparative tendencies of two participants against the remaining eight, namely in terms of the negative consequences and frequent browsing which were reported alongside. These participants displayed contrastive comparisons, focusing on the difference between themselves and the comparison targets (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

“Wow look at that person, I’d love to be that person, I wish I had that body and wish I looked like that” [LO, Focus Group 3]

Individuals high in SCO have also been found to engage in more passive use (Appel et. al, 2016), and the quantitative and qualitative data supported the relationship between passive Instagram use and social comparison. This aligns with Verduyn et. al’s (2017) findings which
suggested a link between the frequency of social comparison and the frequency of passive user patterns.

The quantitative results showed a moderate correlation which suggested that SCO, passive browsing and self esteem are likely to negatively affect social comparison on Instagram. Interestingly, self esteem was seen to have a bigger impact on social comparison than SCO, with the presence of a stronger correlation. Research by Yang and Robinson (2018) found that SCO need not be detrimental, and that even those high in SCO may not suffer negative outcomes. It is possible that individuals who are aware of their comparative tendencies have taken measures to remove harmful content and tailored their feed in order to avoid negative comparisons.

Feed curation was a notable barrier towards social comparison and several participants highlighted the effectiveness of this strategy in alleviating negative comparisons. Several participants reported following Instagram accounts which inspire them, to counteract negative feelings. Research by Meier and Schafer (2018) found that Instagram comparisons could be a source of inspiration, when users assimilate themselves with the comparison target. This shows the positive side of comparisons and the qualitative data indicated the potential for assimilative comparisons to foster positivity on the site. With the work of Meier and Schafer (2018) and Yang and Robinson (2018) outlining positive effects of comparisons on Instagram, this shows a clear opportunity for future research into the mechanisms of assimilative comparisons. Several qualitative participants were more likely to assimilate with comparison targets, leading to more positive experiences with Instagram.

“I really get a lot of positivity from my feed because I follow a lot of people like Cheryl Strayed...so I know I seek out a lot of these types of people because I love what they do in the world” [EC, Focus Group 2]
6.1 Strengths and Limitations

The mixed methods approach offered an immense scope of data. Participants were forthcoming and willing to discuss their experiences. The synergistic effect of the focus group meant that all voices were heard and a range of different experiences were brought to light. Participants cited the topical nature of the study as having piqued their interest. The subject is highly relevant due to the recent statements by Facebook, Instagram’s parent company who cited social comparison and passive use as two key pathways to negative effect on the platform (Ginsburg & Burke, 2018). This research contributes to knowledge in this area and can be used to inform future site redesigns.

Instagram have already targeted passive user behaviours by introducing the “You’re All Caught Up” feature to try to prevent passive browsing which shows that they are open to creating features to guard against damaging behaviours. Instagram is neither good nor bad, but certain personalities may have different experiences with the platform. Active use, engaging and connecting with others is a positive thing and research has attested to the benefits of Instagram for connection and reducing loneliness (Yang, 2016). This study can inform Instagram redesigns to cater to specific vulnerable populations to guard against negative effects of the platform.

Despite these strengths, the study also faced a number of limitations. The scope of this study was extremely broad and the qualitative element could have been its own standalone study due to the range of data it produced.

Self-reporting levels of passive and active Instagram use may not have been accurate as it can be difficult to self-assess specific user behaviours. It may have been more beneficial to optimise Instagram screentime features which can measure time spent on the app and would produce a more accurate estimate of behavioural patterns.
Small sample sizes were an issue, particularly within the focus groups. As a consequence, the results may not be generalisable to a wider population. Similarly, there was an over representation of females in the study and a lack of male perspective in the qualitative data.

6.2 Contributions to Knowledge

The focus group data brought to light several distinct barriers towards negative social comparison including Self-Awareness and Feed Curation. This curation strategy was not outlined in any Instagram or social comparison literature and is a valuable avenue for future research. The focus group results also demonstrated that self-consciousness and low self-esteem can result in negative interpretation of social comparison information on Instagram. This resonated with the quantitative data which found low self-esteem to be the primary driver of upward social comparison. Interestingly, SCO did not seem to have as much of an impact as anticipated, yet a correlation with social comparison was present. Feed curation strategies were not taken into account during the quantitative research, and it is possible that individuals aware of their comparative tendencies may have implemented measures to remove comparison targets and as such, did not report increased upward comparison. Several participants even cited that they were inspired by the people they followed and wanted to learn from Instagram accounts.

“All of my feed, like what you say, tailoring my feed to things that interest me - gym workouts, Kayla Itsines videos, like to teach me things that I can do” [BV, Focus Group 1]

This demonstrates that rather than be looking at possible comparison targets as something unattainable, the information can be viewed as a positive thing and something to aspire to. This is in line with the findings of Mussweiler, Ruter and Epstude (2004). Similarly, research by Meier and Schafer (2018) stated that inspiration was a major product of social comparison on Instagram, due to assimilative upward comparisons. The quantitative results showed self esteem as a key predictor of negative comparisons. However following accounts of interest can
produce learning opportunities and potentially increase self esteem, which would be an effective barrier for vulnerable users. The current study made the case for feed curation and the removal of harmful content on a regular basis to counteract negative social comparisons and create a positive user experience. These strategies had not been examined or factored into any previous research and present a clear educational opportunity to guard against negative outcomes of social comparison.

6.3 Future Research

Extensions of this work could take a number of avenues. Concern for younger users was a strong theme in the qualitative focus groups.

“Our feed is tailored depending on what our interest is so I don't know do teenagers kinda absorb it all?” [BV, Focus Group 1]

It would be valuable to conduct the same study again with a younger age demographic and contrast the results. 18-29 year olds are the most active age demographic on Instagram (Pew Research Centre, 2017) and it would be interesting to repeat this study to contrast their experiences against an older population. A gender split would also be interesting to deduce if young men are affected by social comparison to the same degree as young women.

An experimental design examining participants experience with a personally curated feed versus an assigned control feed would be beneficial to examine the power of autonomous feed tailoring on negating negative aspects of Instagram use.

A purely qualitative approach would be insightful. An investigation modelling Fox and Morelands (2015) qualitative Facebook study would be interesting to examine Instagram specific affordances and how they contribute to social comparison.
6.4 Conclusion

Fox and Moreland (2014) called for research to highlight ways to optimise the positive aspects of social media and minimise the negative effects. This study has provided a depth of data and determined predictors of and barriers towards social comparisons on Instagram, along with strategies to mitigate potential negative outcomes of comparative behaviour. Although social comparison was found to be a largely universal process, knowledge of the self and feed curation helped to stem negative consequences for participants. Low self-esteem was found to be the primary driver of negative social comparison and those low in self-esteem were also found to engage in more passive Instagram use, the most detrimental user behaviour. Social Comparison Orientation had a moderate effect on social comparison but may not be the biggest contributing factor. SCO is composed of a number of traits, including self-consciousness and it is possible that there are other variables at play which predict negative comparisons. While the quantitative data revealed that those low in self-esteem were most vulnerable to negative outcomes of social comparisons, the key takeaway from the qualitative data was that feed curation was vital in preventing negative comparisons and can be used as an educational strategy for younger users. As stated by a focus group participant:

“So that might just be some advice that I think is worthwhile if you don’t want Instagram to make you feel bad, you literally have the control to delete the people or to unfollow the people that are making you feel bad. I made an effort to do that a long time ago and I think it’s working” [EC, Focus Group 2]
7.0 References


8.0 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A - Ethics Form A
# DEPARTMENT OF TECHNOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY
## ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM A

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<td>Email contact</td>
<td><a href="mailto:maire.carr89@gmail.com">maire.carr89@gmail.com</a></td>
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1. Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect? **X**
2. Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary? **X**
3. Will you obtain written consent for participation (through a signed or ‘ticked’ consent form)? **X**
4. If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed? **X**
5. Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason? **X**
6. With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer? **X**
7. Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs? **X**
8. Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e., give them a brief explanation of the study)? **X**
9. If your study involves people between 16 and 18 years, will you ensure that passive consent is obtained from parents/guardians, with active consent obtained from both the child and their school/organisation? **X**
10. If your study involves people under 16 years, will you ensure that active consent is obtained from parents/guardians and that a parent/guardian or their nominee (such as a teacher) will be present throughout the data collection period? **X**
11* Does your study involve an external agency (e.g. for recruitment)? **X**
12. Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort? **X**
13. Does your project involve work with animals? **X**
14. Do you plan to give individual feedback to participants regarding their scores on any task or scale? **X**
15. Does your study examine any sensitive topics (such as, but not limited to, religion, sexuality, alcohol, crime, drugs, mental health, physical health)? **X**
16. Is your study designed to change the mental state of participants in any negative way (such as inducing aggression, frustration, etc.)? **X**
If you have ticked No to any of questions 1 to 11, or Yes to any of questions 12 to 18 you should refer to the PSI Code of Professional Ethics and BPS Guidelines and consult with your supervisor without delay. You will need to fill in Ethical Approval Form B and submit it to the Department of Technology and Psychology Ethics Committee (DTPEC) in place of this form.

There is an obligation on the researcher to bring to the attention of the DTPEC any issues with ethical implications not clearly covered by the above checklist.

I consider that this project has no significant ethical implications to be brought before the DTPEC. I have read and understood the specific guidelines for completion of Ethics Application Forms. I am familiar with the PSI Code of Professional Ethics and BPS Guidelines (and have discussed them with my supervisor).

Signed Máire Carr Print Name MÃÆ’ÂIRE CARR Date 04/04/18
Applicant

I have discussed this project with my student, and I agree that it has no significant ethical implications to be brought before the DTPEC.

Signed ________________ Print Name __________________ Date ________________
Supervisor

* If you are dealing with an external agency, you must submit a letter from that agency with the form A. The letter must provide contact details, and must show that they have agreed for you to carry out your research in their organization.
8.2 Appendix B - Qualitative Questions

1) Do you ever compare yourself to others when browsing Instagram?

2) If yes, what makes you likely to compare yourself with others?

2a) If no, what makes you not compare yourself with others?

3) Have you ever had a negative feeling after social comparison? Why?

4) Have you ever had a positive feeling after social comparison? Why?

8.3 Appendix C - Focus Group 1 Transcript Example

Participant 1 - AK

Participant 2 - BV

Participant 3 - LR

Question 1 - Do you ever find yourself comparing yourself to other people on Instagram?

AK - Oh yeah definitely. But I think you, like, it’s based on your personality, some people are definitely more susceptible to that than others. But yeah of course, you compare yourself.

BV - Definitely but I use it, like, at the moment I am trying to get fit so I use it to look up workouts and body shapes and how certain clothes, style, shapes and stuff.

LR - I’m sure I do, it doesn’t really stick in my mind that I compare myself to people. Although it’s made me want to get a tattoo..... “Oh they look cool!” But yeah I guess. I don’t follow any pages of anyone who is an influencer, the beautiful people, deliberately, because I find it irritating. I’m 37, I don’t need this in my life. But I suppose if I did have all that stuff coming up in my feed, it would make me feel quite shit about myself. Because I don’t look at it, I don’t see those people to compare myself to. Most of the
things I follow are my actual friends or funny pages, or art so I kind of keep it a safe space for me because I don’t like to see these unhealthy ideals of what your body should look like. But I don’t follow the body positivity things either. Like I’m glad they’re there but I don’t feel the need to follow them.

AK- I follow loads of the body positivity ones. And I strongly believe in curating your feed to make you not feel shit. I don’t mind looking at skinny people but I don’t want to look at photoshopped skinny people.

LR - That’s what I loved about Bloggers Unveiled - like they showed you “oh look that legs a bit warped there!” And its very sad cos I have a niece who’s 16 and she’s all over Instagram and she’s getting progressively sexier as time goes by. Like it’s dreadful for young ones and young fellas to behaving like that is normal; to grow up with that. Same way as watching porn. The same way watching porn would mess you up if that’s all you ever see. I do wonder about it because I always think “oh if that was me i would find it quite influential”. But I don’t have the full picture because a 15-16 year old now has grown up in a different way, they have a different lived experience to interact with their entire network of friends. So I don’t know if its reasonable for me to say it must be awful for them because it would have been awful for me. It’s a completely different experience. I wonder does it make children more resilient you have that feeling of being an outsider perhaps is reduced if you can go on Instagram and find your tribe, no matter what that is. There will be a million hashtags that you can look through. I worry to think of it in a very niche way. Like if you are some sad teenager who feels this way that it’s going to devastate you like maybe it could be a positive thing if you are resilient enough to understand. Don’t just follow models.

BV - Yeah like I used to follow all the Irish bloggers and after Bloggers Unveiled and finding all the ones that are fake, I cleared them all out and I said if I miss them I will go back but I didn’t miss them. All of my feed, like what you say, tailoring my feed to things that interest me - gym workouts, Kayla Itsines videos, like, to teach me things that I can do, home workouts and stuff, makeup videos or like, actually a lot of our friends that I know, like, places they go for travelling.
8.4 Appendix D - Focus Group 2 Transcript Example

Participant 1 - EC

Participant 2 - SM

Participant 3 - JG

Participant 4 - EM

Question 3 - Have you ever had a negative feeling after comparing yourself on Instagram?

EM - I don’t think that I would say that I have negative or positive feelings because I’m not comparing myself directly to people on Instagram that I see because they’re not really my peers. What I will say though is that it absolutely influences me, so for example like I love interiors, I love fashion, I can lose the run of myself very easily on that and be like oh I can be excessive in those areas in terms of buying things I don’t need I have to work in being responsible and mindful in buying stuff I don’t need, like it’s stupid to buy these pair of jeans when you just bought something last week or whatever. However looking at things on Instagram all the time, like, because of what I follow I am just seeing every time I look on Instagram, this new thing I got, this new thing I was gifted, this ad, promoting things, promoting a lifestyle and it can definitely influence even the strongest minded of people, like when they might have been like I don’t need that I don’t need to buy that but being exposed to that can just change your not even perspective or just influences you or like “oh yeah I never thought about that thing before” if you’ve never been on Instagram you never would have seen it never would have bought it, and would have been totally fine. But it makes you more susceptible to buying definitely. It’s not a direct comparison but it’s an indirect thing.

Having a positive body image from a young age and the fact that like, we received some sort of education around that whole media area are the two reasons why, I would say, that is why I don’t negatively compare myself and I don’t have negative feelings and I don’t actually compare myself if that makes sense.
SM - Yes, 100%. Like I often think as well that it’s a more like delayed reaction so like I don’t think you see the pictures and think “oh god im comparing myself and I feel terrible”, I think its like a slow burner like you see it and take it in and then maybe its an hour or two or maybe its the next day that you really find yourself thinking “wow I found that run really hard, and that other person managed to do a fucking marathon yesterday and I just struggled through 15 km and I’m so pathetic like that’s the way I’ll find like it’ll be after the event or I’ll try on clothes, the next day or try to make an outfit and I’ll think oh you look like such a lump in that crop top remember how great that person looked in that picture, they went to college with you and back in college you were probably skinnier than that person back then, you were fitter than them back then, you were better looking than them, you’ve lost that you’re so shit why have you lost that, so that’s what happens and how the negative feeling I get impacts me personally.

EC - I don’t think I’ve had a negative feeling like that. Like I haven’t ever sat around and cried because my bum isn’t as big as Kim Kardashians. Like really I get a lot of positivity from my feed because I follow a lot of people like Cheryl Strayed and Elizabeth Gilbert and Reese Witherspoon and Shonda Rhimes so I know I seek out a lot of these types of people because I love what they do in the world and they’re really positive and they’re always talking about progress and its great. So like I know some people get like this but its not something that happens me on a regular basis. I can’t even pinpoint any examples. Well, ok not so much social comparison but I do get a horrible feeling sometimes when I see someone who I have a crush on just happily living their lives without me, that’s probably not really social comparison. Actually no this is one! I feel like sometimes if I see someone who is having a great Saturday or Sunday, or having plans on a day that maybe I don’t have any, like if someone is at lovely brunch or having a great time, I think sometimes I’ll be a bit like “oh I wish I was doing this”, and I might go into a spiral like “oh I don’t have any plans, I don’t have any friends” But it’s not that common, but I wouldn’t say it doesn’t happen either. Like I would say I compare myself to people’s plans when it comes to travel and socialising but it catches me in moments when I don’t have any as opposed to when I do then I don’t feel anything.

JG - Yes me too. And you know, years ago I would have negative feelings about comparisons on social media all the time. I think it was because I wasn’t always emotionally in a good place back then which made me think other people were living a better or more enjoyable life than me. But I think this is also an issue with being a young person who lacks life experience so it may have always been something that people go through at those ages but social media has become a sort of a highlights reel of this imagined glossy life so that definitely doesn’t help.
EC - One thing I will say, if its relevant actually, is that I have noticed if I go through my likes and go through posts i’ve liked, you know, its hidden in your settings somewhere, I generally don’t like things, and it’s not something I consciously do, I tend not to like things of people looking really well, being really cool. Like I tend to like things where people have done well. Like a post where “Oh my sister is home and I haven’t seen her in ages” or maybe like a funny meme or a progressive feminist thing that’s happening in the news and I tend not to like something that nots just people looking pretty. I think that’s, it doesn’t feel like it’s deliberate but it was a deliberate effort on my behalf to only follow people who like give me good news or fill me up in some way when i’m looking at Instagram. instead of just people who have gorgeous clothes and gorgeous hair and gorgeous boyfriend and I don’t know what she does or why she’s around but now I feel shit looking at her. So that might just be some advice that I think is worthwhile if you don’t want Instagram to make you feel bad, you literally have the control to delete the people or to unfollow people that are making you feel bad. I made an effort to do that a long time ago and I think its working aside from the arching bum problem!

8.5 Appendix E - Focus Group 3 Transcript Example

Participant 1 - LO

Participant 2 - CB

Participant 3 - CF

Question 2 - What makes you likely to compare yourself with others on Instagram?

CB - I think for me personally, I’m just going to be very honest here, it’s when I see someone, like a person I know, it sounds very , how do you say, very sad. But it’s like when I see someone has a lot of things or goes on holidays or you know that for me links with being successful and I’m like, you know at that stage, you compare yourself, like you know as in, maybe i’m not successful enough, like that I haven’t achieve that or I can’t go on all those holidays which is not the truth like you know that they are very often, they are sponsored but I think that’s how you perceive it anyway. Like you think , ok they’re
going on all these holidays how come I can’t be doing this at the same age, I haven’t been able to do that. So you know that’s not the full truth either but you can’t help but think that either

**CF** - I think when you see something that triggers you to, that triggers something that you feel inside you. Like that you have, like yesterday we spoke about travel bloggers and like I used to travel a lot when I was younger, before social media was even a thing so now when I see travel bloggers who are hugely successful and I think I could have done that photo or I probably have the same photo from 15 years ago but I never thought about putting it out there and becoming a social media whatever person, so I think that sometimes hurts me a bit when I feel like it was a missed chance of becoming a famous photographer, things that you regret, like when you feel you’re not living fully what you could have done. I think that’s something that triggers something in myself when I see people who are successful in something that I also like to do but then maybe when I was younger I didn’t care to go down that road because it was too difficult for me or I doubted myself too much. For example to become a photographer I always wanted to but I never did it because I thought I was not good enough but now I see how easy it is to become famous because of a single photo of something that’s “cool”. Yeah I think that triggers me and makes me likely to compare myself so like something that you regret or something where you think “oh I wish I had done that”, you know, something like that.

**LO** - For me I suppose it’s a, I don’t know maybe a body confidence thing. But like if I see someone and they just look absolutely stunning I think “oh how could you get to that point” and then I’m like oh but I love my chocolate and all those things like that and I’m like I would love to be at that point so I am very envious when I see absolutely beautiful people. And like maybe it’s me for me it’s just one of those things I’m just very envious like maybe it’s just me maybe I’m just self conscious I don’t know what it is but I’ve never got to the point where I’m like I’ll give up choc and go to the gym so it’s my own fault really at the end of the day. But for, with regards to Instagram like when I’m looking through people’s photos I am like “wow look at that person, I’d love to be that person, I wish I had that body and wish I looked like that”.

**Question 4 - Have you ever had a negative feeling after comparing yourself on Instagram and why?**

**LO** - Sometimes I use Instagram as an out, like go on hoping that it will make me feel better but there’s instances where you’re just flicking through and I think oh it just annoys me, do you know that kinda
way, just little things but you’re going to get that on any social platform I suppose but when you’re using something as an out but it’s actually going to have the opposite effect on you it can be so frustrating because I suppose that’s the thing everyone has Instagram on your phone, flick through it and like, for me it’s just an out, I’m bored I want to feel better or I want to just like, take two seconds and then when you do get a negative feeling about whatever you have seen, it just casts a deeper negativity on yourself then in my opinion.

8.6 Appendix F - Quantitative Survey

An Exploration of Social Comparison on Instagram

This research study will examine social comparison on Instagram. Instagram is rapidly growing in popularity and social comparison is an oft-cited effect of the platform. This study will seek to illuminate the relationship between Instagram browsing and social comparison and distinguish how different people are effected by social comparison.

Information Sheet

This research is being conducted in order to investigate social comparison on Instagram. Social comparison is noted as a common denominator in many of the reported negative effects of social media use. However certain studies have refuted this citing positive side effects of Instagram use. As Instagram use continues to grow, it is important to gain a deeper understanding on the app’s effect on user wellbeing and the potential repercussions of social comparison.

Although the studies have pointed out some significant correlations between social comparison and negative effect, the research fails to acknowledge the different ways people interact with Instagram and how they interpret social comparison information. Therefore, in order to understand how social comparison effects Instagram users, this study will investigate passive browsing behaviour patterns and explore how individual characteristics such as self esteem and Social Comparison Orientation impacts social comparison on Instagram. Social comparison is a multi faceted process and
Although the studies have pointed out some significant correlations between social comparison and negative effect, the research fails to acknowledge the different ways people interact with Instagram and how they interpret social comparison information. Therefore, in order to understand how social comparison affects Instagram users, this study will investigate passive browsing behavior patterns and explore how individual characteristics such as self-esteem and Social Comparison Orientation impact social comparison on Instagram. Social comparison is a multi-faceted process and different users will be affected by this process in different ways. It is vital to examine the variables involved in social comparison processes and how user behavior and individual characteristics intersect to affect user wellbeing.

If you would like any more information regarding this study please contact the researcher via email N00172910@student.iadt.ie.

Do you have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to fill out a consent form, indicating your consent to participate.

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time until 20/03/2019 and without giving reasons. You can skip any questions you do not want to answer. If you wish to stop at any point during the study, you can do so by closing the browser. You will be asked to create a unique identifier code, which will enable the researcher to remove your data should you wish to do so.

Please take note of this code and keep it safe. If you wish to withdraw your participation, please contact Máire Carr at N00172910@student.iadt.ie.

If you take part, what do you have to do?

If you wish to take part, you will be asked to:

1. Read the consent form and tick boxes which indicate your agreement to take part.
2. Complete a questionnaire which will consist of:
   - Demographic questions regarding yourself (e.g., Age, Gender)
   - Questions regarding your Instagram use
   - Questions to assess your susceptibility towards social comparison
   - Questions from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
3. Submit your answers and read a debrief form.
   This will take approximately 10 - 15 minutes.

How will your data be used?

All data will be anonymous, confidential, and for research purposes only. The data collected will be used for the researcher’s Research Project as part of an MSc. in Cyberpsychology at the Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology. The project, including findings of the research, will be viewed by the supervisor and examiners, may be published in the form of journal articles or conference proceedings, and may be made available in the IADT library, but individual data will not be identifiable in any way in the published accounts. The information collected will remain entirely anonymous and will not be used in future research studies.

The data will be stored securely and kept for at least two years and no more than seven years. The data collected in this survey will be stored by Google Forms, which will be secured with a username and password. The data will only be accessible by the researcher and their supervisor. No information collected will be traced back to any participant of the study.

You will provide a unique identifier code when filling out the consent form (eg. Initials of your parent’s name followed by the last three numbers of your phone number). This will ensure that your data can be removed if you wish to withdraw from the study at any time before ...

If you wish to obtain a copy of the research paper, you can contact Máire Carr at N00172910@student.iadt.ie.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed by the IADT Board of Ethics.

What if there is a problem?
Contact for further information

Máire Carr - N00127190@student.iadt.ie
Círona Flood - ciorna.flood@iadt.ie

Consent Form

Please tick the boxes if you consent to participate in this research study.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions by email if needed.

☐ I agree

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the survey or up until 20/09/2019

☐ I agree

I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication

☐ I agree
Unique Identifier Code

Please create a reference number using the initials of a parent's name and the last 3 digits of your mobile phone.
Example: JS123 (Parent's name: John Smith, Last 3 digits of phone number: 123)

This enables the researcher to identify your data should you wish to withdraw your responses.
Please keep a note of this.

Please Enter Your Unique Identifier Code

Are you Eligible to Participate?

Description (optional)

Are you 18+ years old? *

- Yes
- No

Do you use Instagram? *

- Yes
- No
Social Comparison on Instagram

**Age**
- [ ] 18-25
- [ ] 26-35
- [ ] 36-45
- [ ] 46+
- [ ] Other...

**Gender**
- [ ] Female
- [ ] Male
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am very active on Instagram *</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often comment on friends’ pictures *</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often browse Instagram but don’t post photos *</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I rarely interact with others on Instagram *</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am relatively passive on Instagram *</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often compare myself with others when browsing on Instagram *</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Often</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often does it give you a pleasant feeling when you compare yourself</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Often</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often does it give you an unpleasant feeling when you compare yourself with others?</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td>Very Often</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life</td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely True</td>
<td>Completely Not True</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not the type of person who compares often with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences

1  2  3  4  5
Completely Not True  ○  ○  ○  ○  Complete True

I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people

1  2  3  4  5
Completely Not True  ○  ○  ○  ○  Complete True

I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people

1  2  3  4  5
Completely Not True  ○  ○  ○  ○  Complete True

If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done

1  2  3  4  5
Completely Not True  ○  ○  ○  ○  Complete True

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree  ○  ○  ○  ○  Strongly Agree

At times I think I am no good at all.

1  2  3  4  5
Strongly Disagree  ○  ○  ○  ○  Strongly Agree
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel that I have a number of good qualities.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am able to do things as well as most other people.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel I do not have much to be proud of.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I certainly feel useless at times.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I wish I could have more respect for myself.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you very much for taking part in this research study

The study in which you just participated was designed to investigate social comparison on Instagram

If you have questions about this study or you wish to have your data removed from the study before 20th March 2019, please contact me at the following e-mail address: N00172910@student.iadt.ie. Alternatively, you may contact my supervisor Cliona Flood, at cliona.flood@iadt.ie.

We thank you sincerely for contributing and assure you that your data is confidential and anonymous, and if published the data will not be in any way identifiable as yours.
8.7 Appendix G - Quantitative Output

Standard Regression for H1 -

The effects of self esteem and passive Instagram use on Social Comparison”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Self Esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Self Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (1-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Self Esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Self Esteem</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables Entered/Removeda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparision

b. All requested variables entered.
### Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.572 ²</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>2.068</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **a. Predictors:** (Constant), Total Self Esteem, Total Passive Use
- **b. Dependent Variable:** Total Social Comparison

### ANOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>199.213</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>99.606</td>
<td>23.290</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>410.565</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4.277</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>609.778</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- **a. Dependent Variable:** Total Social Comparison
- **b. Predictors:** (Constant), Total Self Esteem, Total Passive Use

### Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95.0% Confidence Interval for B</th>
<th>Correlations</th>
<th>Collinearity Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lower Bound</td>
<td>Upper Bound</td>
<td>Zero-order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>20.876</td>
<td>1.945</td>
<td>.10731</td>
<td>17.014</td>
<td>24.737</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
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<td>.653</td>
<td>-.329</td>
<td>-.283</td>
<td>-.722</td>
<td>-.325</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total Self Esteem</td>
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<td>-.531</td>
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- **a. Dependent Variable:** Total Social Comparison
### Collinearity Diagnostics

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<th>Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Condition Index</th>
<th>(Constant)</th>
<th>Total Passive Use</th>
<th>Total Self Esteem</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.949</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>8.163</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>21.684</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.02</td>
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a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison

### Residuals Statistics

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tr>
<td>Predicted Value</td>
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<td>10.44</td>
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<td>1.786</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<td>Standard Error of Predicted Value</td>
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<td>.347</td>
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<td>Adjusted Predicted Value</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Std. Residual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stud. Residual</td>
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<td>2.391</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>1.007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deleted Residual</td>
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<td>5.102</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>2.121</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stud. Deleted Residual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mahal. Distance</td>
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<td>1.980</td>
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<td>Cook's Distance</td>
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<td>.012</td>
<td>.022</td>
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<td>.071</td>
<td>.020</td>
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</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison
Standard Regression for H2 -
The effects of SCO and passive Instagram use on Social Comparison

### Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
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<td>Total Passive Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total SCO</td>
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<td>99</td>
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### Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Total Social Comparision</th>
<th>Total Passive Use</th>
<th>Total SCO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-.323</td>
<td>.489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
<td>-.323</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>-.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SCO</td>
<td>.489</td>
<td>-.119</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sig. (1-tailed)</th>
<th>Total Social Comparision</th>
<th>Total Passive Use</th>
<th>Total SCO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SCO</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.120</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Total Social Comparision</th>
<th>Total Passive Use</th>
<th>Total SCO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Social Comparision</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SCO</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Variables Entered/Removed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Variables Entered</th>
<th>Variables Removed</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Total SCO, Total Passive Use</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>Enter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparision
b. All requested variables entered.
### Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Adjusted R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of Estimate</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.592²</td>
<td>.310</td>
<td>.296</td>
<td>2.093</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* a. Predictors: (Constant), Total SCO, Total Passive Use
* b. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison

### ANOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>189.084</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>94.542</td>
<td>21.574</td>
<td>.000²</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>420.693</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4.382</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>609.778</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison
* b. Predictors: (Constant), Total SCO, Total Passive Use

### Coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>95.0% Confidence Interval for Effect</th>
<th>Correlations</th>
<th>Collinearity Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>Lower Bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total SCO</td>
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<td>.038</td>
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</table>

* a. Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison
### Collinearity Diagnostics\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Eigenvalue</th>
<th>Condition Index</th>
<th>Variance Proportions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>Total Passive Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.934</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>7.324</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>.011</td>
<td>16.136</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison

### Residuals Statistics\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicted Value</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>12.15</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>1.389</td>
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<tr>
<td>Std. Predicted Value</td>
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<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Error of Predicted Value</td>
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<td>.685</td>
<td>.351</td>
<td>.098</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted Predicted Value</td>
<td>4.17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Std. Residual</td>
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<td>Stud. Residual</td>
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<td>Deleted Residual</td>
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<td>Mahal. Distance</td>
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<td>1.980</td>
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<td>Cook's Distance</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.020</td>
<td>.018</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison
Normal P–P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison

Expected Cum Prob

Observed Cum Prob
AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ON INSTAGRAM

Scatterplot

Dependent Variable: Total Social Comparison

Regression Standardized Residual

Regression Standardized Predicted Value
8.8 Appendix H - Sample of Code Book

8.9 Appendix I - Qualitative Coding Themes

**Primary Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mood Fluctuations affect interpretation of Social Comparison information</th>
<th>Self Awareness as a Barrier to Social Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The effect of social comparison varied depending on the mood of the users</td>
<td>Participants who felt secure and happy with themselves did not report issues with negative social comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Depends on the state of mind I’m in”</td>
<td>“I’m 37, I don’t need this in my life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What makes me compare would be my own humour and headspace”</td>
<td>“Just being happy and content in yourself really is the only barrier”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I do compare myself, like for me sometimes it depends what mood you’re in...”</td>
<td>“I’m a very positive person and I’m very happy with myself so then, I can look at things and I think “oh that’s amazing, that’s great” but I’m not, I love what I have and how I am and how I feel”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Catches me in moments...”
Some participants avoided Instagram entirely on “bad days” as they knew they may be more likely to be negatively impacted

“I’m trying when I’m not feeling well, I’m trying to avoid social media anyway”

“I would almost try not to go on it [Instagram] those days because I knew I wouldn’t have the capacity to self regulate”

Time of the month may have an effect on mood and make participants more vulnerable to comparison

“Weirdly, when I’m on my period, I’m just much less rational of a human”

“If you’re a bit down, or if it’s that time of the month then yeah, you know when you’re not feeling that great, then you start comparing”

More vulnerable to negative effect when hungover

“I know I would just be in that humour where I was just being irrational because of the way I often feel when I’m hungover”

Possibility that social comparison is affecting users without them realising it - lack of awareness

“I always felt happy and secure in my body from a young age... I don’t tend to compare myself to other people for that reason”

Knowing who you are and what you about is a barrier to social comparison

“You appreciate who you are and what you are and what you have, it’s way easier to appreciate others for what they are... it’s more like, that’s cool, it’s not me but thats cool, my life is different”

“Whatever I look at on there, if it’s friends or anyone, I just feel happy for them I suppose. It doesn’t ever make me feel bad about myself”

“I don’t compare myself on Instagram because I’m quite content with the way things are in my life”

“When you’re in a place where you’re happy with what you have, it takes away a lot of the feeling of need for comparison”

“You have to know who you are and know that maybe you are not going to be like those people and that’s ok”

Being aware of content that may negatively impact you is the first step to circumventing
“There are days where I wake up and feel shit and think “what am I doing?” and whether that stuff is still affecting me and I don’t realise it”

“It’s more like a delayed reaction so like I don’t think you see the pictures and think “oh god I’m comparing myself and I feel terrible” I think it’s like a slow burner like you see it and take it in and then maybe it’s an hour or two or maybe it’s the next day that you really find yourself thinking…”

negative outcomes

“I made a point of purging my Instagram… I just purged a load of people who were negative for my mindset”

“I don’t follow any of those because I know they have negative consequences for my mental health and my comparison with other people”

“You just need to have awareness of it, like check your behaviour”

“It’s your own tolerance for filtering out the bullshit”

Taking steps to avoid these accounts is a buffer to negative comparison

“So I think you have to be smart and bright and aware of all these things so you can use it in a positive way that it helps yourself to become a better person if you want to use it that way”

Knowing your interests and catering your feed to highlight relevant content for you provides inspiration

“I really get a lot of positivity from my feed because I follow a lot of people like Cheryl Strayed…so I know I seek out a lot of these types of people because I love what they do in the
**False nature of Instagram**

The false nature of the platform was brought up several times

“It’s not real life”

“Instagram is a much more positive platform”

*I think a lot of the time it can be false”*

“Social media has become a sort of highlights reel of this imagined glossy life so that definitely doesn’t help”

People may compare themselves to images which are not reflective of reality

“Nobody posts anything that’s not positive”

“And it’s not real and it’s never attainable”

“It’s very easy to feel bad after looking at Instagram”

“So you know that’s not the full truth either but you can’t help but think that either”

“Those people are comparing themselves to things that are fake”

**Self Consciousness as a risk factor that contributes to negative social comparison**

Inner monologues were evident throughout the transcripts

“Oh my god I wish I had a body like hers”

“Oh she has a beautiful body or look at all the stuff that person has or they’re going on an amazing holiday”

“Oh look at that person, they’re so beautiful, their life is so perfect”

“Wow look at that person, I’d love to be that person, I wish I had that body and wish I looked like that”

“Oh that’s amazing, that’s great”

“Don’t believe everything you think, or don’t believe everything that you feel”

“What am I doing?”

“Oh I don’t follow Kim K or those people so I am safe from social comparison because I follow normal people”

“Oh well that’s Roz Purcell, its her job to look like..."
This perception of Instagram seemed to neutralise social comparison to a degree

“I know there is a certain level of bullshit to a lot of it”

“You don’t put up shite days”

“This perfect life doesn’t exist”

“It’s a glimpse into the world but it’s not the real world, like it’s not the full picture”

Some participants mentioned these unrealistic images misrepresented what is achievable and can still lead to comparison, even with the knowledge that it is all false

“Like even when you know something is fake, or even when you know it’s maybe not the full picture we’re seeing, it’s how we are, like you react to what you see”

“I’d say those things are 50/60% real life”

that”

“Oh I wish I was doing that”

“I wish I had more money to buy clothes”

“I’m so pathetic”

“Oh you look like such a lump in that crop top”

“Back in college you were probably skinnier than that person, you were fitter than them back then, you were better looking than them, you’ve lost that, you’re so shit, why have you lost that”

“Oh I wish I was doing this”

“Oh I don’t have any plans, I don’t have any friends”

Those who compared themselves, compared themselves on personal achievements, body image, success etc.

“Like honesty for me, it’s the physical comparisons”

“For me I suppose it’s a body confidence thing”

“Oh she has a beautiful body…”

“You look at yoga teachers online and they have this perfect life, on a perfect beach in this perfect
country in a perfect world and they’re beautiful and rich and more beautiful”

Envy as highlighted as an emotion that is experienced due to comparison

“It’s just one of those things, I’m just very envious”

Participants who displayed self consciousness and high comparison have both deactivated their accounts due to negative effects

“I decided to go off all social media account... just to figure out for myself do I feel any better, do I feel any different, just for myself and so far it’s very positive for me because I’m not always on my phone”

Self consciousness is on a spectrum

“Maybe I’m just self conscious, I don’t know what it is”

“I think that something that triggers something in myself when I see people who are successful in something that I also like to do... that triggers me and makes me likely to compare myself os like something that you regret or something where you think “oh I wish I had done that”

“Years ago, maybe pre Instagram or Facebook...
AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ON INSTAGRAM

would think “Oh I wish I was doing that”...

More / less likely to compare with friends?

“I think social comparisons are the most dangerous for me it’s, or whatever, like, I think that people from school or college who look fantastic or look really well…”

“The thing is all of my friends are getting engaged now so all wedding photos and all can make you feel shit”

“Whatever I look at on there, if it’s my friends or anyone, I just feel happy for them I suppose. It doesn’t ever make me feel bad about myself”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feed Curation as a Barrier to social comparison</th>
<th>Need for Education to prevent negative outcomes of social comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Another facet of self awareness, actively tailoring the IG feed to your own interests and removing harmful content is an effective strategy for participants</td>
<td>Education is a barrier to social comparison</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I deliberately don’t allow certain things because I’m not interested to hear that perspective. I have made a bubble but if you don’t have the sense to do that or are more vulnerable”

“I strongly believe in curating your feed to make you not feel shit”

“Having an education in that area helps you not get caught up in that cycle and not be a victim to...”

“The course that we did in college, like we were 18-19 starting to learn about that, kind of getting a bit more educated at an age where you were quite vulnerable, at an age where social media was really starting to take off and so because we had like I Suppose a bit more of a well rounded knowledge of how it can impact you…”
Following special interest pages leads to inspiration and motivation

“At the moment I’m trying to get fit so I use it to look up workouts and body shapes and how certain clothes, style, shapes and stuff”

“Most of the things I follow are my actual friends or funny pages, or art so I kind of keep it a safe space for me”

“All of my feed, like what you say, tailoring my feed to things that interest me - gym workouts, Kayla Itsines videos, like to teach me things that I can do”

Being aware of your own personal triggers allows for more control over the content you should and should not view

“I suppose if I did have all that stuff coming up in my feed, it would make me feel quite shit about myself”

“That’s why I don’t follow make-uppy people or fashion people because they make me want things that I can’t afford or shouldn’t buy and I haven’t even got into that habit so I’ve gotten rid of them which I’m happy about”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s deliberate but it was a

that cycle which can very easily happen”

“I think helping them [young people] to choose accounts to follow on like if they’re using Social Media would be looking for role models who might suit their interest”

Building resilience as a barrier

“I just think it’s important as a society that we teach resilience in young people and self assuredness”
AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ON INSTAGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deliberate effort on my behalf to only follow people who like give me good news or fill me up in some way when I'm looking at Instagram instead of just people who have gorgeous clothes and gorgeous hair and gorgeous boyfriend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don't really follow any of those because I know they have negative consequences for my mental health and my comparison with other people”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants wondered did younger users have this insight, to cater the feed to themselves - may lack personal awareness at a young age

“*Our feed is tailored depending on what our interest is so I don't know do teenagers kinda absorb it all?*”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive vs Active Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mindless scrolling and problematic use was a concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t even notice, like it’s mindless, if I’m just walking to the bathroom I’ll be scrolling and I don’t even take in what’s happening on the screen. It’s just automatic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re just flicking through…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everyone has Instagram on your phone, flick through it and like for me it’s just an out”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It massively depends on your personality. It depends what kind of a person you are and what age.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s based on your personality, some people are definitely more susceptible to that than others. But yeah of course you compare yourself”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable self concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“I’m bored, I want to feel better”

Spending too much time on Instagram

“I think I spend way too much time on Instagram. I have an energy saver thing on my phone that tells me how long I spend on Instagram and it tells me at the end of the week and I think I’m really bad”

“I do be on Instagram oh god, god knows how many times all the time like, all the time even on my desk, I’ll just take a quick look and for myself, even though I was on 10 minutes ago…”

Active use cited as a positive aspect of the site - keeping in touch with friends and family

“On the flipside, it’s a good tool for keeping in touch with people, one of my sisters lives in Toronto and it’s good to keep in touch and my Mum joined Instagram to keep in touch with my sister”

“I use it to keep in touch with my Erasmus friends”

“If you ever look through my Instagram, it’s literally all my friends”

“It’s like a different feeling when you’re chatting...”
to people on Instagram versus scrolling through”

Younger generation appear to be using IG DMs as primary communication tool, over Whatsapp. Interesting area for future research.

“The only person I talk to [on Instagram] is my 16 year old niece, she doesn’t use Whatsapp”

“Like you said your niece only talks through Instagram, whereas I would only use Whatsapp for messaging but then my boyfriends little sister doesn’t use Whatsapp, she only uses Instagram to communicate with friends, like they only message through Instagram DMs”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Image</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body image concerns seemed to spark negative comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Like honesty for me, it’s the physical comparisons”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s a lot around how someone is looking or like fitness comparison”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Remember how great that person looked in that picture, they went to college with you and back in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success in their area of interest or feeling a lack of achievement was a risk factor for comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When I see someone, like a person I know, it sounds very, how do you say, very sad. But it’s like when I see someone has a lot of things or goes on holidays or you know that for me links with being successful and I’m like, you know at that stage you compare yourself, like you know as in, maybe I’m not successful enough, like that I haven’t</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL COMPARISON ON INSTAGRAM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation to Buy</th>
<th>Account Deactivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>college you were probably skinnier than that person back then”</td>
<td>achieved that or I can’t go on all those holidays”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is evident throughout the literature</td>
<td>“I think when you see something that triggers you to, that triggers something that you feel inside you. I think that something triggers in myself when I see people who are successful in something that I also like to do”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks to the theme of self consciousness, whatever the users particular trigger is, will likely be a subject of comparison</td>
<td>“Yeah I think that triggers me and makes me likely to compare myself so like something that you regret or something where you think “oh I wish I had done that” you know, something like that”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I tend to feel a pang of comparison sometimes when I see people with lovely skin just because that’s something that I’ve struggled with for years and it makes me feel unhappy in my own skin”</td>
<td>Success means different things to different people - photography, yoga, fitness, holidays, money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think when you have so many Instagram images of people with small waists and curvy bums whenever I’m trying something on and turn to the side, I’m always arching my back too because I need a bum to appear, if that makes sense”</td>
<td>“You look at yoga teachers online and they have this perfect life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarly, friends may be more relevant comparison targets due to target immediacy.</td>
<td>“If they have completed a race that I know I’m not fit enough to do right now or whatever then it would lead me to compare myself to them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They went to college with you and back in college you were probably skinnier than that person back then, you were fitter than them back then, you were better looking than them, you’ve lost that”</td>
<td>“If I know I have just done one [a race] and I’ve posted about it myself, I’m less inclined to feel bad and it’s more likely to bounce off me a little bit more I think”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instagrams ability to influence purchases came up several times

Most notably, a participant who stated strongly that she did not engage in social comparison, admitted that she was extremely susceptible to products advertised on Instagram and readily admitted to buying into the “lifestyle” being promoted

Several participants reported friends who had taken themselves off Instagram entirely for mental health reasons

“I have this friend, she’s not like, well she’s sensitive, I wouldn’t say she has major issues or anything but she’s taken herself off it [Instagram] because it was making her feel so shit”

“She was probably really unhappy and looking at pictures of people in her own life, mainly of people like shes in a fairly bad relationship and she was looking at people in good relationships...and it made her unhappy so she took herself off it altogether”

“I know somebody who came out of a bad relationship and she was pretty depressed and she deleted her Instagram to get herself back level.”

“Seeing all her friends with babies, at weddings, she said “this is not good for me” so she took herself off it.”

“I know a lot of people who do that, take a break, delete it for a bit, turn off social media because they need a break from it”

Two participants who engaged in the most social comparison of the group also outlined that they remove themselves from the app for their
“So I notice myself doing that [comparing] so it makes me think ok it’s time to delete this off my phone and so I don’t have it anymore and I am feeling a lot better about not having it”

“A few weeks ago, I decided to go off all social media accounts…just to figure out for myself do I Feel any better, do I feel any different, just for myself and so far it’s been very positive for me because I’m not always on my phone”

This seems to be a common practise, and an extreme one at that. Why is it that feed curation strategies do not work for these users? Maybe they have not attempted these strategies. Maybe as Vogel et. al suggest, these participants are actively seeking out comparative information, whether on a conscious or subconscious level.

Similarly, (for the discussion) SCO leaning qual participant seemed to engage in Instagram heavily, experience negative comparison, and have to remove herself entirely from the platform in order to regulate. This may be down to the desire to compare, which may impede any protective strategies adopted.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Unhealthy Use</th>
<th>Concern for Younger Users</th>
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<tr>
<td>Addictive behaviour was reported.</td>
<td>Despite the active strategies and self awareness evident among participants - there was an</td>
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<td>“I think I’m really bad and I’m addicted”</td>
<td>undercurrent of concern for younger users</td>
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<td>“I do be on Instagram oh god, god knows how many times all the time like, all the time even on my desk, I’ll just take a quick look and for myself, even though I was on 10 minutes ago…”</td>
<td>“Our feed is tailored depending on what our interest is so I don’t know do teenagers kinda absorb it all?”</td>
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<td>Similarly, the deactivation tactic appears to suggest an unhealthy relationship with the site</td>
<td>“It’s very sad cos I have a niece who’s 16 and shes all over Instagram and shes getting progressively sexier as time goes by. Like it’s dreadful for young ones”</td>
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<td>“It has put a far more positivity because I’m not comparing myself to other people all the time or what they’re doing at the weekend and for me its positive, maybe to take a break every now and again from social media.”</td>
<td>Many noted that they would not have coped as well with Instagram as a teenager</td>
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<td>Mindless passive scrolling appeared to have an effect on most users and the literature links this to negative effect. However one participant who admitted her own unhealthy scrolling habits did not appear to be negatively affected by the platform</td>
<td>“I don’t think at 16 I knew fully my personality”</td>
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<td>“I say that a lot of us are glad that this crap didn’t exist back when I was a teenager”</td>
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<td>“I do wonder about it because I always think “oh if that was me, I would find it quite influential”</td>
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<td>“I don’t know if its reasonable for me to say it must be awful for them because it would have been awful for me. It’s a completely different experience”</td>
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<td>Enquiries about education for younger users</td>
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<td>Fear and worry about impact on Gen Z</td>
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| “My nieces are coming into a totally different
Notably - examples of younger users highlighted appear to be overwhelmingly positive

“To kind of counteract those fears of mine, like this niece, my niece, her and her friends put photos up of themselves looking absolutely ratchet....now I think that’s a really positive outcome and like look at all these kids who love themselves now, who actually do like isn’t it great?!

For balance - one participant outlined that every generation fears for those following them and there is often a moral panic about technology - Instagram may not be as harmful as once thought

“Like every generation looks at the one behind it going “god you’re so unlucky”. But really you just know what you know”

“But I don’t have the full picture because a 15-16 year old now has grown up in a different way, they have a different lived experience to interact with their entire network of friends.”