

Social Media Influencers and Body Fascination

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by

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Abstract

This research explores the experience of young female users of image based social media platforms, such as Instagram, and the way they can be influenced by prominent ‘celebrity’ influencers. Data was captured through in-depth interviews with ten participants, then thematically analysed. Drawing on theories of social connection and gaze, the study examines the notion of body fascination directed towards social media influencers, and its underlying factors that capture the attention and extended attention of followers. From the data analysis process, the potentially negative impact that this gaze practice has on female Instagram users emerged, especially in the context of those vulnerable to body fascination and self-comparison. Furthermore, the study suggests that users try to negotiate the tension between being drawn into an extended gaze practice and wanting to divest themselves from the platform. These findings contribute to a framework representative of the key results. Primary contributions offered by this research are to the extant literature on consumer cultures by exploring the notion of digitally mediated connections, and how these loose ties to a prominent poster can influence followers’ sense of self and worth in comparison to the influencer.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements	2
List of Figures.....	5
Chapter 1 - Introduction	6
1.1 Outline.....	6
1.2 Research Process	7
1.3 Thesis Overview	7
Chapter 2 – Literature Review	9
2.1 Introduction.....	9
2.2 Social Media	9
2.3 Social Media Influencers	9
2.4 Social Media Platforms.....	11
2.5 Social Media and Self-Concept	13
2.6 User Vulnerability.....	17
2.7 Discussion and Conclusion	18
Chapter 3 - Methodology.....	20
3.1 Introduction.....	20
3.2 Philosophical Assumptions.....	20
3.3 Phenomenology	21
3.4 Research Design	23
3.5 Role of the Researcher	24
3.6 Personal Biography.....	26
3.7 Chapter Summary.....	26
Chapter 4 - Data Collection and Analysis.....	27
4.1 Introduction.....	27
4.2 Selection Criteria.....	27
4.3 Sample Recruitment	27
4.4 Data Collection Procedures.....	28
4.4.1 Interview Protocol.....	28
4.4.2 Interview Approach	28
4.4.3 Pre-interview Procedures	29
4.4.4 In-depth Interviews.....	30
4.5 Data Analysis.....	31
4.5.1 Thematic Analysis Process	31
4.6 Evaluating Research Quality	33

4.7 Ethical Considerations	35
4.8 Chapter Summary	35
Chapter 5 - Findings	36
5.1 Introduction	36
5.2 Body Fascination	36
5.2.1 Device and Platform	37
5.2.2 Visually-focused Medium	40
5.2.3 Repetition	41
5.2.4 Connection	44
5.2.5 Social Norms	55
5.2.6 Idealisation and Idolisation	62
5.2.7 Influence	68
5.3 Body Management	73
5.4 Social Media Management	87
5.5 Chapter Summary	96
Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusion	98
6.1 Introduction	98
6.2 Body Fascination	102
6.2.1 User Vulnerability	105
6.3 Body Management	107
6.4 Social Media Management	108
6.5 Managerial Implications	109
6.6 Policy Implications	110
6.7 Theoretical Implications	111
6.8 Limitations	112
6.9 Future Research	113
6.10 Chapter Summary	113
6.11 Conclusion	114
References	115
Appendix 1 - Interview Guide	130
Appendix 2 – Information Sheet	132
Appendix 3 – Consent Form	134
Appendix 4 – Human Ethics Approval	135

List of Figures

Figure 1: Interaction of User Behaviour Online	99
Figure 2: Body Fascination Behaviour Online Model	101

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Outline

Over the last decade, a new ideal of vocational success has emerged, embodied by proliferating digital personalities who ostensibly live – and promote – their passion (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Among such individuals, the social media influencer is a prominent internet celebrity who cultivates as much attention as possible and crafts a personal brand using social networks (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Those who have achieved, or are pursuing, influencer status online utilise the affordances of the constantly evolving social media platforms they operate on to build and monetise a fan base (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017), that can subsequently be leveraged by marketers, brands and businesses for possible financial gain (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017). Social Networking Services (SNS) allow these fame-seeking users to create, modify, share and communicate through digital content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011) however the landscape in which they do so is increasingly saturated (Khamis et al., 2017).

Influencers rely on awareness from, and attempt to stay visible and relevant to, an audience who are unpredictable and subject to change. Their efforts to do so can be understood as labour; social media influencers rely heavily on their image, and work to curate and filter a successful online aesthetic (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). These users are predominantly women who are followed by young female social media users (Abidin, 2015a), and emphasise their bodies in the self-images they share with their audience – most commonly on the Instagram platform (Drenten, Gurrieri & Tyler, 2018). Cultural and social precedents have signalled to women that their physical attractiveness is highly valuable and can be capitalised on as a way to gain attention, which has been linked to the posting of sexualised self-images to social media (Daniels, 2016). Influencers, therefore, can achieve fame through presenting their physical form through highly visual social media platforms. What is not well understood, however, is how body prominent social media influencers attract and affect their follower bases.

This research draws on the experience of 10 young female Instagram users. Through utilising a qualitative methodology, this thesis aims to explore the way in which social media influencers on primarily image-based platforms, such as Instagram, can draw some users into a cycle of extended gaze and body fascination practices. It seeks to understand whether prominent social media influencers that rely on visual presentation of their own body impact, either negatively or positively, their follower base's sense of self and their social media engagement practices. Furthermore, the project intends to understand how followers of social media influencers

manage their relationship between their own ideals of body and those presented on social media. It considers the impact that body influencers can have on young female users, as this follower base is not just very active on Instagram, but also considered vulnerable to body idealisation messaging (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2017).

1.2 Research Process

This thesis was guided by a phenomenological approach and an exploratory, qualitative research design. It sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. How do young female users engage with and consume image oriented influencer's posts on social media?
2. How does this consumption practice impact their sense of self?
3. How does this consumption practice impact their user behaviour?

Ten in-depth interviews, coupled with observations, were conducted with research participants to explore these questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, before the data generated was thematically analysed. A series of themes emerged from the data analysis process that contributed to the development of a research narrative that was representative of the dataset, as well as a theoretical framework to visually depict the results. Findings generated by thematic analysis are presented and discussed.

1.3 Thesis Overview

The following document consists of six chapters. The current section provides an overview of the topic under investigation, including the research questions.

Chapter 2, Literature Review, presents and discusses research pertaining to aspects relevant to the particular subject area: social media, social media influencers, social media platforms, social media and self-concept, and user vulnerability. It concludes by addressing gaps in the literature that emerged from the review process, which shows the value of the study.

Chapter 3, Methodology, describes the philosophical assumptions fundamental to the research.

Chapter 4, Data Collection and Analysis, outlines the way in which data was obtained from the respondents and the analytical procedures employed to develop the research findings.

Chapter 5, Findings, presents and discusses the data obtained from the interview process as a sequential and interrelated narrative of themes and sub-themes.

Lastly, Chapter 6, Discussion and Conclusion, summarises and analyses the primary findings that emerged from the inquiry. These are discussed in the ways they may relate to, but also differ from, prior literature. The possible managerial, policy, and theoretical implications are then included, as are the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The following literature review intends to present extant research relevant to aspects of the phenomena under investigation. The chapter will first discuss social media and a specific type of user, the influencer, before addressing the nature of prominent platforms, the relationship between sense of self and social media as well as the possible vulnerability of the particular user group focused on in the study. It concludes with an identification of the gap in the literature that this research purposefully explores.

2.2 Social Media

Social Media can be defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). While these features were separately available to consumers through various websites, social network sites combined them. The first to do so was SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Since then, web-based technologies have enabled the introduction of highly interactive platforms. These platforms contribute to what is now a diverse social media environment, each site varying in regard to scope and functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The leading platforms are unique, each attracting consumers for different reasons and used in distinct ways (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). User numbers across the most popular sites have exceeded hundreds of millions (Alhabash & Ma, 2017), who present who they are, create their own content, and view and engage with that posted by friends and others online (Carr & Hayes, 2015). By definition, each site allows individuals to make digitally mediated connections, but the nature and name of these may change from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007.)

2.3 Social Media Influencers

The growth of social media use has allowed both famous and non-famous people to develop unrestricted quantities of personal media, manipulate and share this content broadly, and reach out to real or imagined audiences. These changes have contributed to a shift in the definition of celebrity, to encompass a group of practices, self-presentation techniques and subjectivities learned from others (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Instead of being binary in nature, celebrity status can exist as a continuum. Against this definition, celebrity behaviour can be something an

individual does, rather than what they are. Therefore, anyone can behave as a celebrity to some extent, and microcelebrity is the term used to encompass this (Marwick, 2010).

Microcelebrity was first proposed in a study of camgirls: women who use the internet to broadcast themselves to the public while attempting to develop a measure of celebrity from their actions. A burgeoning online trend at the time of research, such women utilised the affordances of digital technologies including videos, blogs and social networking sites to ‘amp up’ their popularity. Described as ‘non-actors’, these women shared narratives free from overt manipulation to seem more ‘real’ than television personalities in a new style of online performance (Senft, 2008). Since then, other scholarship has drawn on and expanded the concept. Microcelebrity can be understood as a mentality and set of behaviours intimately linked to social media, in which users frame those they are digitally connected to as an audience or fan base (Marwick, 2010). The public, picture-perfect self presented by the microcelebrity (Raun, 2018) involves the careful creation, assemblage, expression and sharing of identity for others to consume online (Marwick, 2010; 2015).

The considered self-presentation characteristic of the microcelebrity can be discussed as self-branding or personal branding. A form of self-presentation, the focus of self-branding is the cultivation of attention, cultural and monetary value (Hearn, 2008). Like commercial product branding, the notion that it is advantageous for people to develop a public identity that is charismatic and targeted to an audience, to their needs and interests, is inherent to branding of the self (Khamis et al., 2017). Microcelebrities self-brand by strategically creating an identity that they can promote to others, often employing personal interaction as a means of differentiating this identity (Marwick, 2010).

People who have developed microcelebrity on social media can be called social media influencers (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; 2016b; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017). The term ‘influencer’ is used in common parlance by people referring to an everyday, ordinary internet user who has amassed a following (Abidin, 2016a). The influencer is a particular kind of online microcelebrity (Khamis et al., 2017) but the title predates internet culture, drawing from the idea that particular individuals are able to influence the thoughts and opinions of others within their social networks (Katz, Lazarsfeld & Roper, 2017). Influencers pursue influence (Cotter, 2019) through applying a strategic and methodical approach to social media in which they recognise and play to an audience (Marwick, 2010). In constructing a celebrity-like subjectivity, the influencer can position themselves across a range of specific categories

such as interior design, healthy eating, motherhood, fashion and beauty (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Alternatively, there are ‘lifestyle’ influencers who share content premised as a narration of their experience of everyday life (Abidin, 2016a). Generally, such social media users are young women aged 18-35 (Abidin, 2016a).

Among some influencers, presentation of the self has evolved to emphasise presentation of their body, as these users differentiate their digitally depicted identity (Marwick, 2010), and attempt to cultivate greater attention, cultural and monetary value from an audience (Hearn, 2008). Body presentation has become prominent on social media, which Drenten et al., (2018) highlight through exploring performances of sexualised labour on social media, as enacted by female Instagram influencers. Their conceptualisation represents a complex and multifaceted performance specific to the digital context it takes place in, that includes emotional and aesthetic labour. Specifically, the female body is used in textual and visual content that aims to capture attention and monetise a follower base. In contrast to traditional notions of sexualised labour, the influencers in their study have no guarantee of financial reward; however, they do show that overt sexualisation and body presentation can be a way to improve their chances of monetising their audience.

2.4 Social Media Platforms

As social media and its use continues to evolve, comparison of the leading platforms is an interesting analysis (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Founded in 2004, Facebook is a social media site that allows users to present themselves through a digital profile and develop an online network of ‘friends’ who they can communicate with. The platform also enables member’s to view others, and learn about their interests, hobbies and relationship status, as represented through their profiles (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Facebook is cited for its tendency to facilitate online connections to existing offline social networks, whereby members predominantly use the site to interact with people they know (Ellison et al., 2007; Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering & Orr, 2009). It has been proposed that site use is motivated by two primary needs: the need to belong and the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Other research suggests that use serves two main goals: passive social browsing and extractive social searching. Of these aspects of app use, members spend most of their time on passive activities like reading the newsfeed, but are more satisfied by extracting information from their friends’ profiles (Wise, Alhabash & Park, 2010). The latter relates to a particular appeal of Facebook, as the SNS offers its members the ability to stare into the lives of their ‘friends’, and protects their anonymity while they view others and look for private

information. The platform removes social norms that act as a barrier to such behaviour in an offline setting, and generates perceptions of connectivity and closeness for the user to the subject of their gaze (Veer, 2011).

Facebook has been noted for its mass popularity (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Wise et al., 2010) but the growth of the platform has slowed while user numbers for other major platforms, such as Instagram, have significantly increased (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). A strong correlation exists between age and social media usage, with young adults aged 18-29 consistently found as the most likely group to use social media (Perrin, 2015). The young adult demographic has contributed to the significant increase in use seen by Instagram, as more than half of those of the age range who are online use the platform. The same proportion of the group can be categorised as daily users (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), and increasingly, the popularity of the site is associated with young women (Cohen et al., 2017).

Instagram is a photo sharing, social networking mobile device application that allows users to capture, filter and share photos, and follow others. There are more than one billion monthly active users, who share more than 500 million 'stories' every day (Instagram, 2019a). Of the motives behind Instagram use, Sheldon & Bryant (2016) suggest that the most influential is to learn about others who may include family, friends, strangers and celebrities. The dimension of secondary influence is documentation, an affordance specific to the platform, it enables users to photographically capture moments of their lives, describe them briefly with a caption and then share them. Instagram's popularity – both as an application and in respect to its particular features – also drives users to the app. Members can edit and filter the images they share, explore trending 'tags' and 'posts' and follow prominent accounts. Creativity has also been acknowledged for its relevance to Instagram use, due to the site's highly visual nature (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Support for the aforementioned findings can be found in Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung (2015), who report that Instagram users are compelled to establish and maintain social connections with others on the app. 'Others' in this context similarly include friends, family, strangers and celebrities, reinforcing the platform's ability to connect people unknown to each other in offline life. Furthermore, users take advantage of the platform's visual affordances to capture their life in images, and develop their digital self-presentation. They also utilise Instagram to escape from their offline reality, and observe the lives of people and celebrities as photographically depicted and shared on the app (Lee et al., 2015).

While influencers are active on Facebook, these users are most prominent on the Instagram app (Abidin, 2016a; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Marwick (2015) proposes the term 'Instafame' to denote ordinary users who have become 'Instagram famous' through posting appealing, photogenic and conventionally attractive self-images. Selfies mediated through smartphones are an integral aspect of the content influencers share to the platform (Abidin, 2016a). The prolific nature of such imagery emphasises the platform's appeal to the influencer, in that its nature as a socially connected visual experience enables them to develop an audience and cultivate attention (Abidin, 2016a; Marwick, 2015). Abidin (2016a) explores selfies shared by high-profile influencers in Singapore, discussing ways the platforms particular affordances are used in their strategic, monetised self-presentation. Influencers purposefully disseminate and circulate content to generate a high number of unknown followers who they frame as their audience, while personally only following a limited amount of known profiles. These users capture high-resolution photos with a premium digital camera to improve the quality of their images, transferring them to their smartphones to post. Content that is purported to visually represent the lived experience of their offline reality, or purported to be spontaneous, is intentionally laboured over and constructed to convey a specific persona and aesthetic. Digitally altering content with photo-editing and image-enhancing tools is prevalent among influencers who operate on Instagram (Abidin, 2016a).

2.5 Social Media and Self-Concept

As social networking site use has proliferated, an area of specific research interest has been the role the broad genre of internet-based services play in identity construction (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). An early contribution explains self-identity simply as the perception of oneself (Sherwood, 1965). This holds true but the notion of self was subsequently expanded upon. According to Baumeister (1986) significant meanings are drawn on and attached to the self. Important definitions are those relating to morals, beliefs and perceived position within society. One's understanding of their future potential is included (Baumeister, 1986) reflecting an embryonic element to the definition.

Further progressions attempt to distinguish between layers of identity. Tajfel (1981) discusses the idea of a self-concept, comprised of one's personal and social identity. In explaining personal identity, he refers to features and characteristics specific to the individual. One's view of themselves is postulated to include attributes such as ideas, emotions and capabilities. Social identity is derived from knowledge of the self in relation to other people. Perceptions of how

popular or physically attractive people feel are relevant to this component of self-concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

Belk (1988) later proposed the conceptualisation of the extended-self, framing identity as a continuous variable. Objects, experiences, relationships to others and individual perceptions could all contribute to the self to varying extents. Self, sense of self and identity were used interchangeably but all were accepted to reflect an individual's subjective understanding of who they are. Later, Belk (2013) re-examined the notion of self-concept presented by previous research (Belk 1988) to propose that individuals are increasingly engaging in identity work online. Self is co-constructed online, as is shared memory through social media. Studying identity only offline is argued to miss a majority of influences upon the contemporary self-concept, as well as activities ourselves and others engage in to develop them (Belk, 2013).

The interrelationship between identity and social media can be attributed to the three principle components that define an SNS, namely: the construction of a self-profile, identification of a list of others to connect with, and the ability to view others, their connections and interactions within the network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The first component pertains to the activities of online social networking, involving the performance, articulation, representation and negotiation of identity (Cover, 2016). These practices reflect, reinforce and can also change every day, accepted behaviours, particularly in the context of how individuals present and conceal aspects of self, but also in the way they engage with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This social or relational aspect of the online sense of self relates to the latter aspects of SNS as defined by Boyd & Ellison (2007). Social networking sites facilitate relationships between people that may otherwise not exist (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Because of this, individuals now negotiate their sense of self in relation to those known to them in their physical reality, but also unknown others who they engage with in networked environments (Cover, 2016). Offline and online experiences are deeply interwoven, and identifying and interacting with 'friends' – whether known or unknown – can influence the norms users are exposed to, and supply them with an audience that guides their behaviour (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cover, 2016).

Studies that consider the intertwined nature of SNS use and self-concept often draw on sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter in discussion (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Cover, 2016; Hongladarom, 2011). Facebook in particular has been cited as being representative of the affordances of social media, such as the way platforms are used, as well as their capacity to allow users to make online connections with those in their offline networks (Ellison et al.,

2007). In a systematic literature review of research that investigates Facebook's effect on identity development, Nadkarni & Hofmann (2012) present particular personality traits that have been correlated with widespread Facebook use, in addition to its impact on individuals' presentation of self, and self-esteem. While this study utilised Facebook as a representation of social networking, other research contends that social media use cannot be discussed as homogeneous when the users, their practices and features of each platform are increasingly distinct. As such, a more context-dependent approach to SNS research is necessary (Smock, Ellison, Lampe & Wohn, 2011). For instance, Facebook use is comprised of a varied assortment of activities that include posting photos, direct messaging between friends, and scrolling through newsfeeds, friends' profiles and updates, whereas the increasingly popular Instagram is primarily a photo-sharing application (Cohen et al., 2017).

Tiggemann (2015) argues that a fundamental aspect to sense of self and worth is positive body image, and research has sought to examine the effect social media usage has on these facets of identity for young women. Platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest are interactive and visual in nature, presenting a multitude of images and the distinct presence of others (Perloff, 2014). Such sites increase the opportunity users have to make social comparisons by extending their social network to include online spaces (Drenten, 2012; Perloff, 2014), encouraging appearance-related comparisons in particular (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Drenten, 2012; Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian & Halliwell, 2015; Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton & Ridgway, 2017; Perloff; 2014), and may enable this user group to constantly critique their perceived physical flaws which decreases their self-esteem (Drenten, 2012).

Support for the position that social media use can negatively affect young women's perceptions of self and body image (Perloff, 2014) can be found in platform-specific studies. Spending time on Facebook has been found to worsen mood in young women, increase body dissatisfaction and influence their desire to alter their physical appearance as related to their weight, face, hair and skin (Fardouly et al., 2015). Both negative mood and body dissatisfaction were also increased in young women through exposure to attractive Instagram images of peers and celebrities (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Users in this demographic who reported a tendency to engage in Instagram-mediated appearance-related comparison are also suggested to experience a greater drive towards thinness and increased body dissatisfaction, because of their heightened exposure to the thin-ideal (Hendrickse et al., 2017). While the latter studies address Instagram in regards to young female social media user's sense of body and self, the research

method employed was different to the actual nature and reality of platform use. Brown & Tiggemann (2016) sourced a limited number of public images from Instagram and presented them to participants away from the context of using the device and the platform. Hendrickse et al., (2017) used self-reports obtained through online questionnaires that similarly captured data as removed from the digital experience of using Instagram.

Further to considering sense of self as affected by digital environments, an important aspect is the capacity of such sites to make available knowledge of stereotypes. As perpetuated by traditional media in an ongoing capacity, this characteristically involves images and representations of bodies, what those particular bodies are doing or how they are behaving, and their self-presentation. Bodies can be reduced to specific images, ideas and notions which are then disseminated quickly. Typically, these can centre on gendered bodies and accepted views about women (Cover, 2016). Drenten & Gurrieri (2017) show this, by demonstrating social media's capacity to present, propagate and perpetuate body image trends among women. An exploration of the Twitter platform focused on the emergence of the bikini bridge – a hashtag representing images of protruding hipbones and a concave stomach – suggested that offline cultural and normative expectations of the female body can be shaped by social media (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017).

Research that has linked social media use to negative effects on sense of self and body among young females draws on extant scholarship considering the influence of traditional media, television, magazines and fashion models on such consumers (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017; Fardouly et al., 2015; Hendrickse et al., 2017). Whilst these studies identify similar effects to earlier work in this field, Perloff (2014) emphasises that contemporary media technologies differ from the conventional mass media and may therefore impact young adult women differently. The proliferation of prominent celebrity users that can be followed by consumers on social media, and particularly Instagram, is one important distinction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Celebrities are the most followed users on Instagram (Lee et al., 2015) and are given widespread attention from the media (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Their presence on the platform then allows their audience to view details of their personal life in greater detail (Lee et al., 2015). Compared to fashion models or celebrities prior to the affordances of social networking, people are increasingly able to develop strong connections to famous figures (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016), which is characterised as celebrity worship (Maltby, Giles, Barber & McCutcheon, 2005). These extant contributions pertain to stardom in the traditional sense, which is a phenomena that remains relevant due to the

increasing presence of mainstream celebrities on SNS (Duffy & Pooley, 2019; Marwick, 2015). Influencers, however – the comparatively new type of celebrity specific to, and proliferated on social media (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; 2016b, Duffy & Pooley, 2019; Marwick, 2015; Khamis et al., 2017) – are not addressed by these studies.

2.6 User Vulnerability

Social media influencers are primarily followed by young female users on Instagram (Abidin, 2016a). In the context of the platform's commodification and influencer marketing, the demographic is recognised as being particularly lucrative as the follower base can be monetised (Abidin, 2016a; 2016b; Duffy, 2016). This audience is very active on Instagram, and also considered susceptible to body idealisation messaging (Cohen et al., 2017).

Age is a contributing factor to the vulnerability of such social media users. The group relies on social media (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014) and have grown up surrounded by digital technology that influences a perception that the real physical self should be critiqued and altered in the way the online self can be (Drenten, 2012). Those in this age bracket can be conceptualised as emerging adults. Beginning in one's late teens and continuing throughout their twenties, this period is characterised by fluctuations between youth and increasing maturity. Emerging adults are inclined to repeatedly seek recognition and approval from their peers in developing their self-identity (Arnett, 2000).

The user group's status as emerging adults can be coupled with their gender in addressing their potential vulnerability. Throughout history many people, but predominantly women, have struggled to alter their bodies to align with appearance-related pressures and expectations (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Various social and cultural factors influence body image disturbance in women, including the emphasis placed on thinness by the media (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Extant scholarship frequently cites television and magazine presentations of the thin-ideal for leading women to internalise such idealised imagery, develop appearance concerns and disordered eating habits (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Current studies examine the way social media use contributes to these particular body image disturbances among women. The availability of mobile devices and peer-to-peer networking, alongside the prevalence of visual content, combine to increase the probability that young female SNS users will self-objectify and compare their appearance to others (Cohen et al., 2017).

In addition to the vulnerability inherent to the broad demographic aspects of age and gender, user susceptibility to body presentation can increase if an individual possesses certain traits. The aforementioned internalisation of the thin-ideal; the degree to which someone accepts socially established standards of beauty and adopts practices to achieve them (Thompson et al., 1999), centrality of appearance to self-worth, perfectionism, depression and low self-esteem (Perloff, 2014) can exacerbate the inherent susceptibility to influence that youth and a female identity can bring.

Considered collectively, age, gender and individual characteristics can increase a user's vulnerability to body idealisation on social media. However, populations who are susceptible to detrimental effects to their sense of self can also be empowered. Empowerment has a specific connection to identity in research, with Rees (1998) arguing that one's subjective understanding of their own identity and empowerment are intertwined. Through creating and participating in discourse, young women can gain awareness of socio-political factors that may underpin their personal problems (Carr, 2003).

2.7 Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding review outlined contributions made by existing scholarship that pertain to, but do not fully address, the area of current inquiry. One particular aspect of literature to be considered is the way that studies explore SNS or social media in general, when platforms and the way they are used are not homogenous (Smock et al., 2011). This is relevant to the present research in several ways. Firstly, a large body of work draws on data from Facebook, citing that the platform is popular and representative of social media use and users (Ellison et al., 2007). Facebook use may involve a diverse array of activities including posting photographs, privately messaging friends, reading newsfeeds, and observing and interacting with friends' posts and updates. In comparison, Instagram users may primarily follow models and fitness bloggers who share appearance-focused content (Cohen et al., 2017). While social media use has been found to negatively affect young female's sense of self and body image (Perloff, 2014), it is greater engagement with a platform's visual affordances that increases body image concerns among young women compared to more varied user practices (Cohen et al., 2017). Studies that have explored interrelationships between female users, their sense of self and exposures to the self-presentation of others through Instagram, such as Brown & Tiggemann (2016) and Hendrickse et al., (2017), captured data by segregating participants from the ways they would use the app in real life. The results therefore, may not fully reflect the way this user group consumes content on the platform, or the possible impact of their practices.

Another defining aspect of SNS is their capacity to facilitate digitally mediated connections that differ in name and nature between sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It could be reasoned then, that young women who engage with influencers on Instagram may connect to those they follow in a way that differs from networked relationships formed through other platforms. Support for this position can be drawn from Kowalczyk & Pounders (2016) who argue that there is a need to learn more as to how and why particular celebrities are followed online with a specific channel focus. Furthermore, research has found body presentation to be increasingly prominent on social media, which Drenten et al. (2018) highlight through exploring performances of sexualised labour on Instagram. The concept of body presentation, where one emphasises their physical body in visual imagery, warrants further attention from scholarship, particularly in the context of young female users who follow influencers online. Specifically, the lived experience of this potentially vulnerable user group, who follow accounts who strategically attempt to capture the attention of, and monetise, their audience is yet to be explored.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodology utilised to address the research questions outlined earlier in the document. It discusses the philosophical assumptions fundamental to the study, and introduces the phenomenological approach. In addition, the chapter outlines the researcher's role in an inquiry of this nature.

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions

As the procedures for undertaking research evolve from one's philosophical perspective, the researcher should begin inquiry by identifying and reflecting on their personal ontological, epistemological and axiological stance (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Defined by Guba & Lincoln (1994) as the investigator's basic belief system or world view, this informs the selection of the research methodology most suitable to fulfil the study's purpose (Creswell, 2017). While all investigations must first consider how the problem can be conceptually and theoretically understood, this is particularly crucial in qualitative inquiry (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007) due to the personal role of the researcher which is a major distinction to quantitative research (Stake, 1995). As the qualitative researcher is actively involved in collecting data from participants and analysing findings, their fundamental beliefs and assumptions can affect this process and the understandings drawn from the dataset (Jackson et al., 2007). In phenomenological investigation in particular, it is inevitable that researcher subjectivity is involved in the study. Arguably, the interrelationship between the researcher, research subjects and the phenomenon characterises such research (Finlay, 2012) which means that preconceptions cannot be totally disregarded as a possible influence. However, inquiry can be purposefully undertaken to bring transparency to the researcher's previous understandings, past knowledge and assumptions. Researchers 'bracket' such beliefs and communicate their personal philosophical stance to clarify the way conclusions have been made (Finlay, 2012).

This research took a phenomenological approach lead by a constructivist paradigm, which is a worldview that commonly manifests in such studies (Creswell, 2017). The constructivist position is that human beings construct subjective and experiential meanings (or truth) as they interact with and interpret the world (Crotty, 1998; Fosnot, 2013; The Human Element, 2009). It is possible for people to have shared understandings of what they experience, but also for differences to exist in the meanings individuals attribute to those same experiences. For this

reason, the perspective allows for the existence of multiple realities (Draper, 2013). Social constructivism is an extension to this position, drawing on the belief that reality is constructed through social interaction. The way people experience the world is mediated by social context, culturally shared concepts, language and history (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Draper, 2013; Harper, 2011). Social constructivism argues that when an individual encounters new information, they relate it to existing knowledge and interpret the experience through a pre-existing framework of understanding. Accordingly, individuals' sense-making of the world around them is inherently subjective (Draper, 2013).

The personal ontological stance belonging to the researcher best aligns with Historical Realism, as defined by Guba & Lincoln (1994). In this ontology, what is perceived as 'known' or 'real' is a social construction shaped by various social, political, cultural, economic, and ethnic and gender factors over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is the researcher's belief that individual actions, thoughts and feelings are impacted by one's preconceived outlook and values, which also influences their understanding of their experiences and interactions with others. This perspective is reinforced by a transactional and subjectivist epistemology that assumes an interactive link between the researcher and the phenomena under investigation. What can be 'known' is inextricable to the interaction between the specific investigator and the specific group to be studied. As such, values – of both the researcher and subjects – will inevitably influence inquiry and mediate findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.3 Phenomenology

The questions as outlined in Chapter 1 were addressed with a qualitative, exploratory and emergent research design. A phenomenological methodology was first introduced to the social sciences by German philosopher Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Sage Research Methods Online, 2016). It is a philosophy that endeavours to identify and clarify a concept or phenomena through describing the way it has been experienced by individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Eagleton, 2008; Lester, 1999). The phenomena is understood as dependent on individual actions, and determined by context, beliefs and values. An actor's experience and the way they subsequently interpret it are considered as manifestations of the phenomena (Eagleton, 2008). The objective of the phenomenological researcher is to reduce individual lived experience of a phenomena to capture a universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

According to phenomenological theory, an objective or single reality does not exist for individuals with experience of the specific phenomenon. Instead, what participants provide is their personal experience and the meaning they have prescribed to that experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005). The aforementioned universal essence sought by such research (Creswell & Poth, 2017) is drawn from individual descriptions, built from their fundamental beliefs, values, past experiences and interpretations (Lester, 1999; Moran, 2002; Sage Research Methods Online, 2016). As such, phenomenological inquiry investigates individual perceptions from a subjective, first person point of view (Smith, 2018). Because of this, a phenomenological approach can develop thorough insights as to individual thoughts, feelings, motives and actions, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions. This is achieved through describing the way in which different participants interact with, and experience the same phenomena (Lester, 1999; Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005).

The primary concern of phenomenology is representing lived experience from the point of view of the individual, essentially seeking participants to describe their interaction with the specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lester, 1999). Whilst description is fundamental to the theoretical viewpoint, it is also understood as an interpretative process where the researcher interprets the meaning of lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Through utilising this approach, the phenomenological inquirer can reproduce the participants lived experience, generating empathetic understanding and insight as to the nature of the phenomena, and how it is experienced for readers (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lester, 1999; Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005). The aim of the researcher, therefore, is to represent the phenomena – as described by the participant/s – as accurately as possible, refraining from using established frameworks in the process (Groenewald, 2004).

As agreed upon by significant contributors to this philosophy such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, phenomenological understanding is developed through language. It involves ‘bracketing’ the researcher’s presuppositions, biases and assumptions to observe and describe the essence of the phenomena in question (Given, 2008). Recent developments to the discipline expand on this, emphasising the importance of cultural and gendered contexts of interpretation and meaning, and capturing variation of human experiences as they appear to individuals through description, phenomenological writing and reflection (Given, 2008). Various methods can generate the human perceptions needed for this type of analysis, including interviews, discussions and participant observations (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lester, 1999). The addition of an interpretative dimension to phenomenological inquiry increases its capacity

to inform, support or challenge policy and action (Lester, 1999). Such research is effective when it makes readers ‘see’ something in a way that enhances their understanding of a specific lived experience, and transforms their attitudes or habits (Given, 2008). For this reason, experiences that are emotional, intense, or of high personal stake for participants are befitting of phenomenological inquiry (Lester, 1999; Merriam, 2009).

Undertaking qualitative, phenomenological inquiry can be characterised as both an inductive and emergent process. The approach enables the researcher to identify ‘deep’ information and concepts from a dataset, instead of interpreting participant points of view through an existing theoretical framework (Groenewald, 2004; Lester, 1999). In such inquiry, the researcher takes an active role by collecting and analysing the data. A commonality between this and other qualitative methodologies is that the possibility of researcher bias cannot be completely disregarded. However, the focused researcher can clarify the way they have generated an understanding of the dataset in their presentation of the findings, acknowledging their prior perspectives and beliefs (Given, 2008; Lester, 1999). Research guided by phenomenology seeks to generate findings that represent the fundamental dimensions of the human experience under investigation, which are less able to be broadly extrapolated compared to quantitative results (Given, 2008; Lester, 1999). This is due to the treatment of individual, subjective and context-dependent perceptions of experiences as presentations of the phenomena (Lester, 1999).

3.4 Research Design

The primary concern of phenomenological research is to capture and convey the essence of a particular human experience. Gathering data directly from participants who have personally experienced the phenomena through interviews and observations is an appropriate way of achieving this objective. The data collected comprised of full transcriptions resulting from in-depth phenomenological interviews, the content of relevant Instagram posts provided by participants as examples, and observations made during discussions. This inquiry aims to identify common themes from the participants’ specific statements and experiences, coupled with the Instagram content they cite. According to the philosophy of phenomenology, the process was guided with the intention of discovering ‘what’ individuals experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it. Observations made as participants shared their perspectives contributed to the varied sources of data that can be sought to support such an approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The inductive and emergent characteristics of phenomenology made the methodology especially appropriate to address the research questions, and direct the data collection and analysis process. This is due to the philosophy of phenomenology that positions subjective, individual, context-dependent experiences of an individual as key to understanding a concept or phenomena (Creswell et al., 2007). It allows the researcher to develop insight as to meanings human beings attach to phenomena, and the actions, ideas or new experiences they can construct as a result (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2005). In addition, by refraining from the use of a pre-given framework to analyse the dataset, new or different ideas and themes can become apparent (Groenewald, 2004; Lester, 1999). These can then be pursued by the researcher as they continue inquiry, which enables any pre-existing perceptions pertaining to that phenomena to be challenged (Lester, 1999).

Findings and insights generated from this exploratory investigation will be discussed, highlighting managerial, policy and theoretical implications, contributing information that may be beneficial in addressing challenges across these areas. Extant literature addresses ties between social media and body image, demonstrating the importance of whether young women's SNS activity is appearance-focused on Facebook but more crucially Instagram as the more image-based platform. Following appearance-focused content on Instagram (celebrities) relates to numerous body image concerns in early adult females vulnerable to body image disturbances. As such, attention should be directed towards appearance-focused social media activities undertaken by this user group (Cohen et al., 2017). What is not well understood, and is both relevant and necessary to further this research context, is insight as to the lived experience of young, potentially vulnerable women who follow social media influencers and the effect this has – not only in regard to body image concerns – but to their identity, sense of self and their social media engagement practices.

3.5 Role of the Researcher

A phenomenological investigative approach that is qualitative, inductive and emergent requires the researcher to accurately understand and convey the participant's point of view, without drawing from pre-existing beliefs to impose subjective judgements upon the dataset (Groenewald, 2004). Toward this intent, it is important for the researcher to utilise 'bracketing'. Bracketing is a process involving the purposeful, temporary suspension of one's presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to observe and describe the essence of the phenomena (Given, 2008).

The researcher undertook bracketing in the initial phase of the inquiry, before beginning the literature review and interview stages. This process involved discussions of the topic with colleagues and the research supervisor. These allowed personal reflections as to essential elements of the subject that the investigation intended to explore to emerge, and clarified the researcher's existing perceptions, namely:

- Negative body image is a historic and ongoing concern among young women. In addition, social media is often described as being detrimental to one's wellbeing and body image.
- A common narrative in the news and popular media, and anecdotally, is that many people, and young women in particular, compare themselves to what they see on social media - especially Instagram. Such reports often link effects to one's self-esteem and self-worth to their engagement with the platform.
- 'Social media influencer' is a term that represents a certain type of Instagram user. This user is likely to be a young woman – often a model – who has become famous on the platform, with a predominantly female follower-base.
- A social media influencer can use their Instagram presence for financial gain by modelling, selling and endorsing products and brands to their followers.
- The majority of people use Instagram. Specifically, every young adult female known to the interviewer uses the platform and the use cadence is daily. Prominent social media influencers are followed by, and are a topic of conversation for these young women. They often reference bodies and physical appearance in their discussions.

By undertaking the bracketing exercise, the researcher's cognisance increased as to pre-conceived knowledge pertaining to the phenomena. As such, the researcher was better able to conduct the inquiry and interviews, guided by the specific intention that personal bias would not restrict the direction of the study or the data collected. Lastly, the attention that bracketing brought towards this prior knowledge made the researcher especially conscious of avoiding questioning participants in a way that would influence their understanding of the phenomena (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013).

3.6 Personal Biography

The researcher is a 22-year-old female from Christchurch, New Zealand. As a non-user of social media, the researcher is the only one among her peers who does not have an Instagram account, and does not make daily use the platform. Beyond her personal network, the researcher has been both a university student at undergraduate and post-graduate levels, and has been employed in a range of work roles across various industries. Through engaging with and observing others in multiple contexts, the researcher noticed that women in particular would make frequent use of the Instagram platform. They would talk about what they viewed on the app, often specifically discussing a specific type of user – the social media influencer. Furthermore, the researcher has experienced conversations with women – in private, social, university and professional spaces – pertaining to physical appearance, body image concerns and self-esteem. It can reasonably be assumed that the researcher’s personal background, coupled with her identity as a young adult female, contributed to her motivation to explore the way social method influencers attract and affect their audiences.

3.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter sought to outline and describe the research methodology and philosophical assumptions that are foundational to this inquiry, and that determined its research design. It provided an introductory discussion of phenomenology, and justified the methodology as one that would capture the data necessary to achieve the research objective. The chapter also presented the inherent role of the researcher in this approach, including the process of bracketing undertaken to prevent that active, personal position from influencing the dataset. In the following section, data collection and analysis processes utilised by this research are addressed, as are the ethical concerns underpinning the project.

Chapter 4 - Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This section intends to outline the data collection and analysis processes utilised by this research. The chapter begins by describing the participant selection and recruitment process before explaining the in-depth interviews that were conducted. Analysis of the data these captured was undertaken during, but predominantly following these interviews and the selected approach to this, as well as the specific stages involved, is discussed. Finally, the chapter addresses the principles of ethical research that were adhered to throughout the project.

4.2 Selection Criteria

In order to fulfil the intention of the study, participants were sought according to pre-determined selection criteria. Firstly, this criteria specified that participants would be individuals who identify as females aged 18-24. This is because young adults aged 18-29 are the highest users of social media (Perrin, 2015). Furthermore, the popularity of Instagram in particular is increasing among young adult women. The demographic is not only highly active on the platform, but considered vulnerable to body idealisation messaging (Cohen et al., 2017). Hence, females aged at the lower end of the young adult bracket were identified as the target population. Individuals under the age of 18 were excluded from inquiry due to the principles of ethical research. Secondly, the selection criteria required participants to be Instagram users who follow social media influencers on the platform.

An additional component of the eligibility criteria was availability. It was necessary that participants be both willing and able to take part in the research process. Specifically, their involvement would be an interview of a duration that enabled their personal experiences and perspectives to be shared thoroughly.

4.3 Sample Recruitment

Participants who met the criteria were recruited by utilising purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Specifically, a form of convenience sampling referred to as “snowball” sampling was used which involved circulating the Information Sheet that informed participants as to the purpose of the research, and requesting that other people also distribute it. The method generates a sample through referrals made among individuals who share or know of others who meet the characteristics required by the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Interested parties who were female, aged 18-24 and from the Canterbury region made direct contact with the researcher to register their interest in participating in the interview stage. Through snowball

sampling, individuals unknown to the researcher were reached, enabling a broader range of people to contribute than could have been achieved from only appealing to a personal network.

The sampling method generated a group of 10 participants who ranged from 21 to 24 years of age. The group included students from different institutions as well as professionals employed in a range of roles across diverse industries. While the initial intention set out when the research aims were formulated was to recruit 12 participants, 10 interviews yielded sufficient data. This was based on the researcher's judgement that data saturation had occurred, as no new information emerged as the interview process ensued (Bowen, 2008). All participants were allocated with a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

4.4.1 Interview Protocol

Prior to beginning the data collection phase of the study an interview protocol (Appendix 1) was developed. As data would be collected through direct interactions with human subjects, it was necessary to devise a process that would allow participants to speak thoroughly about their experiences so that sufficient data could be captured at each interview. The protocol established the structure of the interview and information the researcher would need to share with the participant. It outlined the questions that would be asked at each interview, as well as the probes and prompts that would be used to encourage participants to clarify or elaborate. Guidelines pertaining to rapport-building were also included for the researcher's reference.

4.4.2 Interview Approach

Interviews conducted to inform this research were undertaken utilising an approach that was in-depth and semi-structured. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data generating technique, where the interviewer is guided by an interview schedule and set of questions, instead of being dictated by it (Chan et al., 2013). In phenomenological inquiry, semi-structured interviews can be prepared that will steer the interview in a way that avoids the pre-determination of leading questions (Chan et al., 2013) and allows the researcher to follow the cues of the respondents (Ray, 1994).

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with an in-depth approach, as the method is both open-ended and discovery-orientated, allowing the researcher to explore feelings and perspectives shared by a participant (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001). Pre-planned key questions are asked, but the researcher also endeavours to make the exchange conversational, drawing on earlier responses to formulate subsequent questions. Both types of questions –

whether structured or unplanned – need to be open-ended as to encourage respondents to expound on a subject, and offer them the freedom to answer in their own words (Chan et al., 2013; Guion et al., 2001). The interviewer undertakes questioning with a purposeful sense of curiosity as to what they might not know, which allows participants to introduce ideas, experiences and information previously unconsidered by the researcher (Chan et al., 2013).

Paraphrasing and reflection are essential elements of the researcher's active role in data collection. By focusing wholly on what is being said and how it is being shared, then paraphrasing their understanding of what was conveyed and referencing emotional tone, the researcher ensures they are capturing the essence of the participants experience as accurately as possible (Guion et al., 2001).

The aforementioned conversational nature of exchange that the interviewer tries to develop is another aspect to their active role. The researcher strove to be approachable, open-minded, sincere and empathetic when engaging with participants. Interactions characterised by these qualities are more likely to build a sense of trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee, allowing subjects to speak honestly. Imbuing communications with these standards of conduct was fundamental to develop a deep source of information, especially when inquiry aims to explore subjects that are highly personal to the respondent (Lester, 1999). Given the commonality of age and gender between researcher and participants, coupled with the personal experience, interest and understanding that contributed to the topic under investigation, the researcher was optimistic that mutual rapport and trust could be established. Further to encouraging participants to share their experiences, each interview was conducted on the university campus to provide a private, professional and comfortable environment.

To fully capture the data sought by this method, that is the lived experience of the participants, the thorough in-depth interview complements audio-recordings of responses with written notes (field notes) taken by the interviewer. These seek to make detailed observations of both verbal and non-verbal behaviours as they happen. In addition, the researcher documents their personal reflections immediately upon completion of the interview. The tool, therefore, is able to generate rich information that can inform further questions as to the phenomena under investigation (Guion et al., 2001).

4.4.3 Pre-interview Procedures

During the pre-interview phase, the Information Sheet detailing the research intention and the Informed Consent agreements (Appendix 2 and Appendix 3) were provided to participants.

The interviewer extended the opportunity for participants to ask questions as to the interview process or overall research project, and reminded them that they could seek clarification at any time. The researcher also sought to build trust and rapport with participants at this stage.

4.4.4 In-depth Interviews

Ten interviews were conducted of a duration between 45 minutes and two hours. The interviews began with the participant signing the Consent Form (see Appendix 3) and the researcher requesting permission to record the interview. This was also communicated to participants on the Information Sheet and Informed Consent forms. Interviews were voice recorded to remove the barrier to full engagement – both with the participant and the conversation – that an impediment to take thorough notes would impose. This was also essential to ensure accuracy of data, and for verbatim transcription.

Before meeting, participants had been made aware of the general subjects they would be questioned on. The information sheet distributed prior to their involvement included this detail, and allowed them the opportunity to reflect on the topics. This enabled thorough descriptions as their experiences had been brought to the forefront of their consciousness, but was also intended to reduce any feelings of apprehension one might have approaching an interview.

Further to creating an interview situation that would allow respondents to provide rich descriptions of their experience using Instagram, Actor-Network Theory (Law, 2009) was drawn on. The theory posits that all elements contributing to a social situation – such as objects, systems and ideas – are of equal importance to the human actors involved. Employing this theory meant that technology and the way respondents interact with it could be understood as factors contributing to the phenomena. Prior to their interviews, participants were asked to bring the device they use to access Instagram from, and were informed that they would be able to use their device during their interview.

According to the protocol developed in line with both the study's objectives, and the characteristics of semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Chan et al., 2013; Guion et al., 2001; Lester, 1999), the process began with an introduction. The researcher initially focused on using a natural conversational approach to get to know and build rapport with the respondent. In this phase, the topic and research intention were presented. Interviews subsequently followed a method of first exploring general social media use, then moved to more specific questions about social media influencers. The researcher followed the cues of the respondent (Ray, 1994), adapting to the particular influencers and Instagram content they discussed and showed

examples of by using their device. These questions explored the way influencers can use their body as a means of attracting attention from followers. The process concluded with discussions regarding object/user management and whether the participant had attempted to change their social media engagement with these influencers.

The researcher endeavoured to use open-ended questions that would enable participants to share their stories in their own words without constraint, and with minimal prompting. Questions were intended to reveal the behaviours, opinions, emotions and values of the participants'. This was considered essential if an accurate and authentic understanding of their experiences, and the meaning prescribed to them, was to be captured. The interview and observation approach uncovered and exposed rich information pertaining to the phenomena, as shared directly by those who experience it.

4.5 Data Analysis

The six-phase approach to thematic analysis as developed by Braun & Clarke (2012) was the method of data analysis utilised by this research. It is a systematic approach to identifying, organising and deriving insight from a dataset into patterns of meaning (themes). The method focuses on meaning across the dataset, enabling the researcher to observe and make sense of understandings and experiences common to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This allows the researcher to generate a detailed, accurate and authentic description of the phenomena. The aim of the depiction is to be reflective of the shared meaning and knowledge prescribed to that phenomena by those with direct, lived experience of it (Groenewald, 2014). An inductive and emergent approach to thematic analysis was employed, whereby the researcher is led by the content of the data instead of relying on predetermined ideas or concepts to interpret it (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Applying this form of thematic analysis is fundamental to the phenomenological, qualitative research methodology underpinning the inquiry, and will enable a theoretical framework to be generated from the dataset (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

4.5.1 Thematic Analysis Process

Initially, data analysis comprised of verbatim transcription and detailed note-writing. The brief notes that were taken by the researcher during the interview were supplemented with thorough descriptions of the researcher's observations. These included the content of Instagram images, videos and stories participant's showed from their devices as examples and the way they used their device during the conversation. These were typed immediately at the end of the interview. Furthermore, all in-depth interviews conducted were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word

documents by the researcher, at the earliest opportunity following the interview's completion. These records were drawn on throughout the interview and analysis process, enabling the researcher to begin to identify ideas as they emerged. These could then be further explored in later interviews, following the cues of interviewees as they shared their experiences.

Following the completion and transcription of the ten interviews, the researcher checked each document and the corresponding notes against the original audio recording, ensuring each reflected the participant's responses exactly. Then, the six-phase approach to thematic analysis method as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012) was followed. The first of these involves the researcher becoming increasingly familiar with the data. The aforementioned reading and re-reading of the transcripts, as well as multiple listens to the audio data that took place contributed to the immersion this phase prescribes. In addition, the researcher began to make hand-written notes as each interview was read and listened to. Note-making at this point was casual and observational but focused towards items of potential interest. The researcher began to critically examine the data, looking for meaning across the set beyond the surface impression of individual responses in this note-taking. This would be used as a resource to inform latter stages of analysis.

The second phase transitioned from the above-mentioned casual approach to one that was more systematic as initial codes were generated. Codes identify and label aspects of potential relevance to the research objectives from across the dataset. Braun & Clarke (2012) outline multiple coding practices that can be used in conjunction, as this inquiry did in identifying emergent themes. Coding involved a mix of summarising, describing and interpreting the data. Initially, the codes were predominantly descriptive but became more interpretative as thorough line-by-line examination of the data took place, and the researcher became increasingly immersed in the data and able to examine it more critically. Some codes mirrored the language participants' used and others used existing concepts to offer insight as to their accounts.

Once initial codes were identified, the researcher shifted their focus from codes to themes. Like a code, a theme recognises an important element from the dataset pertaining to the research question, but also represents a pattern that has emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Uncovering themes is an active process, in that they are generated or constructed through analysis. Toward this purpose, the researcher reviewed coded data looking for those that shared a unifying feature. These could then be clustered to represent a clear and meaningful pattern, and used to develop the themes and subthemes of the research. The researcher concluded this phase by

organising quotes and observations according to theme, and by producing a hand-drawn, initial conceptualisation of a thematic map.

The potential themes generated were subsequently reviewed against the original dataset. This phase prioritises quality checking, requiring the researcher to return to the original data to check the codes and themes. The two-part process firstly focused on particular excerpts that were identified to convey the meaning of a particular code, then involved a thorough reading of the dataset in full. The latter aspect is important so that the chosen themes meaningfully reflect the essence of the dataset, and therefore the phenomena under investigation.

Following this process, the themes reviewed for their capacity to accurately capture the dataset were named and defined. The researcher entered into another iterative phase of re-reading the interview transcripts and notes in full, in order to summarise and label each essential idea. These sought to highlight the unique and specific nature of each theme as a key facet of the shared, lived experience of the participants. The aforementioned hand-drawn thematic map was used to guide this latter stage of analysis. As a tool, it enabled the researcher to check that the constructed themes were interrelated, sequential and avoided overlap, and built to convey a coherent narrative about the data. Excerpts drawn from across the dataset at earlier stages of analysis were reviewed, and Chapter 5 includes the direct quotations that most appropriately capture the essence of each theme.

Through adopting this approach as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012), three primary themes, and seven sub-themes emerged from the dataset. These themes capture the lived experience of the phenomena as reported by participants, and are discussed with supporting quotations in the following chapter. This discussion is focused towards the research objectives underpinning the study, in that the themes offer insight as to how body prominent social media influencers attract and affect their follower bases.

4.6 Evaluating Research Quality

During the data collection and analysis process, the researcher sought to capture a deep understanding of the knowledge and structures pertaining to lived experience of the phenomena under investigation. As is characteristic of qualitative, phenomenological inquiry this involved direct testimony from respondents, participant observation and probing to obtain detailed meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012) was purposefully utilised by the researcher in developing a qualitative narrative that would accurately and authentically represent the data this generated. During this process, and

following its completion, the researcher must assess whether their account is a valid representation of the dataset. Many perspectives exist as to how this can be defined and the ways this can be established (Creswell & Poth, 2017) however, there is consensus that a naturalistic study – such as the phenomenology - should not be assessed by the standards used to evaluate traditional, quantitative projects (Salkind, 2010).

Guba & Lincoln (1982) outline an approach to establishing the ‘trustworthiness’ of a study that they contend is befitting of naturalistic research. The authors replace the traditional concepts of reliability and validity with the term, including four other concepts in their conceptualisation: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). Their method has been used in considering the quality of data collected by this research, which can be summarised by Shenton (2004). The first consideration, credibility, requires the researcher to show that they have presented an accurate representation of the phenomena being investigated. Transferability focuses on context, whereby the researcher must offer adequate detail of the setting in which fieldwork took place. This is so that a reader can judge whether there are similarities between the study and alternative situations familiar to them, and whether findings might relate to that setting. The dependability element is difficult in qualitative inquiry, but calls for the researcher to offer an account of their actions and process, to possibly enable another investigator to conduct the study in future. Lastly, confirmability can be realised when the researcher presents their findings as emergent from the dataset and not from any personal preconceived notions (Shenton, 2004).

Guba & Lincoln (1982) discuss appropriate techniques that can be drawn on to increase the extent to which these criteria can be met, which the researcher utilised in the current study. Towards the purpose of credibility, the researcher sought prolonged engagement with the respondents to allow thorough exploration as to their experiences of the phenomena, and important aspects to emerge. The researcher endeavoured to identify saliencies throughout the research process, and conducted in-depth conversations and observations to uncover them. Triangulation also contributed to the credibility of the project, as the researcher utilised multiple methods including phenomenology, interviews, and voice recording to enable cross-checking of the data against developing findings. Transferability was prioritised at the outset of the data collection process. To capture thick descriptive data, an intentional approach to sampling was adopted to collect as much information as possible. The researcher also endeavoured to create an environment where participants could thoroughly explain their

personal experience of the phenomena. A natural style of conversation, open-ended questions and probes were also used towards this intent. In regards to dependability, procedure followed by the researcher was documented throughout inquiry, and was frequently examined against the methodology underpinning the study. The research supervisor took the role of auditor, and was involved for the duration of the project which contributed to both dependability and confirmability. Their remit was to assess the consistency of the investigative process and the findings that emerged from it, ensuring dependability of research and that interpretation appropriately reflected the dataset (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The current study was undertaken to comply with the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (UC HEC) principles and guidelines. Before research commenced, the project was reviewed and approved by the committee (Appendix 4). Those who participated were provided with an Information Sheet (Appendix 2) that outlined the intention of the research, as well as an Informed Consent Form (Appendix 3) which they were requested to sign prior to their interview. The researcher sought verbal permission from each participant as to audio recording before their interview, to confirm their willingness to partake in that aspect of the project. The documents assured participants as to the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collection process, which was upheld by allocating each respondent with a pseudonym on her consent form. Only these assumed names were used in the subsequent stages of research, including transcriptions, analysis and in the final thesis document. As per UC HEC policy, the Consent Form also outlined the rights of the participant, as well as data security and privacy details. Respondents were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any stage as long as still practicably possible, and that the research would be publicly available. Finally, data was to be stored securely on a password-protected computer for the period of time specified by the committee.

4.8 Chapter Summary

This study utilised purposive, snowball sampling to identify and recruit ten respondents eligible according to the research criteria, who then participated in a phenomenological interview. Verbatim transcription and detailed notes of the researcher's observations captured the data these yielded. Thematic analysis was then undertaken to develop a qualitative narrative representative of the dataset, including themes that directly addressed the research objective, which could be used to develop a conceptual framework. The findings of the data collection and analysis process are presented and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss data obtained from ten in-depth interviews conducted to explore the questions proposed by Chapter 1.

The participant group in this research project share demographic characteristics that identify them as a potentially vulnerable population. As young adults transitioning from a university environment to the professional sphere, they are experiencing ‘emerging adulthood’ – a period defined by difficult developmental challenges for some (Arnett, 2000), potentially further (negatively) impacted by gender in this research context. That is, a purposeful exploration of the impact that body influencers can have on young female users, as this follower base is not just very active on Instagram, but also considered vulnerable to body idealisation messaging (Cohen et al., 2017).

Data analysis utilised a process of thematic analysis, in line with that defined by Braun and Clarke (2012). Through coding, three central themes became apparent: body fascination; unhealthy attachment to viewing others and comparison to ones’ own body; body management; posting content to social media in attempt to alter ones’ body and thinking about the way others will perceive ones’ appearance; and social media management; attempts to manage attachment to the media that prove unsuccessful. These, and the contributing sub-themes, are discussed more thoroughly throughout the chapter. A theoretical framework developed from these findings is presented in the following chapter.

5.2 Body Fascination

Consumer behaviour whilst using the Instagram app can be conceptualised as body fascination; an unhealthy attachment to viewing others and comparison to ones’ own body. This theme draws on the work of Laura Mulvey (1999) who developed the concept of “the gaze”, a voyeuristic practice where people derive satisfaction from viewing others. Participants demonstrated their use of the platform, quickly scrolling through content, acknowledging the posts of friends and family by rapidly double-tapping to ‘like’ the image, whilst skipping past others in comparison. Images that captured their sustained interest were largely appearance-focused and body-emphasising. The subject young, female and often a particular type of Instagram user, the influencer.

Research argues that body dissatisfaction, poor mood and low self-esteem are prevalent in female social media users (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018) and exposure to perceived attractive images of peers and celebrities through Instagram, in particular, encourages appearance based comparison (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2017). In the current study, it was prominent among the young women to compare themselves and their bodies to what they had seen on Instagram. This was both self-declared by respondents, and emerged from thematic analysis. Comparison behaviour negatively affected their thoughts and feelings about their body and life, as well as their actions in their physical and digital lives. Such tendencies were reinforced by normative behaviour in the networks of participants. Body fascination behaviours were accepted as not only appropriate in a social situation but participated in as a group, in both online and offline settings.

As indicated by their reports, awareness existed among the participants that they regularly compared their body to others they viewed on Instagram, and that they experienced negative effects to their wellbeing as a result. Yet, their behaviour continued, in-part because of their investment in the lives of the women they view. Through using the app, they have developed not only body fascination but connections to particular digitally represented bodies.

Instagram is the conduit for the connection that app users can develop to the bodies they see. The app is accessible from mobile devices carried during most of their waking hours on their person by participants. The platform itself is a highly visual medium, enabling users to edit and enhance the images they post. Controlled by its algorithm, the Instagram feed will repeatedly boost images and accounts if a user has historically viewed similar content, facilitating repeated and habitual exposure. This leads some to idealise and idolise not only these bodies, but also the behaviour they engage in – what they say and do.

Influencers on Instagram are endowed with power, from users who are fascinated by, connect to, idealise and idolise them. The young women who afford them this power subsequently make attempts to regain the agency they have lost through their body fascination. The struggle to regain agency is described more thoroughly in the subsequent theme, social media management.

5.2.1 Device and Platform

Consumers' habitual use of mobile devices enables body fascination. All participants in the current study report using their cell phone every day, which is the device they access Instagram

from. Their use is frequent and subconscious; reportedly occurring when they are bored, in the company of friends, when they wake up in the morning through to ritualised use before sleep.

To experience Instagram-hosted media, consumers simply need to open the app and scroll images on the photo and video sharing platform. With their phone in their possession they can continue to constantly consume content without any greater effort than the swipe of a thumb. Participants demonstrated this during interviews, keeping their phone on the table next to their hand, using a finger to scroll during conversation with the interviewer.

Research has addressed consumer use of social networking sites (SNS), finding that excessive use of an online platform within this category can have similar characteristics to other behavioural addictions (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2017; Cabral, 2008; David & Roberts, 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Sofiah, Zobidah, Bolong & Osman, 2011). An individual who finds themselves spending more time than intended on social media, who prioritises checking the platform above other necessary activities, and who believes their productivity is impaired as a result of their use is proposed to be experiencing SNS addiction (Cabral, 2008).

While questions first explored general social media use, interviews focused towards further understanding the way these consumers use Instagram, in particular. For all of the respondents, Instagram was both their ‘favourite’ app and the one they spent the most time on. In discussing their use of the platform, their reported behaviour indicates a level of addiction as conceptualised by Cabral (2008).

Emily describes the way she is drawn to Instagram before checking any other SNS. Her self-report that she “lives” on the platform is indicative of the excessive use found in other SNS studies.

“Instagram. Always. Literally if I’m on my phone it’s always going to be Instagram first. Especially if I’ve got any notifications, for anything, it will be Instagram that I will go on. I live on Instagram. It’s so bad.”
(Emily, 21).

Laura habitually spends more time using Instagram than she would like to, the actual duration far exceeding what she would consider an acceptable amount of time.

“When I first realised you could see your screen time I thought, oh, it might be half an hour? But oh my god. An hour and a half? What the

fuck! I was horrified. Like holy shit! That's unbelievable. But yeah - there it is." (Laura, 22).

Frankie describes the stress and disconnection she feels when unable to access Instagram. These emotions indicate withdrawal-like symptoms, further suggesting the presence of behavioural addiction (Cabral, 2008; Cam & Isbulan, 2012; Sofiah et al., 2011). Frankie continued to detail her experience, offering further insight; rather than remaining in a state of withdrawal and its accompanying negative emotions, she acts to resolve it by trying to regain access to Instagram at significant personal effort.

"If I didn't go on Instagram for a day I'd be like (demonstrates a panicked facial expression). I need to check it every day. I struggle. Even if I'm like camping or something I'll go and get reception, just, to check it. But then I do quite like being removed from it a bit. Just limiting myself, but I still want to check it and I still want to go on." (Frankie, 23).

The interview and observation research context expands on the way prioritising social media use before other activities can be understood. Rather than needing to check a social networking site prior to a task as described in other SNS focussed behavioural studies (Cabral, 2008; Cam & Isbulan, 2012; Sofiah et al., 2011), the participants in this study demonstrated attempts to constantly use their device and scroll Instagram at the same time as completing other activities. Maintaining a conversation, walking and writing were all accomplished by participants as they used Instagram. Beyond the interview setting, Maggie talks about finding herself using her phone to go on Instagram as a subconscious and habitual endeavour.

"When I'm doing uni, and I'll be bored and pick it up and scroll, then be like no! Got to put it down, but then I'll pick it up and scroll again." (Maggie, 22).

A possible reason for this difference in the nature of addiction to Instagram as opposed to other social media sites may be due to characteristics of the device and platform. Instagram is an entirely visual medium compared to other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter considered by other research (Andreassen et al., 2017; Cabral, 2008 ; David & Roberts, 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Sofiah et al., 2011) that feature information, short phrases, and articles in addition to photos and videos (Sofiah et al., 2011). Participants

showed their ability to scroll through images, pausing in places when something interested them without needing to read or direct any effort except for the use of their thumb.

5.2.2 Visually-focused Medium

Instagram as a highly-visual medium facilitates body fascination behaviours. The nature of the app means that an emphasis on appearance is inherent, users take and post photos with the specific intention that others will look at them (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018). Using their hand-held mobile devices, consumers can view digital bodies enhanced with light and filters up close, in high definition. Participants both demonstrated and described their ability to zoom in on bodies, take screen shots and save these to their phones to return to. The constant projection of visual images and video that consumers view is uninterrupted by other forms of content.

While the app is inherently appearance-focused (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018), it can become problematic to young women if their aesthetic exterior is central to their self-worth which can put them at risk of developing body image disorders (Perloff, 2014). Respondents in the current study reinforce the notion presented by Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015; 2018), in that they emphasise the influencer's physical appearance and their own physical appearance in describing how they view and perceive content. More than general appearance however, they discuss bodies, those of influencers in particular and being drawn to posts which so clearly emphasise the body.

Georgie demonstrates this, through explaining her choice to follow an influencer – a woman who popularly disseminates body-focused content.

“Apart from that she actually seems, not super interesting but she does have an insane body. Probably like the best body on Instagram.”
(Georgie, 24).

Georgie's assertion indicates that one may be deemed more worthy of attention than another on Instagram, because of their body. While social media's capacity to encourage appearance-comparison is well-established (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly et al., 2015; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018), Georgie expands on this. She shows that young women can compare not only their own self to others, but make comparisons between body influencers as like other respondents, she is actively evaluating and ranking the bodies she sees. She then devotes more time and attention to her perception of 'the best'.

Georgie uses examples from the influencer's profile as evidence that her body is 'the best'. The images she chooses and the way she talks about the body they represent align with the notion of the 'thin toned body', often discussed as how ideal female physicality is presented (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Greenwood & Pietromonaco, 2004; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018). Idealised female physicality is also addressed by Charlotte, as she describes influencer content she sees on her feed.

“Like, some people, literally they’ll whiten their teeth, they’ll take away blemishes, they’ll take away any stretch marks or scars, make their waist skinnier, their butt bigger, their boobs bigger, and it’s like... It’s sad to think that they feel they have to do that, and they can’t just look great natural as they are.” (Charlotte, 22).

Instead of referencing the 'thin toned body', Charlotte discusses a variety of highly specific characteristics of ideal female physicality she sees on Instagram. While Drenten & Gurrieri (2017) show that desired body images can be reinforced through hashtags on social media, Charlotte shows how these are cultivated then presented in the images that influencers post to the platform. Rather than projecting accurate images of their exterior self, it is popular for these women to manipulate their physicality, turning it into something not realistic to real life scenarios. It is the visual nature of the platform that enables influencers to self-edit in this way, but also that exposes consumers like Charlotte to this content.

Drenten & Gurrieri's (2017) position that social norms can be associated with such images, can be coupled with research from Tiggemann (2015) who argues that positive body image is central to self-worth, but also that practices of body expression are influenced by social identities and connections built with a wider social network. Instagram as a socially connected visual experience may therefore have an effect on what young women perceive as a normative physical appearance, and the development of their personal identity and sense of self.

5.2.3 Repetition

Body fascination conceptualises not just the viewing of digital bodies, but the volume of body-focused content and frequency of consumers' exposure to it. While participants choose to use Instagram, and that use is daily and habitual, they do not have total control in their exposure. In networked media environments, for instance social media platforms, algorithms personalise the content a user sees based on their historic interaction with the network (Bozdag, 2013). Algorithmic filtering can contribute to a digital experience in which users repeatedly encounter

homogenous images and information, which may create and then reinforce a perception of normalcy (Pariser, 2011).

On Instagram, the algorithm tracks a user's interests from searching or following accounts and looking at particular photos. It will then repeatedly show users similar types of content through the 'explore' functionality without them explicitly searching for it. As such, repetition is an underlying facet of body fascination both through consumers deciding to use the app, and through what they will unintentionally be exposed to.

Informing the algorithmic filtering that effects content viewed by users is their interaction with an SNS (Bozdag, 2013). On Facebook, users spend most of their time on passive activities like reading the newsfeed but are more gratified by viewing their friends profile pages where they attempt to glean personal information (Wise et al., 2010). Staring into the lives of their 'friends' on Facebook has a voyeuristic appeal for users and enables information collection, but also contributes to a perceived sense of connection felt by the user to the person they are staring at (Veer, 2011).

While learning about others and what they are doing is also the primary motivation for Instagram users (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), information is sought about family, friends, celebrities and strangers (Lee et al., 2015). Comparatively, Facebook is cited as a platform that facilitates online connections to existing offline social networks (Ellison et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2009). Participants in the current study exhibit staring behaviour similar to that explored by Veer (2011) but direct their gaze towards users who are not part of their social network. They also describe the extent of information and content they are exposed to.

Rather than just expressing a desire to look at what others are doing on Instagram, India described the volume of content she sees. This is not from a family member, friend, stranger or celebrity, but from an 'influencer'. A separate category of Instagram user, the influencer is proposed to exist in a space between distant friend, acquaintance and the traditional celebrity (Chae, 2018).

“Sometimes I think it's kind of weird how I can know so much about people. See so much about other peoples' lives. I'm like, you live like, and I don't even know your name... You live like, in America, or go travelling like 9 months of the year. Like, who are you? But also...I've seen so many photos - it's kind of weird.” (India, 21).

While other consumers use Instagram to learn about other people (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), India feels as though she has inadvertently accumulated personal knowledge of influencers through repeated and prolonged use of the platform. Instagram ‘stories’, an ephemeral aspect of the platform’s functionality, may further facilitate this. Once consumers select a ‘story’ to watch, more continue to play without any additional feedback or prompting required from the viewer. For the majority of participants, ‘stories’ are the first type of content they choose to view when they’ve opened the Instagram app. Emily describes the volume of story content she is exposed to – not due to any particular motivation to learn more about the people she follows (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016) but as a habitual practice to distract herself from what she is actually doing.

“So I go to the gym, and I’m doing like, a workout. And I want to have something there, I literally just play all those stories, cause I follow so many people, they’ll just keep on going. So I’ll just sit there, like, watching all these stories that I just literally don’t care about, but they’re there so I’ll watch them.” (Emily, 21).

Another aspect of Instagram beyond the direct control of consumers are the images they see when scrolling through the ‘explore’ page and their own feed. For participants in the current study, despite an interest in the lives of others motivating them to use Instagram (Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016), the algorithm uses their usage history to repeatedly include related content in their feed. Ellie describes the lack of autonomy she thinks she has in her exposure to Instagram.

“I think a little bit with like, the ads and then the trending, you know when you want to search something it comes up with all the - you know - photos and videos underneath that kind of thing. It’s hard to like, have a complete say in what you see.” (Ellie, 22).

Rader & Gray (2015) explored individual’s beliefs pertaining to algorithms, finding that users noticed the same people represented frequently in the News Feed. Like other SNS users, Ellie speculates about algorithmic influence and shows an awareness that a relationship exists between her interaction with the system and the content displayed by the app (Rader & Gray, 2015).

Despite increasing recognition of the existence of algorithms, the way ordinary and potentially vulnerable users interact with such technology and understand its effect on their digital

experiences is yet to be more thoroughly understood (Wells, Ajunwa, Barocas, Duffy & Ziewitz, n.d.) Algorithms expose potentially vulnerable groups – who are least able to comprehend and challenge them - to what may be unfair outcomes on social media platforms (Wells et al., n.d.)

When coupled with research that shows social networking sites, and particularly Instagram, encourage appearance comparisons (Fardouly et al., 2015; Hendrickse et al., 2017), an associated detrimental effect to the wellbeing of young women (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo 2015; 2018), and that the majority of research concerning idealised female physicality presented in the media and body image concerns shows that increased exposure contributes to greater body image disturbances (Greenwood & Pietromonaco, 2004), the repetitive effect of algorithmic technology may increase body-focused content Instagram users are exposed to, and its negative effect on their sense of body and self.

Frankie explains that it is not just images on the platform that encourage her to compare herself to others, but the amount of time she spent and the quantity of pictures she viewed when using Instagram.

“All the time I was on Instagram, honestly I’d just stalk all these people I didn’t even know. I’d compare myself. I’d be like, oh I wish I had her clothes, I wish I had her hair... you know?” (Frankie, 23).

5.2.4 Connection

A perceived sense of connection is an elemental component in the conceptualisation of body fascination, as some participants reported feeling drawn to, and more likely to, view certain influencers on Instagram. In using the app, young women may become immersed in the activity of viewing others, and become attached to the bodies they see, even though they are digital images. This felt connection is fostered by the platform; a visual medium, controlled by an algorithm that repetitively shows the user bodies of influencers and related content, opened by a mobile device in the consumers possession constantly, and always accessible.

While research understands that consumers often use Instagram to follow celebrities (Lee et al., 2015), the relationship between influencers and participants in the current study is different. Influencers inhabit a space between distant friend or acquaintance and the traditional celebrity (Chae, 2018). Respondents are drawn almost exclusively to these users, their interest in the traditional celebrity comparatively very minimal in the context of using the Instagram platform.

They are first exposed to the influencer on the app, begin to engage with their content, become interested and then are shown it repeatedly – the algorithm having tracked their interest. Other consumers have a pre-existing knowledge of traditional celebrities through their work in an offline setting, then use social media to follow them for a combination of personal and career information (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Maggie describes what it is about influencers that draws her continued interest on Instagram.

“I just like to know about their lives. I’m just nosy. I like to know what they’re doing. Their make-ups, their breakups.” (Maggie, 22).

Like other respondents, it is the influencer as a person and the details of their life that Maggie wants to see on Instagram. This is similar to what other consumers seek from celebrities on social media (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), but the self-reported extent of this interest differs. Where other consumers were curious about and intrigued by celebrities online, participants in the current study present a much more significant attachment. They are ‘invested’.

“God, see, this is the thing with me and Instagram, I am way too invested in other people’s lives.” (Georgie, 24).

“I get real invested, I’m like, and what are you going to name your baby?!” (Maggie, 22).

An alternative method of exposure to an influencer discussed by participants was referral from a friend. If someone in their social group became aware of an influencer on the app, and started to engage with their content, it was common for them to recommend that person as someone they too should ‘stalk’. Georgie describes an influencer whose content she will repeatedly view as she tries to uncover details about her life because of a recommendation from a friend.

“Like the (influencer) one I got because my friend Sarah told me about it, told me about her. They have like, dramas. They’re all friends with (influencer) and stuff. She mysteriously broke up with the baby’s daddy and we don’t know why so we try stalk that. Still don’t know why. So stuff like that. Like, her kids are cute, she dresses them cute, she’s, yeah. They’re not like, I don’t even think she’s got that many followers. Like, a few thousand. And then like (influencer) ... I thought (influencer’s children) were cuter when they were littler. She does some... yeah, I

don't even actually overly like her... but I'm not sure why.” (Georgie, 24).

Talking about the influencer as a shared interest further fosters the connection Georgie and her friend have with her – something that may never have developed without Sarah’s recommendation. They engage with the content as they see it on the platform, then continue to develop a narrative around it together in real life, attributing more detail than they could glean from the digital representation. By sharing this discussion, they are then more interested by what the influencer may post next, and are compelled to return to her posts.

Being fascinated by, and attached to viewing an influencer’s content despite reporting to not actually like them was not unique to Georgie. In describing influencers whose photos and stories she habitually views, Frankie wonders why she actually does this.

“I mean I follow people that are like Auckland... mums, and they’re like, living the high life, and I’m like - why do I follow them? Like, they are not that real.” (Frankie, 23).

Other consumers favour celebrities who present an authentic representation of self on social media (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), something Frankie also suggests to be desirable yet she follows influencers who she does not believe meet this standard. In sharing this, she contradicts other research explaining that young women follow ‘Instafamous’ profiles because they are credible and relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Frankie deems influencers she follows to be void of both of these attributes, yet she continues to habitually view their content.

Abidin’s (2015a) perspective that three levels of engagement exist between a reader and a micro celebrity may be more relevant to participants in the current study. Abidin (2015a) argues that followers seek aspiration, and look for advice on subjects like fashion, beauty and relationships; followers view micro celebrities critically, with an outlook of judgement or jealousy; and voyeuristically, acting as keen spectators of their personal lives (Abidin, 2015a). Frankie’s connection to influencers may be a combination of the latter two aspects. She may be jealous of the affluent life projected by the women she follows and impose judgement for their ostentatious displays of privilege – yet, driven by a desire to observe what would be private matters if not presented on Instagram, she continues to view them.

Regardless of whether liked or disliked, participants demonstrate their connection to influencers by showing other ways they try to develop knowledge about their life or body.

These are attempts to learn more than what is immediately evident from their posts. Users scrolled through images quickly when the focus was a family member, friend, physical object or landscape and lingered over images of influencers. When respondents were viewing a digital ‘other’ they described being particularly connected to they would zoom in on specific body parts and take screen shots. Some of the participants stored images of influencers, by saving them to their phones.

Influencers can increase the sense of connection that their followers feel by sharing personal aspects of themselves with their audience (Calvert, 2004; Hogan, 2010). Emily, a user who felt unsatisfied by the amount of information posted by an influencer she especially likes that she follows, was compelled to look for more on the app. This respondent searched for, and found the private account of this woman. On this account, the influencer makes greater use of Instagram stories than she does on her public profile by posting longer videos more frequently. These are predominantly selfie-style videos where she talks about her day, what she is doing and shares personal information.

“I love, I follow her private as well, which is so interesting, I love the privates, because she says so much more in it.” (Emily, 21).

Lydia fosters the connection she feels to particular influencers by reading the comments left by other users below their photos. These threads contain compliments, criticism, discussion and theories pertaining to the influencer, their life and their appearance.

“When I’m just up to nothing. Just during the day, I’ll just scroll through. At night time that’s when I’d probably go and click on, even like, people that like, comment on. I even sometimes at night time read comments, say like (influencer), I’ll go through all of her comments.” (Lydia, 22).

Emily also goes to ‘fan pages’ made in honour of influencers. These contain real, edited and imagined images and supply narratives about the women and their lives. Despite actively following the fan pages of her three favourite influencers, Emily attempts to minimise her interest. She feels invested enough in the influencers’ lives to habitually view their fan pages, suggesting that her connection to these women is something private and personal.

“Not that I’m really even interested in the fan pages, I just like to know what’s going on with her, cause, I get obsessed very easily.” (Emily, 21).

If Emily also chooses to conceal her connection to these influencers from her friends, she is acting in line with other females who have ‘intense-personal’ relationships with celebrities. This is an attachment that can involve admiration, body worship, and ultimately contribute to poor body image (Maltby et al., 2005). The difference between Emily and other consumers however, is that her admiration is not directed at a traditional media figure (Maltby et al., 2005), but influencers. These are women who she can view repeatedly, whose bodies she can screenshot and stare at, and who she can investigate using other information sources – whether real or imagined – on the platform. Through feeling a sense of connection to a certain influencer, and being more likely to view her social media content, Emily may be increasing her vulnerability to body worship and negative self-image compared to other consumers whose admiration of media figures does not take place in the context of Instagram. In addition, the body image concerns that emerged from the data set may contradict the findings of Maltby et al., (2005) who argue that such anxieties stemming from celebrity worship occurs only in female adolescents and disappears at the onset of early adulthood. This is a position that is challenged by the current study as the majority of respondents described body dissatisfaction in detail, connecting their experience to Instagram and influencers.

Like Emily, other participants describe an attachment to viewing specific influencers. Georgie is one such respondent, but her report shows that connection is not instantaneous – rather, it is something that can develop over time.

“I’ve opened my feed and I’d scroll through that first. I can see the first picture is (influencer) and, I love her. I just love her child and I’m... I never used to follow her until she had (daughter). And I just think (daughter) is the cutest baby alive.” (Georgie, 24).

Georgie demonstrates the typical way she uses Instagram by opening the app and looking at her main feed, which shows images from the accounts she follows. The first image is an influencer who she ‘loves’. The photo is of a young woman posing by a pool in a bikini. Georgie then goes to her profile to look through her photos, lingering over images of the woman with her daughter, who she also ‘loves’.

Georgie's assertion that she started following this influencer only after the birth of her child may contradict the AIDA model, widely applied to online marketing. The model proposes four sequential stages; Attention, Interest, Desire and Action, represent a consumer's sequential reaction to marketing communications (Hassan, Nadzim & Shiratuddin, 2015). The traditional framework suggests that a consumer first becomes aware of, then develops an interest in a particular marketing message. In the second stage, Interest, the individual may be encouraged to undertake further research as to the message. If through research, a consumer shifts from 'liking' that message to 'wanting' what it represents they may have moved into the third phase that is Desire. This is the precursor to Action, where the recipient interacts in some way with the message sender (Hassan et al., 2015).

If Georgie's self-reported behaviour is related to the AIDA model, the order of her response may not reflect that proposed by the framework. Georgie first became aware of the influencer and exposed to the content she posts through viewing the app's 'explore' function. This respondent was at the first stage of the model, Attention, yet this did not sequentially lead to the second stage as the framework would suggest. Instead, Georgie was uninterested in the influencer and her posts. She would frequently see this user in the explore page which increased her feelings of disinterest, as Georgie described feeling 'bored' of seeing her when using the function. Georgie's feelings changed however, when the influencer had her child. By sharing this personal information, the influencer was able to illicit feelings of perceived connection from Georgie (Calvert, 2004; Hogan, 2010). In the AIDA model, a sense of emotional connection is proposed to evolve from Attention and then Interest as the third stage (Hassan et al., 2015). What Georgie may instead show is that Desire can be the second step in a consumer's response to marketing messages, which can then encourage Interest and further research. Maggie shared a similar perspective, describing an emotional connection she feels to influencers who share their lives with their audience (Calvert, 2004; Hogan, 2010) that encourages her interest in the content they post to Instagram.

"I reckon influencers are real weird though. Like, when you first look at them you'll be like, 'meh, who cares'? But then, once you start following them, and get committed to their life then you like, real care about them. Like, one of my friends used to follow (influencer), well she still does, and I didn't really like her, I was like, 'her voice is really annoying'. And then, she got pregnant, and now I'm obsessed. I watch her videos all the time." (Maggie, 22).

Maggie describes frequently viewing the life of an influencer to an extent where she now cares about her and what – ostensibly – happens in her life. Like Georgie, she was previously uninterested in, and even disliked the influencer until she got pregnant. Defined as ‘micro-celebrities’, Abidin (2015b) has explored influencers who share images and stories about their pregnancies and children. Such women can monetise these facets of their personal life, the same way they would with other private matters. The exposure continuous, it is a deliberate practice in deriving further attention and fame on the networks they operate on (Abidin, 2015b). What is not considered thoroughly by this research, however, is the experience of the audience of influencers and their ‘micro-celebrity’ children. Georgie and Maggie show that – to them – pregnancy and children make an influencer worthy of fascination as they describe seeking out these personal images and stories, viewing them repeatedly. Such content can foster a sense of connection to the influencer they expressed disinterest and dislike in before their transition from childless woman to mother. While other consumers use Instagram to connect with people that share their common interests (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), neither Georgie, Maggie nor any of their friends have children. They are attached to the portrayal of a life experience foreign to them, something Frankie relates to.

Frankie’s description may be an insight into why she and other participants connect with the influencers the way they do. Successful interaction between social media influencers and consumers occurs when the influencer is authentic, confident and interactive (Glucksman, 2017). Young women in the current study then, may be searching for influencers who demonstrate these attributes. For Georgie and Maggie, viewing pregnancy and child-related content may be evidence of such qualities. For Frankie, seeing an influencer speak and share her home may be the confirmation she needs to connect.

“Like honestly, I feel like I know them even though I have no idea who they are. Because you’re seeing their face and they’re talking. And especially like, now, this year, stories have just become so big. And, people are talking into them and their face all the time. Like, showing you around their house, and it’s like, you just feel like you know them.”
(Frankie, 23).

Compared to Frankie, Emily expresses a similar sense of ‘knowing’ influencers. However, she invests greater effort in this connection. Rather than passively viewing their content, Emily started commenting on the profiles of the women she follows.

“And I think, even just commenting, me starting to comment on other girls photos being like ‘you look so good in this’ because I know how much that actually makes you feel better. It’s like when you say it in person... It’s like... it’s just that gratification, you know?” (Emily, 21).

While Emily initially did this to encourage and interact with influencers she admired, she was especially pleased when one started to comment on her own pictures.

“I just like the fact that I can talk to people across the other side of the world that are like, really, they seem cool. But it’s not like we talk. Like it’s not like we, like, I feel like they’re catfishing me in a weird way. If that makes sense? I just like that I follow this girl that will like comment on my photos when I think she’s really cool. Like I think she has a good life, but she’ll call me beautiful as well. And it’s like, girls supporting girls, you know? I love that. I’m all for it.” (Emily, 21)

In Emily’s behaviour, parallels can be drawn to other consumers who are attached to social media as explored by VanMeter, Grisaffe & Chonko (2015). By commenting on influencer profiles, she is trying to connect with and encourage these women, the influencer who replies providing an example of an exchange that imbues Emily with a sense of affirmation and assurance (VanMeter et al., 2015). Her comments also emphasise the self-objectification that Instagram can encourage among young women (Fardouly et al., 2015). She views and evaluates the influencers, using beauty as justification of a ‘good life’ and feels validation when she receives similar compliments. This could also be indicative of the narcissistic tendencies of a social media addict (Andreassen et al., 2017). Emily describes ‘gratification’ when someone calls her beautiful, but relying on a comment from an influencer to feel this way could be indicative of low self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017). It’s possible the influencer may be using this characteristic to their advantage. By complimenting Emily, she infuses her narratives and self-branding with a sense of realness (Khamis et al., 2017). Emily believes this influencer is accessible and that she cares about her, which can cause her feelings of connection to strengthen, in turn causing body fascination behaviours to increase. When Emily feels connected, she views an influencer’s content more, and attaches greater meaning to it than the initial face value of the digital images.

Another participant who looks for influencers she can connect to is Kate. Kate views images and videos, specifically searching for bodies she can identify with, even though they are digital depictions.

“She’s very like, athletic. And I think also with her, I feel like she looks more like me, the shape, than everyone else that’s like, you know? Whereas I’m quite like, that kind of thing, more, athletic looking (makes shapes with her hands each time she references a different body shape to show what she means). Yeah. If that makes sense.” (Kate, 22)

“Yeah. Like with the fitness thing I’m trying to focus on people who aren’t like ‘let’s just get skinny’ but more like ‘let’s be strong’ so I follow a lot of like, thicker curvier people and stuff. And that’s kind of what I want to do with the models, obviously they’re real skinny, but if someone looks like, like I can really see all their bones and stuff, I’m definitely, I’m unfollowing them.” (Kate, 22).

As for other app users, Instagram is an easy way for Kate to compare her body to others (Hendrickse et al., 2017). By following and looking to relate to influencers, however, she is viewing posts that may encourage her tendency to view others and make upward comparisons. During the interview, Kate showed images from Instagram that she has saved to her mobile device where the woman’s body is shown in high-focus. The influencers are wearing a bikini or cropped Lycra sportswear, and Kate demonstrated her ability to zoom in on areas of their bodies. She would then spend prolonged periods of time looking for discrepancies and similarities to her own, explaining that it was typical behaviour for her. In a sense, her engagement is aspirational, as she is seeking advice. Rather than engaging with subjects such as clothing, beauty or relationships (Abidin, 2015a), she wants to understand how these women make their bodies look the way they do. She considers their images a source of inspiration, uses exercise routines they share at the gym, and follows their diet advice. Kate shuns the conventional standard of beauty and fitness that is ‘thinness’ (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018), looking for ‘curvier’ models.

Where Kate views some influencers as aspirational, she criticises others (Abidin, 2015a). Each level of engagement is elicited from her attempts to find bodies she connects with.

“There were people that I thought were fit and stuff, and then after watching her I realised that they weren’t. Or they were just naturally,

they just looked like that, and then they got rich off it. You know what I mean? Like there's this lady. I'll show you her.... Like I used to follow her and think her... But she's literally just shaped like that and has really spaced out legs... I don't know - you know what I mean? You're just like, 'what the hell'? And then you realise, actually, and I just noticed, when I watch her workouts she doesn't even do high weights or anything. Like, what is she trying to improve? I don't know." (Kate, 22)

From regular and prolonged viewing of the images and videos shared by a particular influencer, Kate has concluded that she is inauthentic. Authenticity is an important element of the influencer's strategic self-presentation on social media (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; Duffy, 2016; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Marwick, 2010; 2015; Raun, 2018). In this context, authenticity can be defined as the influencer being genuine, honest and open in what she shares with followers (Glucksman, 2017). Influencers encourage their followers to identify with them (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a) and cultivate an emotional connection with their audience by attempting to appear accessible and relatable (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2010; 2015).

Kate previously connected to this influencer because she believed she was posting the training routines she used to become stronger and change her body shape, a goal shared by Kate. Over time, Kate concluded that the woman's body is a result of genetics rather than effort invested into diet and exercise. As such, she perceives the content she posts to Instagram – including paid partnerships with gym clothing and protein powder brands – to be motivated by financial gain rather than genuine attempts to change her body. Kate may also feel jealous of this influencer, something felt towards such women by other app users (Abidin, 2015a). This could be because she does not have to monitor her thinness, attractiveness and fitness as other women feel pressured to do to meet normative physical expectations (Rudd & Lennon, 2000) if this is the way her body looks genetically.

As a result of feeling let down by a seemingly inauthentic influencer, Kate shifts her focus to content shared by other influencers with bodies and goals she can relate to. She begins to feel more connected to these women, and spends more time viewing their images and videos. Also evident in Kate's account is body policing which conceptualises a dynamic between a micro-celebrity and their audience. It occurs when users look for evidence that the body or appearance of someone they follow has changed (Powers, 2015). Comparison is fundamental to the

practice, and involves viewers contrasting historic and current digital content, evaluating which ‘version’ looked most (conventionally) attractive. Concealing physical changes is interpreted as a violation of trust in the eyes of followers, as audience members expect any variation to be acknowledged and explained. Underlying the expectations of viewers are the boundaries of femininity, and the belief that women should control their weight and appearance through using consumer goods such as make-up, skin care, and anti-aging products (Powers, 2015).

Emily describes how the appearance of an influencer she follows has changed. She uses the woman’s profile and ‘fan pages’ to provide images to support her account.

“So this was kind of her back in the day. Like she’s not... and that’s her now. Look at her face. It’s insane, and then she’s gotten worse, at the moment. I feel like she’s gotten way worse now. Like, she used to be a real normal girl, you know?” (Emily, 21).

“And now, all of her comments are hate. It’s actually really sad. So she’s got three million followers. And like, look at her body. It’s just not real. And the bad thing is that she posts so much about it. Like, she needs to chill. I feel bad for her but, because of the hate, I feel like she does it more. Um, if you look at comments. Hold on I’ll find photos. It got to the point, like, she doesn’t even disable her comments which is weird, and she should. Oh, even just this photo, it looks like, she’s just not, and it looks like she’s wearing a mask.” (Emily, 21).

“Oh there she is again, (influencer) she doesn’t look like she can smile anymore. She would be so pretty if she got rid of all the face stuff, and just like... I get the body thing. Like I do understand because I know she has a lot of trouble with food and that stuff. So I do understand why people get their body shaped. And I think that’s their own choice because people can want that. But I think that faces are just so precious, you shouldn’t be able to do that to them. But I do feel bad for her.” (Emily, 21).

Emily’s behaviour can be understood as body policing. She describes the body and appearance of the influencer, defines changes over time and remarks that she used to look better (Powers, 2015). Where this policing differs to that articulated by Powers (2015), however, is that this woman did control her body through post-feminist consumption practices. Her violation was

in going – from the perspective of those who follow her – too far. She policed her body too much rather than not enough. Emily’s report representing the perspective of some of the ‘three million’ people who follow this woman is also an example of both critical and voyeuristic levels of engagement between the influencer and her followers (Abidin, 2015a).

Despite this, Emily is still connected to this influencer, but in a different way to others she has described. She has repeatedly viewed her images and body, deciding that her decision to get her ‘body shaped’ with surgery, the result of ‘trouble with food’. As a participant who described editing her body in images and her efforts to lose weight, she may feel a sense of intimacy with the influencer (Khamis et al., 2017). Whether she views her critically, voyeuristically (Abidin, 2015a) or with understanding and intimacy (Khamis et al., 2017), Emily is attached to viewing this influencer and her body. She follows her to see if and how her body might subsequently change. The platform acts as a repository of comparison data that she and other users can analyse as they wait for new content.

5.2.5 Social Norms

Habitual engagement with content posted by influencers that consumers connect to, and the comparison to the self that this fosters, is exacerbated by social norms. These norms are the rules and standards guiding the behaviour of a group, which are understood without necessarily being explicitly stated (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Participants in the current study share their connection to influencers with their offline social network. In regularly discussing the digitally represented lives and bodies they see on Instagram, they are developing an understanding that the topic is a shared interest of the group. This compels users to continue to view content on the platform so that they can contribute to the group, and meet the expectations of its members.

Laura describes the way content posted by influencers is an area of shared concern amongst herself and her group of friends. They are actively engaged with the content they post, using Facebook messenger to talk about it during the week when they aren’t physically together.

“Now that I’m thinking about it, it’s almost every day, or someone will be like - we have a group chat on Facebook - and someone will post something onto it and be like, has anyone seen this? Or following this person? Or seen what they’ve done? Or this is scandalous, or like, does anyone know where this dress is from? Like there’s always stuff relating back to it.” (Laura, 22)

For Laura, this happens to the extent where her friends assume she has knowledge of an influencer and her daily life. That is, they assume knowledge of the narrative they have developed through conversations in person and over digital messages as to the influencer's life. The group has established this from analysing the digital images and stories such prominent users share in detail, which participants both report and show examples of.

“I think that people assume that we're really up to date with it, and that, because my friends will just expect that I know what's going on with all that drama and stuff. Or like have you seen this? So I think that there's the stereotype that girls are really into it and there are people on there who are like, marketed because they know there's this massive audience of females, of probably all ages on it so constantly and stuff.”
(Laura, 22).

While people can feel “out of touch” when they haven't used Facebook recently (Sofiah et al., 2011), Laura shows evidence that young women's attachment to Instagram may be different. What she describes is not a personal feeling that she is missing out, like other consumers report (Sofiah et al., 2011). Instead, she feels as though knowledge of influencers on Instagram is something her social network demands of her. If she does not engage with their content, she will not be able to contribute to a significant topic of interest with her friends and may feel excluded.

If such norms function amongst a group, body fascination and self-comparison may be behaviours consumers struggle to disengage from. A young woman in this context may want to stop looking at an influencer's Instagram, perhaps due to the harmful effect described by respondents. Despite this, she may feel obligated to continue to avoid deviating from the group.

Like Laura, influencers on Instagram is a topic of conversation amongst Charlotte and her female friends. She describes why viewing and discussing such women and their lives, bodies and clothes does not occur when males are present in the social group.

“A lot of the guy friends that I know... wouldn't, they're not really into following people. They're more into following like, things. So like, if they're into gaming then they'll follow gaming things and if they're into sports then they'll follow sports related things, or if they're into other kinds of things, you know, then they'll follow that. Whereas, you

know, girls follow more, they're more involved in people's lives and peoples Instagram's."(Charlotte, 22)

Differences between the social media behaviour of males and females have been identified in earlier work. Higher numbers of friends and participation in gaming has been found to be more characteristic of males on SNS, whereas the female propensity is to upload self-photos and share status updates (Wang, Jackson, Zhang & Su, 2012). While these behaviours have been differentiated by the gender more likely to partake in them, they are described as individual patterns of use. Charlotte and Laura expand on the difference Wang et al., (2012) identified between male and female users. Both of these participants think that the males they know have a greater sense of autonomy in the way they use Instagram compared to females. Their perception is that young women's use of the platform is influenced more by their peers in comparison.

Frankie reinforces the sense that Instagram use can be a collective activity for young women by describing a particular influencer who was a frequent topic of observation and discussion amongst her female housemates.

"Some people, like, I just think, like my flatmates last year would just follow her because it was funny how ridiculous she was. How much of a twat she was half the time, you know? So, but they, still follow her? They love her, because she's a plonker. She's always like, she's always complaining about her dog or her husband. She's just a bit of a plonker really. And she's just so rich, you know? She's just got money coming out her ears. She's just extreme. They talk about her all the time. Yeah, that's big chat. Always like – 'oh, did you see (influencer) on Instagram yesterday? Oh yeah, she's such a dick.' You know, we're always talking about Instagram. Always." (Frankie, 23)

Young women have a propensity to follow influencers who they feel judgemental or jealous of (Abidin, 2015a), but this finding pertained to a consumer's individual behaviour. Frankie's housemates show that these emotions can be experienced as a group as well.

Participants and their female friends also report viewing and discussing the bodies of influencers they view on Instagram in a group environment. Georgie describes an example of the social context where such a conversation would take place.

“Because if like, say we’re having like, pre-drinks with the girls or something, and we’re just talking for ages so like heaps of stuff would come up. If someone is maybe on Instagram or has been, they’ll be like ‘oh, have you seen that so and so’s got really skinny’ or whatever, and then it’s like ‘argh, I’m jealous’.” (Georgie, 24).

While it has been argued that envy is commonly felt by females towards social media influencers, the finding pertained to ‘lifestyle’ content that ostensibly depicts the daily life of the poster (Chae, 2018). Georgie presents an alternative understanding, describing how jealousy can be expressed to a group about the Instagram bodies they observe and discuss. The young women described by this participant are more attached to viewing particular bodies, focusing their time and attention on influencers who share body-prominent content instead of expressing feelings of envy about affluence and a luxury daily lifestyle (Chae, 2018), in the way Frankie and her housemates may be when they criticise the influencer they follow for the purposes of observing her wealth. Furthermore, the envy that women have been found to experience was an individual and personal response. The current study shows that envy can be a shared emotion that emerges when users collectively view and discuss bodies on Instagram.

Frankie then described conversations she has with another group of female friends who are separate from her housemates. Like Georgie, she reports that body comparison is a regular topic of conversation engaged in by the group.

“Oh well if we’re at, all hanging out and someone’s on their phone they’re like ‘oh my god she’s such a babe! Why don’t I look like her?’ Things like that, yeah so I suppose we still do but I don’t do it as much. Like I’m much happier with myself, you know? As I’ve got older, which is good... But um, I still do. That’s what I’m constantly doing.” (Frankie, 23).

While both Georgie and Frankie discuss social situations where the young women are comparing their own bodies to digital depictions posted by influencers to Instagram, Frankie’s description reinforces the role of mobile devices. All respondents have a cell phone, and report that they – and their friends – carry it on their person during most waking hours. As confirmed by the other participants, this level of use is an accepted social behaviour in their peer groups, as is using and talking about Instagram.

Observations conducted during interviews show how often and easily this use may occur. Participants kept their cell phone next to their hand on the table for the duration of the interview. During conversation their gaze would drift to their phone, some would even open their device and begin to scroll, glancing back and forward between their screen and the discussion. Both of these behaviours happened frequently, as if subconsciously.

Cell phone use in social settings has been examined by other research, and conceptualised as ‘phubbing’ or phone snubbing. This occurs when someone uses their cell phone in the presence of a friend, the proposed consequence being that the ‘phubbed’ individual feels excluded. This feeling is suggested to create a need for attention that is fulfilled by turning to one’s own phone to connect (David & Roberts, 2017).

This conceptualisation may offer insight into the behaviour of the current study’s participants and their female friends. Their cell phones are in their possession almost constantly, using them may be a subconscious tendency and is accepted as normative behaviour by the group. They can repeatedly scroll content on Instagram, vocalise their experience of looking at digitally represented bodies, and feelings that their own does not measure up to what they see depicted. If ‘phubbing’ is accurate, a woman who was not on her phone may feel excluded by a friend who is. She may then turn to her own device and seek connection to bodies depicted on Instagram, because those physically present seem less accessible compared to influencers who actively cultivate this quality (Abidin, 2015a; Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2010, 2015).

An alternative perspective to the way ‘phubbing’ has been conceptualised by David & Roberts (2017) may also be relevant. Instead of feeling excluded by a friend who uses their cell phone in their presence, an individual may be drawn to use their device as a way of participating in shared in-group activity. This draws from the understanding that body fascination can be a collective behaviour amongst young women that emerged from the current dataset. In this context, the individual would not feel excluded by a friend using a phone. They would feel excluded if they could not contribute to the discussion, the phone being a conduit for social connection amongst young women as opposed to a barrier as argued by David & Roberts (2017).

These are different perspectives to ‘phubbing’, but the consequences of users being encouraged to turn to their device are the same. That is, both situations may lead to the individual increasing their cell phone and Instagram use, spending more time engaging with influencers, viewing

and connecting with digital depictions of bodies and then comparing their own, perceiving it to be inadequate.

In this research context, norms are relevant not just to what is encouraged social behaviour in real life, but the norms that are presented on Instagram. Social media can manipulate body image ideals and expectations, as explored by Drenten & Gurrieri (2017), who identified that the role of such technology is one of presenting, propagating and perpetuating body image trends among women through analysis of the Twitter app.

By describing what they view on Instagram, participants in the current study show that this platform may also spread ideals of female physicality. This is because they report particular types of body-prominent content that is posted by influencers. That is, young women sharing self-images where their body – often wearing a bikini or minimal clothing – is the focus. Through explaining their experience of viewing such images and videos, these users also offer an insight into the effect the posts can have on young women.

Laura explains her impression of the bodies she sees depicted on the app, negatively comparing her own to the images and videos she views. She then describes her consideration about what she could do to remedy her body with its perceived flaws because it does not align with what she sees projected by Instagram models.

“Everyone on Instagram is in a bikini and is like, tiny and tanned and stuff so I’m just like okay, well that’s not quite me. Sometimes you’ll just be like ‘ahh shit. Maybe I should pull my head in a bit’. Especially if I’ve had a big binge week, and like eaten really badly. And then like, I’ll be like, ‘I can cut some life choices out’.” (Laura, 22).

Lydia also reports viewing body-prominent content posted by influencers. This user acknowledges that what these women project digitally in their images and videos may not be a true indication of what their bodies look like in real life. Despite this, she continues to look at the content they post, and like Laura, experiences a negative effect to her perception of her own body as a result.

“I find it kind of stupid, but then sometimes I look at them and I kind of get insecure cause I’ll be like ‘oh they always look so good in their photos’ and I’ll see that but then they’ve tried so hard to get to that point. Because I find lots of the girls’ photos are so staged. And they

always have those G-string bikinis with their hair like this (uses hands to move her hair, demonstrating her perception of a common style worn by influencers).” (Lydia, 22).

Ellie is another participant who compares herself to what she sees portrayed in images and videos posted by influencers. She believes that in other contexts – such as when individuals with a specific hobby or interest use the platform to develop a community – Instagram can have a positive influence on its users, but that viewing appearance-focused content negatively affects her sense of body and self. Like Lydia, she thinks that influencers digitally manipulate the depictions they post but this does not mitigate the detriment she experiences to her wellbeing.

“I think it’s, yeah I do think it’s hard because it’s, I do realise, or recognise that like, what they put is edited and things like that. But it is really hard not to compare your body, your clothing, you know like, your lifestyle with them. I find like, Instagram has had both a positive and a negative impact. I would say, a bit more of a negative impact though, on me, and my confidence and self-esteem.” (Ellie, 22).

The reports from Lydia and Ellie show that an awareness of digital manipulation does not lessen the negative effect to self that occurs from viewing images posted by an influencer. This outcome is broadly consistent with Tiggemann, Brown & Anderberg (2019), who found that pairing thin-ideal fashion advertisements with disclaimer labels indicating digital alteration did not protect young women from body image concerns. Instead, reading information explaining how images were digitally altered led to an increased sense of body dissatisfaction in young women. A logical reason for this being that if young women are encouraged to consider digital alteration, they may be led to think about thin models and become more aware of imperfections in their own body (Tiggemann et al., 2019). Support for this position can be found in Borau & Nepomuceno’s (2019) study of women’s reactions to advertisements showing an airbrushed ‘thin ideal’. The group responded with higher vigilance and an increased sense of discrepancy between their physical self and the female models after looking at their images.

In both studies, popular women’s magazines were used as the lens through which to explore the effect of digitally retouched images. A commonality in findings emerged from the current dataset, in that respondents were aware of digital manipulation, yet not relieved of body dissatisfaction they experienced as a result. The research context that is the Instagram platform may, however, make users more vulnerable to negative body image effects. Participants report

a tendency to keep their mobile – the device they use to access the app – on their person during most hours of the day. During their interviews they displayed what seemed to be subconscious and habitual use by moving to use Instagram regularly throughout conversation. Such usage may lead to greater exposure to idealised female bodies, and subsequently increase the recognition of digital manipulation, vigilance and thoughts of flaws in their own physical appearance found to affect women in the other studies (Borau & Nepomuceno, 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2019).

5.2.6 Idealisation and Idolisation

Influencers are strategic and selective as to the content they post to Instagram in order to develop and promote a personal brand (Khamis et al., 2017). Such users are in control of the identity they share with and sell to their audience (Marwick, 2010; 2015), but this theme shows how that identity can be interpreted by those who follow them.

In the current study, reports from some participants are indicative of parallels between social media celebrity culture and particular types of religious behaviour, similar to that identified in Milner's (2005) exploration of traditional celebrity. Narratives shared by certain respondents explain their admiration of an influencer, containing quasi-religious features such as worship and devotion (Milner, 2005). 'Idealisation and idolisation' encompasses the way such users can perceive an influencer as a wholly positive 'ideal' or 'idol', despite only experiencing the identity they share as a digital depiction, promoted on the Instagram app.

Emily describes an influencer she admires as she scrolls through her historic posts, all of which she has 'liked'. For Emily, this young woman is 'perfect' and she speaks about her entirely favourably. She includes details she has remembered from the time of her posts, even those shared months and more than a year ago.

“She’s like the ‘popular girl’. Like if you look at her Instagram, her Instagram’s really, really good. And she’s really natural about it. Well, she’s gorgeous. And she’s a cheerleader for the (sports team). Yeah, so I feel like, when I started following her, it’s like, posts like this that are just awesome (video of her and other cheerleaders dancing). People want to, like, look how many views she has (several thousand). And then you’ve got photos like this (her in a bikini at a hotel resort). People just want to see that stuff you know? And she’s like, I don’t know, she’s awesome. She went to Fiji, (shows photos of her in bikini on beach),

she's just got an awesome life, you know? She went to Fiji for New Years, and then she ... she's just gorgeous." (Emily, 21).

Emily's report pertaining to this particular influencer contains frequent adulation. Her verbal description and the complimentary language she uses aligns her with fans of traditional celebrities discussed by Milner (2005), and the sense of idolisation such people can express towards famous individuals. The behaviour she references and demonstrates may reinforce the quasi-religious aspect of her attachment. Emily has a specific recollection of the details of previous images and videos including what the influencer reports to have been doing, what she was wearing and where she was. She regularly and repeatedly returns to this influencer's account and the content she has posted, which could be similar to a ritualistic act of devotion if the same habits were performed in a religious context.

This respondent's outlook also broadly aligns the dataset with what Khamis et al., (2017) argue to be the typical attitude of young people towards certain prominent social media users. She seems to believe that good looks, a good life and displays of conspicuous consumption (through crafting clothing, make-up and holidays into social media content) merit adoration of the poster. This is the user's interpretation of the content, but Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) find that influencers purposefully attempt to cultivate such a perception. These are predominantly young women who positively frame their online presence to portray a good life (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

While broadly reflective of these recent studies (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017), the way this participant thinks and feels about an influencer may show that viewing body-prominent content can increase gaze-like behaviours, if the focus of the user's attention is someone they admire.

Emily's perception that this influencer is positive and aspirational encourages her to observe the content she posts through the same lens. That is, she idealises or idolises this influencer's feed that is dominated by photos that are largely body-focused, almost all of them featuring her as the singular subject of the imagery. She wears either a bikini or a minimal amount of clothing, with make-up, styled haired, with the overall image and/or her body enhanced by a filter. Emily conflates a specific presentation of physical attractiveness, one that is only achievable as a digital Instagram image, with a satisfying life. Idolising the influencer in this way compels Emily to return to her posts, look at them repeatedly and increases her exposure to content that highlights the young woman's body.

The influencer idolised by Emily is similar to a certain type of Instagram user - the ‘lifestyle’ poster - as she shares photos from her daily life (Chae, 2018). Another category of Instagram content followed by consumers, especially young women, is fitspiration as discussed by Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015; 2018). Ostensibly centred on the aesthetic after-effects of athleticism, images of this type overwhelmingly present the thin and toned female body. Predominantly, this body is not actually participating in exercise and is objectified instead. Particular body parts are given prominence in fitspiration imagery, rather than individuals (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018).

For Maggie, the fitness influencer who posts this type of content is someone to be admired. Like Emily, her favourite woman to follow on Instagram is an influencer who she views as an aspirational figure from the content she shares. She has followed her on a second visual platform, exposing herself to more of her content.

“I actually follow her on snapchat as well. She’s really inspirational, and she’ll talk about, like, she talks about so much stuff. Like motivation. And she puts, she’s got another page called (influencer) Workouts, and I’ll do them at the gym. So yeah, I follow that too.”
(Maggie, 22).

Maggie’s engagement with this influencer involves watching the stories she posts before she gets out of bed every morning, looking at the images she posts later in the day and viewing videos of her demonstrating exercises while she is at the gym. She describes this woman as ‘inspirational’, explaining that she follows her because she shows people how to live a healthier life through sharing her advice on diet and fitness.

Like Emily, Maggie has a detailed recollection of historic posts from this specific influencer, is devoted to viewing her images and videos and does so as a daily ritual. Maggie differs from Emily however, in that she follows the recommendations this woman makes as to what to eat and how to exercise. She believes this woman to be a wellness ‘guru’ and in addition to implementing what she preaches in her own life, she shares her instructions with friends and family thinking that it would benefit their lives too.

Maggie idolises this ‘health and fitness’ influencer, but the woman is not a trained professional and does not possess the education or accreditation that would be required by someone in the industry, such as a nutritionist or personal trainer. She is a bikini model who posts videos and images of herself with a full face of professional looking makeup and hair that is styled into

curls. The influencer wears exercise apparel – micro-spandex shorts and a sports bra – in her ‘fitness’ videos but is otherwise in swimwear. Comparing Maggie’s response to the influencer with what she depicts on the Instagram platform exemplifies the contradiction Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015; 2018) argue as inherent to fitspiration content. She self-brands as someone who uses Instagram to promote fitness, yet strategically uses her body and the platforms highly visual nature to gain attention.

While the images and videos Maggie habitually views broadly reflect ‘fitspiration’ content as defined by Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015; 2018), the context in which the material is viewed is different, and may increase the negative effect identified. Maggie shows that ‘fitspiration’ is not limited to a category of images shown from a specific hashtag search but something projected daily from influencers held up as aspirational by women who follow them. This influencer posts health and fitness content with an overall emphasis on appearance while simultaneously referencing topics such as motivation and mental health. For Maggie, these are positive actions and she idolises the influencer for doing so. It makes her feel connected to the woman, so she repeatedly views the content as an influence to ‘motivate’ herself to eat healthily and exercise. As a result, the worsening of mood, body satisfaction and self-esteem due to acute exposure to fitspiration images (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018) may be exacerbated. Rather than a collective of images contributed from a range of random sources, Maggie habitually turns to one woman who she idolises and connects with.

Charlotte is another respondent who has idolised a certain ‘fitness’ influencer. Unlike Maggie, her perception that such digital depictions could be wholly aspirational is a past experience that she reflects on in hindsight. She describes her experience of following this influencer and looking up to her as a positive figure in her life. She ultimately recognised that the content she shared was constructed to sell a sense of perfection to followers, and did not reflect real offline life.

“She used to post a lot of these pictures in her bikini, and her body would look great but she’d have, a full face of makeup, and her hair’s completely done, and it would just be very like, that’s not what I associate with exercise. I like see it like, sweaty, red face with, you know, hair tied up kind of thing.” (Charlotte, 22).

Like Maggie does now, Charlotte initially idolised the influencer she followed. As she considered the woman to be someone worthy of aspiration and as a source of trustworthy

information, she would repeatedly return to her content and felt increasingly connected to her. Her behaviour in real life changed as she attempted to mirror what the influencer promoted digitally. Charlotte began waking up early to powerwalk ‘fasted’ as this would supposedly encourage her body to burn more fat, then followed by ‘butt’, ‘abs’ or ‘legs’ exercise routines as a ritualised morning practice. Charlotte has since come to the realisation that the representation of the woman that she aspired to look and be like was, in fact, a digital construct. The health and fitness façade that Instagram enabled her to present was actually built from carefully managed posts presenting an idealised view of female physicality.

The influencer whose content Maggie engages with as a daily source of inspiration presents herself in a very similar way to the woman described by Charlotte. Yet, Maggie idolises her whereas Charlotte has recognised that her idealistic perception was wrong. Despite Charlotte developing a more critical outlook towards influencers in comparison to Maggie and her younger self, there are still aspects of their Instagram presentation that she deems inspirational.

Charlotte describes the way influencers will sporadically post makeup free and unedited selfies or videos on their stories. For her, this is an admirable act and something she thinks is especially valuable for younger women to see. She is particularly aware of these users because this was when her own experience of body fascination and comparison was most harmful.

“Because there are a lot of young girls, and girls that do look up to and follow these influencers. But a majority of them do, every now and then, maybe not on their actual posts but on their stories and stuff they’ll have natural faces, and natural, them just in their natural states doing things. But, some of them take their Instagram page very artistically. So it’s very, it does ruin the theme or the flow of what they’re doing if they have just this one random photo with them, you know, looking different. So, they do definitely have a responsibility to not... I wouldn’t say a responsibility to other people because it’s your choice to follow them. They didn’t ask you to follow their page, um, and if you do it’s still your choice. But I think it’s not good for them. It’s not good to edit themselves so much that even, you know, they can’t see any flaws within them. You know, I think it’s quite good to still feel confident enough to post a picture without editing the hell out of it.”
(Charlotte, 22).

Charlotte's support of the makeup free or unedited image offers reinforcement to the suggestion that Instagram is also an empowering self-presentation medium for young people (Lee et al., 2015). The example she shows of this, however, is an influencer whose main feed is comprised of bikini photos, a made-up face and filters. Her inspiring act is in her story where she films herself going about her morning routine. Charlotte's description was accurate in the sense that the influencer's appearance did seem to be more 'natural'. In the video, she discussed her make-up free face as a way women can be brave and show their natural beauty. Understanding that influencers strategically construct an identity to sell to their followers (Marwick, 2010; 2015) suggests that this is an intentional act to bolster her presence and encourage more followers by appealing to the appearance concerns of women. The method she uses to do this is only temporary, as Instagram stories are only available for 24 hours. Therefore, her natural video is a very small proportion of the content she shares, and by nature is ephemeral. The overwhelming majority of content remains bikini photos, styled hair and professional makeup. The perception of Instagram as empowering (Lee et al., 2015), that is reinforced by Charlotte in the context of influencers, may warrant critical examination such as that presented by other recent social media focused studies (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018). Respondents in the current dataset repeatedly engage with particular influencers by viewing their content, feel connected to and idolise the bodies they see on the app. When these admired bodies promote the message that confidence is sharing an image where one hasn't edited their face or body, this may encourage young followers to associate their sense of self-worth with their physical appearance.

Comparing Maggie and Charlotte also emphasises the importance of understanding the nuances of consumer vulnerability. These two individuals share commonalities in that they are the same gender, age and are at a similar life stage as university students. They are daily Instagram users, both actively viewing influencer content but engaging with it in different ways. Maggie follows and idolises an influencer, viewing her content each day in an effort to be motivated to eat healthily and exercise. Charlotte had the same connection, but to a different influencer and experienced body comparison and harm to her sense of self as a younger woman. She is developing a critical view of influencers, yet maintains that they have a positive role to play in the lives of younger women. While research recognises that not all women are effected by social media in the same way (Fardouly et al., 2015), this may be important in the specific context of influencers. It could be difficult to realise if users are experiencing detrimental

effects from their engagement, when the women they follow are outwardly framed as wholly positive and inspirational figures.

5.2.7 Influence

‘Influencer’ is a title adopted by a specific category of online micro-celebrity inspired by Katz & Lazarsfeld’s (1957) conceptualisation of “personal influence”. The term denotes an individual who is capable of influencing the opinions and ideas of others in their social network (Katz et al., 2017). Marwick (2015) discusses Instagram users who purposefully develop an ability to reach an audience through posting self-images that elicit attention, becoming ‘Instafamous’. Cotter (2019) describes such an intentional process as the influencer’s pursuit of influence.

The current dataset contributes to the way influence can be understood in the context of the Instagram platform in two areas. Firstly, the specific interaction between the respondents as users, the platform and the device they access it from means that influencers are constantly observed. These prominent posters frequently acknowledge the observer by sharing personal information, particularly through the story function, as a way of encouraging their audience to repeatedly view, connect with and idolise the content they post. The more consumers engage in body fascination behaviour, the more powerful the influencers they view can seem, and the more they can be influenced by their digital representation.

Secondly, the influencer accounts repeatedly viewed by participants predominantly share body-prominent images and videos. This can be coupled with the extended attention and habitual gaze practices reported and demonstrated by the respondents, to show that influencers may use their physical body to increase both the attention they draw from their audience and their capacity to influence them. When consumers repeatedly view, connect with and idolise bodies on Instagram, they can regard that figure as an authority. They can associate that body with more power than they do their own, enabling what it looks like and does to influence them. This influence can manifest in their consumption decisions, behaviour, thoughts and feelings.

Some respondents associate influencers with promotional Instagram posts. The intention of such content being to encourage followers to purchase products, it results in financial benefit for the influencer. Charlotte is an example of a participant who has this opinion. She explains that it is the connection consumers develop to an influencer that leads them to purchase a product they recommend.

“When I think of them, I think a lot of like sponsorship, or paid products. I feel like, because they’ve got the following they can influence people to kind of, try those products and trust them. I think there’s a lot of like, trust in those influencers from the people that follow them.” (Charlotte, 22).

An influencer can be paid by a brand or company to endorse a product, sharing images of themselves using or wearing an item and espousing the benefit. They often provide a direct link to where it can be purchased and a discount code for a reduced price to their followers. Alternatively, influencers may have their own brand and advertise these products through the platform. Maggie describes examples of each of these contexts through her consumer behaviour, and that of her female friends.

“Okay so last Christmas right? I got (brand name) by (influencer) active wear. I got (brand name) cosmetics which is her mum’s company. What else did I get...? Anyway my whole Christmas was just filled of stuff that (influencer) promotes. Which... is pretty bad.” (Maggie, 22)

“So we have all this (brand name) protein powder in our house, that doesn’t even taste good but cause, (influencer), that’s the one she uses, so, we have it. And, yeah. Just whatever they promote. It’s pretty easy to get.”(Maggie, 22).

Explaining Maggie’s behaviour as being a result of effective marketing using social media influencers would align her with other recent consumer studies. Existing research has explored the impact of social media influencers on consumer’s purchase intentions (Lim, Radzol, Cheah & Wong, 2017), the effect of an influencer’s likability and popularity on customer attitudes to the brand they promote (De Veirman et al., 2017) and their commercial viability (Khamis et al., 2017).

Her behaviour is similar to other young female consumers in particular, as the group use Instagram to learn about the products that celebrities endorse (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016), which effects their purchasing behaviour (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Young women are especially influenced by the non-traditional celebrity, such as an ‘Instafamous’ user, believing them to be more credible and relatable than the traditional celebrity (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

While Maggie's reports indicate a perception that the particular influencer is credible, relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), likable and popular (De Veirman et al., 2017), the most significant factor impacting Maggie's consumption is connection. The influencer who Maggie has purchased products from is the same one who she habitually views on Instagram, whose content she connects with, who she idolises as a source of inspiration and whose body she is attached to viewing. These factors endow the user with influence, enabling her to suggest products and encourage consumption. The success of which is proven by Maggie and her friends buying those products.

Despite being a participant whose purchase intentions are impacted, Maggie shows that influencers have greater control over their followers beyond their own consumption decisions. She has recommended the influencer and the advice she shares with her friends, encouraging them to follow her diet regime and buy the protein powder she promotes even though she herself does not enjoy the product's taste. The connection a consumer can develop, and the power this gives influencers is reinforced by Frankie.

"Having those influencers, to just... because, you invest your life in these people, through watching their stories every day, so you feel that connection with them. And when they say, inspirational stuff like that, it's like - oh my gosh. So I think they have huge power in that."
(Frankie, 23).

The power of influencers is discussed differently by participants who have a relatively more critical view of such Instagram users. They are concerned about their capacity to influence, because of the detrimental effect experienced by themselves or young women close to them. India describes their ability to effect the cultural ideals and expectations of female physicality.

"And I'm all for people posting like, whatever they want and it's their choice, and I suppose it's like, your own decisions but then sometimes I'm like...I don't know if it's their responsibility how people interpret it? But then sometimes I'm like... we kind of have a bit of a culture where we look at it like something we're supposed to achieve, and I look at it and I'm like, I know half these photos are staged, like, Photoshop is so easy to use. Like, we got taught Photoshop in ICT in year 11... and I kind of get worried for my little sister because she doesn't realise that so much of that stuff is fake." (India, 21).

India is concerned about the promotion of an unattainable ideal of what women should look like on Instagram, facilitated by Photoshop and other editing tools (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Charlotte, a participant who has become increasingly aware of the power influencers have to negatively impact their followers, shares a similar point of view.

“Because I can understand how easily influenced and impressionable people are. And, I had enough, to be like actually, no. Like I know that it’s not real and it’s not right, but there are people that don’t know that it’s not real. You know you get a lot of like thirteen, fourteen year olds on Instagram and they don’t know that... that’s not what a waist looks like naturally. Um, and so you never know what they go out and do to try and get a waist like that, or try and get perfect teeth or perfect skin, and so, that part of me is quite um, quite sad that, you know, that happens.” (Charlotte, 22).

Social media’s ability to present, propagate and perpetuate unattainable body image ideals among women has been critiqued (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017) but the images studied by the research were of a singularised body part, and accumulated from a variety of sources. The context of the current study is different and may increase the harmful aspects of SNS that research, such as that contributed by Drenten & Gurrieri (2017), has identified. Rather than anonymous fragments of various people, participants in the current study connect to particular bodies, idolise them and view them repeatedly. Their thoughts and behaviours give more power to the user, potentially granting them with a greater capacity to influence them compared to images that aren’t weighted with such meaning.

Participants discussed Instagrammers who were powerful to the extent that they could influence their followers to purchase and undergo cosmetic procedures. Lydia is one respondent who shared her concern.

“I don’t like how she’s trying to get, the one thing I don’t like about all the influencers is them getting like the Cosmetic Clinic and all the injections and... I just think that if you have young followers, what is that saying to them if there’s a 22 year old getting like, injections and, there’s all that kind of stuff? And they’ll give like discount codes and stuff. I understand the skin ones but I just really don’t agree with the Botox ones.” (Lydia, 22).

Lydia uses her phone to show examples of a partnership between an influencer and a cosmeceutical clinic. She posts selfies emphasising the procedures she has had done to her face, namely; injections of filler in her lips and cheeks, as well as botox. In the images she appears to be using professional lighting, and is wearing full make-up with styled hair. She thanks the clinic and offers her followers a referral code which will provide them with a discount if they undergo any of the same procedures.

Her captions explain that she believes in 'loving your body', 'self-love', and women being empowered to make choices about their bodies. She posts that she is more confident in her appearance and in her sense of self from having these procedures, and encourages other women who too want to bolster their self-esteem to consider treatment.

While self-esteem enhancement is a common strategy in marketing that promotes cosmetic surgery (Dingman, Melilli Otte & Foster, 2012), the influencer is also appropriating language from the body positivity and feminist movements in her posts. She uses the notions of female choice and control over their own bodies to present cosmetic procedures she likely profits from as feminist acts (Dingman et al., 2012). In her use of body positivity language, she is contributing to its commodification and appropriation as something that represents thin white women who meet normative standards of beauty (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Such appropriation has also emerged in corporate marketing in recent years with major brands like Dove, Special K and Weight Watchers including similar discourses into their own messaging (Gill & Elias, 2014). This shows that both influencers on an individual level, and the companies that employ them as a marketing tactic are taking advantage of body positivity and feminist movements moving into the mainstream to improve their sales.

By incorporating the language of popular and powerful movements, this user is attempting to increase her influence and develop more power over the consumers who follow her. Indications of her power and prominence on the Instagram platform can be gleaned from the comments she has received from her followers. The audience show their engagement with, connection to and idolisation of her through commenting 'you inspired me', 'Want!!! You are amazing' and 'OMG I want mine done!!!!' below these posts.

Participants who express concern with the promotion of appearance-altering procedures on Instagram may support legislative development over the process. While disclosure language on Instagram is becoming mandatory in influencer advertising, it has been evaluated by scholarship in the context of ad recognition, brand attitude and purchase intention (Evans,

Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017), not in the way that young, potentially vulnerable women can be influenced to undergo cosmetic procedures. From participant contributions, this may be an area that warrants further critique and reform.

5.3 Body Management

Consumers occupied by body fascination and comparison to digital bodies can become engaged in body management. This includes practices such as users posting their own content, attempts to control ones' body and thinking about the way people will talk about their appearance. Such activities are also an attempt at developing their own form of influence. These consumers endeavour to maintain or re-establish control by behaving like the influencers who affect them so much.

The notion of body management can be identified from Laura's discussion of her friends and their behaviour, in their real lives and on Instagram. These are young women whose use of the platform is frequent, and involves viewing influencer content.

“Definitely in the female friends. Yeah. Um... the dudes it will be more something funny. Or like, ‘oh, we’ll just put this on’. Whereas the girls, it’d be planned out and they’ll have like a photo shoot and they’ll take 20 photos. Like this whole week - Cup and Show week - drives me fucking mental. Um, down to where they’ll wear something that no one else has worn that they’ve seen on Instagram. Or like friends of ours, or like, how they look and stuff. And then they’ll go and get their makeup done by someone that’s on Instagram, like shout them out or whatever. Things like that, where like, their whole day is on how people look at them. Not actually being comfortable.” (Laura, 22).

While other social media research has identified that female users are more likely to upload attractive images of themselves to SNS (Wang et al., 2012), Laura frames the way her friends take images as a ‘photoshoot’. These young women strategically plan the way they will present themselves and how they will capture this in an image specifically for their Instagram, motivated by what others will think about their appearance when they view it. The investment of time, effort and financial resources the process demands of these women is further expanded on by Laura.

“Definitely female orientated which is probably, yeah it doesn’t faze me but I can definitely see it in my friends how they, like it’s their life.

Not their life but a lot of their time revolves around it. Like getting the right photo, and the right filter and all the stuff like that. Buying that \$300 top to get one photo in it and it's like... oh my god.” (Laura, 22).

Laura goes on to address where their effort and attention in particular, are directed at social occasions.

“It's going to be funny now on Saturday when I'm going to pre-drinks just watching everything, like this is crazy. Like how many girls are sitting down chatting to people and having conversations compared to the others who are finding the nice part of the brick wall, or the good part of the fence or the flowers to get a photo. It's going to be really, like, that does happen.” (Laura, 22).

Laura's perception of the behaviour of young women she mixes with socially can be compared to other consumers whose participation in real life social community decreases. Identified as a negative correlate of using social media (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), Lydia shares a similar viewpoint to Laura.

“Like, we were at a friend's 22nd the other day and all the girls were just outside with one of the proper big cameras, just posing and posing. And they'd like take one, look at it and be like 'aww nah', then re-adjust, go back and I was just like, recording them doing it...” (Lydia, 22).

From Laura and Lydia's perspective, they are watching their female friends exclude themselves socially in order to curate an ideal self-image on social media. While this aligns with other research (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), and may be what is happening in such scenarios, there is also an alternative way their behaviour can be understood. Modifying their appearance, concern for clothing choice and developing their Instagram presence are areas of shared interest amongst these young women. Their effort in presenting themselves and capturing photos is something they participate in together. It may be then that it is a specific way they participate in their own real life social community, that doesn't interest or involve the wider group. In considering this perspective, social norms are a relevant and significant concern. While this may be an enjoyable pursuit for some of the young women, for others in the group it might not be. Some in the group may feel compelled to participate, fearing exclusion if they do not. For instance Lydia, from her own explanation, is removed from the group of young women as she

watches them pose for pictures. While outwardly she expresses scorn for their behaviour, in reality she was one of the only females in attendance who wasn't involved which could have left her feeling left out and isolated.

Laura and Lydia's friends are producing a constructed form of self for public consumption. This is the behaviour of the micro celebrity, a job that involves as much labour for those pursuing it as the micro celebrities themselves (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). Despite their behaviour paralleling the definition, such terminology wasn't referenced by any of the participants in the study. The title frequently discussed was the social media influencer, who works to develop a form of 'celebrity' capital by garnering as much attention as possible (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

Beyond the labels, participants' explanations offer insight about what it is they entail that compel women to undertake this type of labour. Maggie describes why she and her female friends take self-photos and use Instagram.

“Why else do you put things on Instagram? It's for the likes really. You want people to see it. Cause you're not going to put an ugly photo on Instagram are you?” (Maggie, 22).

This suggests that rather than being driven by titles that research develops, it is the cultivation of attention (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016) that may contribute to the behaviour described by participants. This explanation is reinforced by Emily whose desire for positive recognition to the selfies she posts on Instagram outweighs the negative comments that she receives on her public profile.

“Like, if I put a selfie up. I get bad comments, like random comments, but I also get my friends being like 'you look like a model' or, you know?” (Emily, 21).

Like Maggie and Emily, other consumers use social media with the intention of enhancing their self-image. Hawi & Samaha (2017) argue that it is individuals with low self-esteem who are more likely to use social media with the intention of bolstering their sense of self and worth. While neither participant explicitly stated having low self-esteem, it is something Lydia has wondered about in regard to the way other young women think and feel about themselves and what they post on Instagram.

“I always put it down to be either, they’re either vain or actually insecure. Like I’ve got sooo many friends that consistently say how fat they are, blah blah blah. Then they’ll go and post photos in their bikinis? So I’m kind of like, well, if you’re that insecure you wouldn’t, but then they must do it so that people comment saying ‘oh you look so good’. Then they get their boost of self-esteem back. I don’t know, that’s just my view on it.” (Lydia, 22).

For consumers like the young women Lydia describes, depending on social media to enhance self-concept can actually have unintended and negative consequences. Such use can decrease not only their self-esteem but also their overall life satisfaction (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). This is an outcome that can be seen in a young woman Lydia describes.

“Like I know quite a few people have said about this girl in particular that posts photos - not saying that she looks bad or anything - just bitching about the fact that she says that she’s fat or doesn’t look good, and then there’s like.. Half naked photos or like, on her Instagram story”. (Lydia, 22).

In real life, this young woman verbally expresses her poor body image to her friends. She then turns to Instagram, posting images of her body – edited and in revealing clothing – in an attempt to bolster her sense of self. The cyclical nature of her behaviour suggesting that rather than being an effective way to enhance her self-esteem, posting pictures of her body on Instagram worsens it, compelling her to repeat those same actions.

Other young women exhibit similar behaviour in turning to appearance-emphasising SNS, such as Instagram, for reassurance and validation (Perloff, 2014). It has been identified that such social media users’ likely share attributes and tendencies that put them at risk of increased body dissatisfaction and resultant harmful effects such as negative emotions and poor self-concept (Perloff, 2014). The age and gender of these young women, coupled with the low self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Perloff, 2014), narcissistic propensities (Andreassen et al., 2017) and significance of appearance to self-worth (Perloff, 2014) that their verbal reports and descriptions of their own behaviour and that of their peers indicate, aligns the current dataset with young women considered by other research. What Lydia’s contribution highlights, however, is critical consciousness among young women, or lack thereof.

Consciousness is advocated as a means for women to become aware of the political dimensions of their personal experiences of powerlessness (MacKinnon, 1989). In this regard, participants demonstrate recognition that they – and other young women – may lack autonomy as they discuss the harmful consequences of their Instagram use. Namely, these include negatively comparing their self, body and appearance to influencers to an extent where their self-esteem subsequently suffers. They express concern for other women, especially younger girls who they believe are also likely to be negatively affected. Lydia reported such a sentiment, yet cast judgement on another young woman who was trying to manage her body, her relationship with it and her use of Instagram. By labelling this woman as either “vain or insecure” and “bitching” about her with friends, she is failing to reconcile the behaviour she sees – in real-life social situations and then depicted on Instagram – with a young woman who may be struggling with the very things she has acknowledged as harmful. This suggests that women may be aware that the relationship between their peers, their use of the Instagram platform and extended observation of influencers may be problematic on a theoretical level, rather than something they thoroughly acknowledge by offering their support to other women. If this is accurate, young women’s vulnerability to Instagram influence will likely continue. Critical consciousness raising could be a means of decreasing users’ vulnerability, as it allows people to recognise opportunity for personal and social change, and can help mobilise efforts towards a common goal (Carr, 2003).

While the cyclical nature of women’s behaviour on, and vulnerability to, appearance-focused SNS has been recognised (Perloff, 2014), the current study shows that this is one facet of user behaviour. The dataset reports viewing others content, engaging in upward comparison, feeling negative about their bodies, then returning to look at Instagram images and beginning the cycle again (Perloff, 2014). In addition, respondents show how such a repetitive loop of behaviour can motivate young women to adopt practices to manage their real and digitally represented bodies.

Through describing her own Instagram posts, Emily shows how cyclical comparative behaviour (Perloff, 2014) can lead to body management practices, bridging earlier research to insight shared by participants in the current study. She begins by showing images she posted when she first started using Instagram. Her profile now predominantly features pictures of herself – either full body shots or selfies – but previously included more diverse content such as pictures of friends, family, activities and scenery. Emily shows an earlier photo she posted of herself where she is dressed for a special event.

“So, whenever I looked at photos of myself, especially these ones here (shows images), I’d picked the best of the best photos I could find, but like, this one here, it’s funny because I didn’t look like this that day. I looked a little bit bigger, but this was the best photo out of all the photos I took.” (Emily, 21).

Emily was unhappy with the way she looked and the size of her body, so chose to digitally present her identity in a way that did not wholly reflect the offline reality (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). She posted the photo in order to depict a version of herself that she thought was more physically attractive. Emily believed that others who viewed the image would share this perception, and sought validation of her appearance, hoping she may receive positive comments complimenting her looks from other users. After receiving two comments that endorsed her image, Emily’s desire for positive reinforcement increased, she became more attached to Instagram and started to use the platform more. Increasingly she viewed pictures of other young women, engaged in comparisons and subsequently felt more dissatisfied with her body than before. This behaviour and resultant reaction that Emily described throughout her interview has also been identified in other young, vulnerable women who depend on social media (Andreassen et al., 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Perloff, 2014). What Emily shows however, is that not only does appearance-focused social media encourage comparison to others, but also to the digital version of one’s own self. She shows this by returning to images she posted where she thinks she looks better than she does in real life. She ruminates in the feeling (Perloff, 2014), but she also begins efforts to change her body by dieting and joining the gym.

“Like, if you looked at my body back then, I was so unhappy. This was at the start of it. (Starts showing before and after weight loss pictures - selfies). I’ll show you my, my progress pics okay? I put this on Instagram. So, when I started... I looked like this... And I just wasn’t... It wasn’t how I thought I looked. I thought I looked like this. And so, if you look at the difference between what I was and what I am now (shows before and after). I know I have changed.” (Emily, 21).

Emily uses Instagram to capture changes she has made to her appearance through diet and exercise, and to identify parts of her body that she thinks need further improvement. She takes regular progress photos, posts them to her profile and repeatedly returns to view the images.

Through dieting and gym sessions, Emily lost weight which altered her physical body, but this was not enough for her to be satisfied with her appearance as depicted in photos for her Instagram profile. Because of this, Emily edits her body before posting pictures.

“And I feel like... there can be a nasty side to Instagram. Like the girls who... ugh, I’m going to be honest, I do edit my photos sometimes. Just because I guess in a way, I still, I want myself to look as good as I can. So if you look at just, even this photo here. So I had, I went to the races. And I took some photos. And, in all honesty, I see my body here, and I don’t really have an issue with it at all. I think I look really skinny. I think I look fine. Like this one. It’s not like I don’t think I look fine, I just wanted it to be... It’s not that I have an issue with my body. I just... I don’t know. I don’t know. Then I edited it to look like... I think this is (showing the two photos where she has made herself ‘slimmer’). This is sort of embarrassing. So that’s the original. And that’s what I edited it to. I just made myself look a little... thinner. You know? And I probably, I would have done it worse before I lost weight. And I don’t, I think it’s stupid that I do it. Because honestly, I don’t even need to. Like it’s not even, I don’t have an issue with myself. Cause I have come a long way. I think its cause, I still want to lose a tiny bit of weight so maybe that’s why I was doing it. Just to keep myself going. Like, I still want my body to be what I want it to be” (Emily, 21).

Where other young women use fitspiration images on Instagram as motivation to diet and exercise (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018), Emily uses her own Instagram profile instead. She makes her body appear smaller by editing it, then posts the photos, returning to view them frequently for inspiration. Using social media in this way is indicative of narcissism (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015), a trait related to addictive use of social media (Andreassen et al., 2017). These characteristics emerged as Emily’s body management efforts increased. That is, she redefined the goals she set about her body, deciding that losing a further 5kg would bring her closer to the idealised version of herself she creates through her edited posts. She captures the efforts to change her body, continues to edit the images and posts them to Instagram.

“I just put like a progress, well it’s not really a progress, and I just decided I want to lose another 5kg. But, I put it on Instagram because I’ve been really lazy about it, and I’ve decided that I want to, so I need to put it somewhere so I can motivate myself. So I look at it and go, ‘oh yeah, I said I was going to do that so I should probably do it’. I hold myself accountable, and my friend was like, ‘my goal is another 4kg’, so I was instantly like, ‘cool, we can do it together’. And then someone else said that I was their inspiration. Which is cute, it just keeps you going, you know?” (Emily, 21).

As Emily became more engaged in body management practices, she developed her own form of influence on the platform. Her friend sharing that she too wanted to lose weight, is an indication that she may have been affected by Emily’s diet, exercise and body-focused posts. Emily has transitioned from someone negatively affected by this type of content and comparison to self and others, to someone deliberating creating the same type of presence on the platform. As this follower is also a friend, it shows that influencers’ Instagram habits, coupled with general societal pressures pertaining to idealised female physicality, have formed non-influencer Instagram behaviour as reported by Emily which has further affected her personal network. She is awarded for this conduct, being called an ‘inspiration’ by a follower which frames her digital depiction as wholly positive, and someone to look up to despite presenting objectification and editing of the self on a public platform.

India describes female friends who, like Emily, start a process of weight loss which they share on Instagram. Unlike Emily, they have created three distinct Instagram accounts, with differing content focuses. She describes a particular friend and her ‘actual’ profile where she predominantly shares self-photos and some with friends, her ‘personal’ where she shares candid or humorous content and her ‘gym’ profile. Using Instagram in this way demands effort and labour associated with the micro celebrity (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016) however rather than producing one publicly consumable self, she develops three. She uses the ‘gym’ profile to document her body management efforts.

“I have friends that, like, I have one Instagram account. I feel like you’re really committed to Instagram when you have more than one Instagram account. So I have a friend, and she has like her personal one, her gym one, and then her actual more. I actually have more than

one friend who does this. And I follow all three of them because they're actually like, I'm like, wait, you've got more than one Instagram account? And they're like - 'it's my journey to fitness'." (India, 21).

Creating multiple versions of self, rather than one, on Instagram is also discussed by Charlotte. This participant has several female friends who create distinct selves on Instagram. Specifically, through a 'main' profile and a 'gym' profile. In developing their presence they focus on the fitness influencers they follow and the type of content they post, trying to replicate that in their own digital self-presentation.

"I know a lot of my friends, um, follow the fitness ones quite heavily, because, they're quite into Instagramming. So they get tips and tricks of how to get more followers from these people." (Charlotte, 22).

Charlotte's description of her friends' behaviour may show that users' engagement with fitspiration content as discussed by Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015; 2018) and the work required of an influencer on social media established by research (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; 2016b; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2010; 2015) are interconnected facets of a user's activity on the platform, rather than disparate elements to be explored independently of one another. The friends she references align with Tiggemann & Zaccardo's (2015; 2018) work, in that they are young women who search for fitspiration images - a category of content viewed primarily by female users - on the app as motivation to diet and exercise.

Specifically, these users purposefully view content posted with the 'Fitspiration' hashtag, looking for content shared by female fitness influencers to find the profiles of the women who create it. As indicated by Charlotte's reports, two main factors influence her friends search. Firstly, they are looking for women who post body-prominent images show an appearance and physicality they admire. They aspire to look like such women and follow their diet and exercise advice, hoping to change their own body to become more similar to the digital depiction shared by the influencer in the process. Secondly, these users are interested in the women themselves and the way they manage their digital body and presence. They use number of followers, paid posts and sponsorship deals as evidence that a fitness influencer is successful on the platform. Then, they replicate their content in an effort to cultivate attention themselves which is characteristic of the social media influencer (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016).

Kate also aspires to increase her following on Instagram, and looks to successful influencers as inspiration to guide her efforts. Rather than managing her body and appearance from a

'fitness' perspective, she identifies as a 'fashion and lifestyle' Instagrammer. Like other consumers, she seeks beauty and fashion advice from this type of influencer (Abidin, 2015a) and even begins to model her profile after theirs (Abidin, 2016a).

"Yeah, like, I save, me and this friend, we have a folder called 'poses' that we just like – 'oh that could be good!' Because we sometimes when we hang out we try and take photos for our feed. Yeah so we're just like 'oh we're really stuck, we look crazy right now, let's just look at our folder and see what we can do'." (Kate, 22).

Kate's efforts, and those of her friend who she shares this passion with, may go beyond those of other women who view content shared by this type of influencer. Where other consumers seek advice (Abidin, 2015a), copy hashtags they use and attempt to replicate their clothing choices through 'Outfit of the Day' posts (Abidin, 2016b), Kate uses their images to study their bodies. She saves their posts, and copies the way they position themselves, from their facial expressions to the placement of their hands as closely as possible.

Respondents in the current study share a point of view held by other consumers, as identified by Khamis et al., (2017), in that the self-branding efforts of the influencer are seemingly replicable. For young women like Kate and her friend, engaging in extended body fascination and body management behaviours may increase this. The more they view the digital depictions of women they aspire to, the more they believe they can imitate them, down to the subtle details of their pose, posture and facial expressions. Emily adopts a similar approach to Kate, but includes additional techniques. Her self-branding efforts are strategic, concerted and focused towards developing an audience (Khamis et al., 2017). Like Kate, these are techniques she has learned from studying influencers.

"I think it's because also - if I'm being honest, I want heaps and heaps of followers, but I don't have heaps and heaps of followers. So I try a little bit harder to you know, hashtag, and tag brands and tag things that will make people follow me. It doesn't work very well though..." (Emily, 21).

Emily shows photos she has posted to Instagram where she has implemented the strategies she has described. These are predominantly full-body shots where she is the sole focus of imagery. She has tagged the company who produced each item of clothing she wears with the hope that they might share her image from their own Instagram account. To be able to do this, she had

to first purchase the clothes, and by doing so, produced promotional content that advertises the brands at her own expense, without receiving remuneration or recognition (Abidin, 2016b). This is behaviour that seems replicable to consumers (Khamis et al., 2017), but may not actually result in any tangible outcome. Despite recognising that what she is doing isn't having the desired effect, Emily's efforts continue.

“And, I would want to have more followers just to have that satisfaction. Although it's kind of like... at the end of the day it's pointless. And I know I'm not really going to have thousands and thousands of followers. I just like the look of those Instagram models who have so many followers and I think I'd want to be like that, I just don't know how I would. So what I do is I hashtag. And people do start following you when you hashtag. Like I put a photo up yesterday, and a couple of people definitely started following me. It also depends on if they stay because I also go down in followers depending on how little I post. Like if I don't post much then my followers go down, if I post a lot then people follow me and continually follow me.” (Emily, 21).

Emily's desire for more followers compels her to maintain her presence, which may cause her to use social media in excess (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Rather than using SNS to sustain social relationships like other consumers though (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), Emily is seeking validation which she believes she will get if enough strangers follow her. This is a feeling other vulnerable young women seek, especially on appearance-focused social media sites (Perloff, 2014). However, Emily's increasing need for recognition from others who view her Instagram images does not result from comparing her profile to a range of content posted by various users. Instead, it is her fascination with a few key influencers that she connects with, idolises and looks at repeatedly. She views these women as inspirational, positive figures who have achieved something worthy through attracting attention from what she perceives to be a large audience on the platform. Even though Emily has not experienced a notable increase in followers, describing her attempts as 'pointless', the motivation she feels towards achieving influencer status outweighs even her self-assessment that her actions are not progressing her towards that goal. As such, she continues with her efforts.

Frankie is another respondent who describes what is required of users to develop a presence on the platform. In doing so, she may contribute detail to research that references the 'labour'

(Mavroudis, & Milne, 2016) and the ‘work’ (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016) of the social media influencer, particularly in the context of young women who use Instagram.

“So, I mean, it’s... You’ve got to be following people regularly, engaging, to get those new followers. Because you can’t invite your friends to like and follow you, you’ve got to get out and follow people, to show them, to show them yourself. It’s, captions take a bit of time. Writing, that sort of thing. Um, and it’s just that, to really build traction you need to be engaging with as many followers as you can. Liking their posts, commenting, and all that sort of stuff. And, you’ve got to go out and do all of that stuff, and I don’t have time at the moment. Next year, I’ll have time.”(Frankie, 23).

In Frankie’s description, there is a possible incongruity in the way scholarship understands the behaviour of young women on Instagram. She explains that commenting on others profiles is essential, but this is something research suggests is more likely in individuals with high self-esteem (Wang et al., 2012). Yet, other work makes connections between young females who frequently use social media with low self-esteem (Andreassen et al., 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Perloff, 2014). This can be coupled with reports from the current dataset, as participants link their negative self-concept to the way they use Instagram. The discrepancy may suggest that young women on the platform can project a false sense of confidence and assurance – for example by commenting on posts shared by their followers – that masks the insecurity they experience in real-life. In doing so, they may be concealing their struggles from themselves and others, which may restrict their ability to verbalise them or ask for support if they need it.

Like the other respondents, Frankie’s discussion indicates a desire to grow her social media presence which can be indicative of extreme use and addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Consumers who are strongly attached to SNS are sought out by companies, and are the targets of marketing initiatives (VanMeter et al., 2015). This is something Emily explains a personal experience of, which happened through Instagram, noting that similar situations occur frequently on the platform.

“They like to, if you tag the right things, like if you tag ‘Insta-fashion’ and stuff like that, then companies will actually, like, if you look at some of my accounts. Um, I got a comment on one of my other recent photos saying ‘you are goals babe! We’d love to work with you. DM our main

account and tell them I referred you for more info.’ But I feel like when they comment like that they’re just , write comments, because I’ve seen this one person, this one company commented on one of my photos, and then I, I went into... um yeah see I’ve got two on this one. ‘Hey lovely, we were scrolling through and think you’re absolutely gorgeous. DM us and we’d love to collab.’ They really like, sell it, because they make you think that you’re special.” (Emily, 21).

“So I brought these earrings, and, everyone was like, be careful because they’re just trying to scam you. Which, let’s be honest, they were. And I brought these earrings and they never came. And, I got them really cheap, because what they do, what brands actually do, I figured it out, cause a lot of brands have come to me. They find people on Instagram, who obviously care about Instagram and becoming bigger which is clear about me. I do care about being bigger. They’ll message you and they’ll say ‘hey, you should become one of our ambassadors and you buy stuff from us, we’ll give you a code, you can earn money and stuff’. Which, I’m not too worried about that. I just want to be on their Instagram, like give me followers. And, this Instagram account, they messaged me, so I was like, okay, I’m going to give it this a go, cause... It can’t really hurt. I’m not too worried about money. So, they gave me like a 50% off, these earrings cost me like, maybe \$20, which is doable. Now they never came, and I didn’t really hit them up about it, I didn’t really care that much. But, I can tell that they’re kind of a bit shady, cause, why didn’t the stuff come?” (Emily, 21).

“This was the one that I did buy off though. So they were like, they messaged me saying ‘Emily let’s collab’. So that’s when I was like, hey they want to collab with me. Um, so that means I would be promoted to someone with 100k followers. So they would put me on their account with 100k followers. That’s what I was like, wanting. (Emily reads aloud) ‘Share Codes to make money and exclusive 50% off discount’. Um, but I bought something and it didn’t get delivered, so that’s really crap, although... It might still be coming because it is from the US. And

that stuff takes ages doesn't it? It was only US\$17.49 so that's actually quite cheap. I'm happy with that." (Emily, 21).

As an Instagram user with a public account, who employs certain techniques like using hashtags and tagging brands in her posts, Emily feels that her desire to gain followers is clear. Companies who are completely unknown to Emily leave comments on her photos or directly message her privately. The communications are highly complementary of her physical appearance, always contain an offer to 'collaborate' or request to get in touch by direct message. Of the many companies who approached Emily, she replied to several and felt reassured by one who used her name to address her rather than an adjective like 'beautiful' or 'gorgeous'. She agreed to begin the 'collaboration' process where she would make a purchase from their website, specifically earrings. In return, she would receive a discount code to share with her followers so that if they too purchased something she would receive a small percentage of the profit. She also expected that the company would share her image on their account, directing their audience to follow her profile. Emily was yet to receive the earrings she had purchased, none of her photos had been posted by the brand and has had no further communication from the company.

If Emily's perception is accurate, and she was purposefully engaged by the brand because of her 'obvious' attachment to Instagram, her experience may be an example of a company increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their social media marketing through targeting and segmentation (VanMeter et al., 2015). Her purchase is a desirable outcome from a managerial and organisational perspective, but VanMeter et al., (2015) do not explore the consumer's point of view in such a situation. Emily observes the seemingly replicable new digital practices demonstrated by young women on Instagram (Abidin, 2016a; 2016b; Khamis et al, 2017). She habitually views the content posted by these influencers, connecting with and idolising their digital depictions. Emily laboured to change her body because of what she looked at, and tries to form her own influence to be powerful like the women she follows, copying their behaviour. Simultaneously, she is a potentially vulnerable consumer. She is a young woman who uses social media excessively and exhibits signs of poor self-image through body comparison and centrality of appearance to her self-worth (Perloff, 2014). Emily masks this vulnerability though, through manufacturing a positive and powerful persona on Instagram like the influencers she aspires to. This dichotomy is potentially problematic. Emily shows that young women can be vulnerable not only to body-image concerns (Fardouly et al., 2015; Greenwood & Pietromonaco, 2004; Perloff, 2014), but also to being financially exploited.

Rather than being a possible by-product from general SNS use, this is a concern relevant to young women who engage with influencers on Instagram in this way.

5.4 Social Media Management

Social media management represents a consumer's behaviour as they try to acquire control of their mobile device, their Instagram usage and the way they use the technology to view influencers and their digital depictions. This involves various practices users implement to reduce their app usage, and can include removing it altogether.

Social media management may be an inevitable result for consumers who participate in body fascination and body management practices as outlined earlier in the chapter. Young women in the current dataset report and demonstrate their use of a visual, appearance-focused platform to repeatedly observe digitally represented bodies. Through frequent viewing, they connect with and idolise influencers, endowing them with power. Young women may self-objectify, compare their bodies to those projected by influencers and experience a negative self-concept as a result. To establish or regain autonomy, consumers may post their own content, try to alter their bodies and anticipate the way other users will perceive their appearance, looking to those same influencers who affected them for guidance. Consumers who behave in this way may become aware of their own attachment to the platform, the digital bodies they view on it, as well as the thoughts, feelings and actions they've subsequently developed that negatively affect their sense of self. This may lead users to social media management practices that are predominantly described as unsuccessful by respondents. Users can find themselves drawn back to the app because of boredom, curiosity and social pressure, only to repeat the same cycles of behaviour that lead to their initial need to manage.

Significant to the conceptualisation of body management, was the awareness young women had that the images they posted to Instagram would be viewed and judged by others. Georgie shows that this is also relevant to the way she manages her attachment to the platform. In trying to reduce her use of the app, she 'curates'.

"I just don't think it's a very productive use of time. It doesn't add anything to your day, it doesn't add, which is then why I try to only follow... so say sometimes if I'm going on I'll only go on my news feed because I've really kind of curated that, so what I follow, and to me that's more towards my interests, it's more say like a Pinterest board of what I like, often with links to Spotify playlists or other things that I

like, but... just the trawling through and stalking people, no. I don't think that's good. It doesn't make me... no there's just nothing positive about it though. There's nothing good and you can end up doing it and be like, 'shit, that's 30 minutes gone'. So no, I don't think there's anything positive about it, but it's hard to just do the one, just look at your news feed, because that would only take, you know. I don't follow like, I think I follow like 200 and something profiles. So a few of them are people I know, there's maybe like 60-70 extra kind of accounts, and the people I know barely post. So if I go to check my newsfeed, to get to that bit that says you're all up to date, I'd only have to look through a few posts kind of thing." (Georgie, 24).

"In my newsfeed I more have things from people that I actually know, my friends. And then stuff that is, like.... I try to follow stuff that is... to keep my newsfeed to be only things that I actually think are worthwhile. So for instance, like a few different book Instagram's to get book recommendations, I follow different like cooking ones, I follow ones that like recommend good podcasts often, or like one like my friend who told me about who does a lot a lot of stuff about PCOS. I find that really interesting and she recommends good stuff. Like some cool people who just make good art. If I don't know them it would be people like that who I follow on my actual newsfeed or like a couple of the funny ones but not really. I kind of cull them and just have stuff that is interesting on my actual follow feed." (Georgie, 24).

Curation is an established form of self-presentation and personal branding behaviour on social media, particularly on Instagram, where consumers carefully select, edit and curate a repository of meaningful content to be viewed by an audience (Zhao & Lindley, 2014). In addition to curating their posts however, participants in the current study also take an active role in managing the Instagram content they follow. Georgie 'curates' her newsfeed to contain accounts that she deems worthy or important. For Georgie, there is a sense of performance where she does this with the people who follow her in mind. That is, she wants people to think she has good taste and is tuned into society and popular culture, not that she follows influencers or bikini models. Georgie admits that she actually spends a ratio of 'probably 50:50' of her time on profiles she won't actively follow.

“Oh they’re just like... It’s just different interesting accounts. I mean I don’t find their content that... I mean I shouldn’t look at it at all... but... for example (influencer) in Auckland. She’s a teen mum. Oh actually, she’s not a teen mum, she’s like my age but she has kids and they’re real trendy and it’s like an (influencer) sitch, but I do follow (influencer). I wouldn’t follow her, but sometimes I’d just go look at her account you know. At her page, and stuff like that. But I don’t follow her because I don’t actually want her in my newsfeed.” (Georgie, 24).

Lydia is another participant who won’t explicitly follow all of the accounts she views on Instagram, especially in the context of influencers.

“I know I’ll go through phases where I’ll follow a whole heap of fitness people, and then I’ll decide not to. And I’ll just unfollow them. Like, but then I’ll still go and stalk, like I’ll still go and stalk like the influencers but I just don’t give them the satisfaction of following them. That sounds.... I just knew that I was putting myself down. Because I was following, like... who was I following?” (Lydia, 22).

Georgie and Lydia both demonstrate that consumers can, and that they each personally do, actively manage their Instagram newsfeed, in part by selecting who they will and will not follow. For Georgie this is an exercise in self-presentation, but for Lydia it’s an attempt to limit her attachment to viewing digitally depicted bodies and regain agency from those influencers. While other consumers can inadvertently experience increased body dissatisfaction and worsened state appearance self-esteem from viewing fitspiration imagery (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018) connecting to particular fitness influences exacerbates this for Lydia. It’s not just exposure to the thin and toned body parts (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018) but the textual and visual narratives (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a), the crafted authenticity, and projected confidence of the influencer (Glucksman, 2017) that makes viewing their bodies so compelling for this user. She recognises that the way she interacts with influencers and Instagram is problematic, tries to manage this by unfollowing yet continues ‘stalking’. This can be understood as a ‘relapse’, as she is repeating behaviour patterns that she tried to restrict which is indicative of social media addiction (Cabral, 2008).

When Lydia describes ‘putting herself down’ by looking at influencer content, she is referencing the comparison to digital bodies that she, and the other participants report engaging

in. Such exposure to idealised digital female physicality elicits comparison, body dissatisfaction, and poor self-esteem in other young women (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Drenten & Gurrieri, 2017; Fardouly et al., 2015; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018), but these respondents are showing how they try to control this. Like Lydia, Ellie has systematically unfollowed influencers on the platform.

“There have been people, like I had a huge like, clear out of people I followed earlier this year. Just people that I followed that like, every time I saw them I’d think, like, compare my life to theirs and stuff.” (Ellie, 22).

“I was just sort of, comparing and thinking - oh my gosh they’re having so much more fun or whatever, you know? So, it just kind of, Instagram became a little bit, well it did become toxic for me.” (Ellie, 22).

Like Lydia, Ellie’s behaviour is indicative of a social media addict going through ‘relapse’ (Cabral, 2008). Despite unfollowing influencers and reducing the time she spent on the app, she didn’t stop completely.

“I used it a lot less, because I knew the feeling that I’d get when I went on it. Um, and when I did go on it I’d kind of end up feeling pretty like, average afterwards.” (Ellie, 22).

Ellie’s admission that she experiences low-mood as a consequence of using Instagram highlights potential gaps in other social media addiction research. Cabral (2008) evaluates SNS addiction in – predominantly female – university students using five of six recognised core components of behavioural addiction as initially outlined by Griffiths (2009). Mood modification is excluded from assessment, based on the justification that one cannot be totally honest in this context. It is suggested that mood would be more accurately evaluated by peers. This contradicts respondents in the current study, who frequently discuss the negative emotional state they experience from using Instagram. Kate is a participant who actively uses her mood to guide her management efforts, specifically in choosing to unfollow influencers.

“I feel like they haven’t said that it makes them feel bad, but, my friends will send me pictures of girls that they follow and be like ‘oh my god’, or ‘how is she so perfect?’ Or whatever. You know? Stuff like that. I’m like, just don’t follow her then. That’s what I’ve started doing, is just

unfollow people. I guess I just look at it, and I'm like, what is she actually putting out? Like, does it make me... how does it make me feel? Or whatever, and I'll be like, okay, I'm going to unfollow her." (Kate, 22).

While many participants discuss unfollowing influencers as a key Instagram management technique, others feel that this is not enough and need to delete the app. Charlotte explains why she decided to do this.

"I on Instagram, I actually took a break from Instagram because I was so like, so overwhelmed with seeing all these perfect models, who'd obviously photo shopped a lot of their pictures. But I was just overwhelmed with seeing models with perfect hair, and like perfect skin, and perfect bodies, and just these perfect pictures." (Charlotte, 22).

"That's why I deleted Instagram for a little bit, because it was like... the voice that was telling me that, it's not real, wasn't strong enough. And, I think I was getting negatively influenced, or not negatively, like I was getting influenced and it was hurting me, by seeing all these people, in their perfect form, and it was just making me feel bad about myself. Making me feel self-conscious about things that I don't need to feel self-conscious about. That's why I deleted it, because that voice, the voice of reason, wasn't strong enough for me to overlook these things. Um, it may have been easier to just, unfollow people, but I think... once you start doing that, you kind of give in to... you give in to – you're not following people because they're making you feel bad about yourself, and people shouldn't make you feel bad about yourself, because... that's not what they're trying to do. They're just, posting those pictures to, make their page look great." (Charlotte, 22).

A significant aspect of Charlotte's decision to delete Instagram was recognising that by habitually viewing the digitally depicted bodies of influencers and negatively comparing her own, she was endowing them with power over her. Lydia shared a similar perspective and, although she chose to unfollow such women instead, still did so in an effort to regain autonomy. Another parallel in their sentiments is acknowledging their own role in the situation. This is

framed by Lydia as ‘putting myself down’ and discussed by Charlotte as unintentional from the perspective of the poster, which suggests that these young women believe it is their responsibility to manage their attachment to Instagram and its implications.

Despite deleting Instagram, Charlotte soon found herself re-downloading the app. Others experience a similar lack of success, reinforcing the frequency of relapse as part of social media addiction (Cabral, 2008).

“Like I obviously try delete it and things. Obviously I can’t be that.... Obviously I don’t think it’s a great thing for me personally. That would be my overall.... I don’t love the way I use it.” (Georgie, 24).

Like Georgie, Kate thinks that using Instagram the way these consumers do is problematic. Despite this, she seems resigned to the cyclical nature of addiction and relapse (Cabral, 2008) and the harm this can have on one’s self-esteem and body image when it takes place on an appearance-focused platform (Perloff, 2014). Kate thinks that these experiences are, and always have been, an inevitable part of being a young woman.

“You’re just bound to feel shit about yourself at some point so I don’t think... yeah, like social media is bad but... I don’t know. They’ve grown up with it so I just feel like it’s their normal.” (Kate, 22).

Despite the majority of participants admitting that they implement specific behaviours to try and control their attachment to Instagram, all of the attempts made have been unsuccessful. They may ‘stalk’ influencers who they tried to limit their exposure to, re-follow accounts they had removed from their feed, or re-download the app for those who deleted it. While the cyclical nature of their behaviour is consistent with the way social media addiction is understood (Cabral, 2008), the respondents offer insight as to the reasons they are drawn back. For several of the participants, it is boredom.

“You can just spend so... I don’t think it’s like a very good habit which is why I tend to delete it sometimes, just to give myself a break from it. And then I’ll get it back just to kill boredom when I’m at work on my break or something but I try to do other things.” (Georgie, 24).

Like other consumers studied by SNS focused research, Georgie occupies herself and attempts to mitigate feelings of boredom by using social media (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Young women in the current study may be

different to such individuals, though. By returning to Instagram, they are not only alleviating boredom but replacing that emotion with arguably worse ones, namely; poor mood and body dissatisfaction. This is a potential factor that highlights the importance of recognising the varying degrees of vulnerability inherent to consumers. Respondents are young women who exhibit indications of low self-esteem and social media addiction (Andreassen et al., 2017). They are also at a stage of emerging adulthood, a period defined by developmental challenges for some (Arnett, 2000). A possible difficulty they may be experiencing is recognising the longer term consequences of short-term actions. These users may re-engage with Instagram and influencer content for a momentary sense of satisfaction, only to be drawn back to staring at digitally depicted bodies and negative comparison to their own. This is behaviour that encourages body management efforts among the participants, leading them to the mental and emotional state that participants like Georgie report needing a ‘break’ from.

Another potential contrast is that other consumers who, if aware of their SNS addiction, are likely to try and cut down their usage (Cabral, 2008). Instead, respondents in the current study develop and implement these specific management techniques so that they can still use Instagram. This may be indicative of the extent of their attachment. Even when they are aware their use is problematic and are experiencing harm, they still try and find ways of using Instagram. Ellie, a participant who has described unfollowing influencers, explains this.

“I have had periods of that. And that’s when I had that big clear out. Cause I wanted to use it still, because there were people that I did really want to see their content. But then it was sort of just, mixed in with all this other stuff that I didn’t want to see.” (Ellie, 22).

The effectiveness of Ellie’s management efforts are also decreased by the nature of the platform itself. Despite unfollowing influencers, the content and accounts she has historically viewed are tracked by the Instagram algorithm. Influencers she has unfollowed, as well as others who share similar images continue to appear when she uses the ‘explore’ function. Kate is another participant who has unfollowed influencers yet is still exposed to their content.

“Sometimes, because I feel like for me what I’ve unfollowed, is like, a lot of models. Like, Australian ones, that like, boutiques that I still follow will post photos of them. So, then I might be interested and follow the tag and be like, oh, and see some more of their photos but at least it’s not constantly on my feed.” (Kate, 22).

For Kate, it is not so much the algorithm that ensures her continued exposure to influencers she has unfollowed. Rather, it is the way commercial practices are evolving on the platform. Other research understands that social media influencers self-brand (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a; Glucksman; 2017; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017), promote brands, companies and endorse products (De Veirman et al., 2017; Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Glucksman, 2017; Lim et al., 2017). What Kate describes is influencers whose attention cultivation efforts (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016) have been successful to the point where they have power and presence that brands want to take advantage of. By sharing images of influencers wearing their label of clothing, the companies Kate follows are capitalising on the connection these women have built with their followers. This makes management more difficult for Kate. She wants to see the Instagram content of the clothing and style boutiques that she likes show, and to know when they release new collections for example, but tries to keep her newsfeed free from images of bikini models.

An additional component relevant to Ellie and Kate's continued Instagram use is curiosity. Both participants describe an interest in viewing the lives of influencers that persists despite their management practices. Laura shares how her female friends also consistently repeat the same cycles of behaviour on the platform. She describes a different situation to that reported by Ellie and Kate that involved influencers and captured the attention of the group. She learned about this through conversations in person and through their Facebook Messenger group chat.

“I think... well they follow (influencer). Don't know how to pronounce her name. And like, (influencer) who does the (clothing business) stuff, so they'll like follow her but they... There was this scandal or something that went down and they were being mean to, um... I think, (influencer). So they were all like, 'that's horrible, we don't stand for that', so they've all gone and furiously unfollowed them all, then all followed (influencer) being like – 'we support her!' But they'll still like, go on and look at what they're doing.” (Laura, 22).

It is common for other consumers to use Instagram to 'peek' into the lives of others (Lee et al., 2015) and try to gain knowledge about them (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). This is something that is achieved by following people and liking their posts (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The behaviour Laura describes however, shows that young women may act differently. Ostensibly, they are managing what they view by removing people who they think act in an unacceptable way, who

they don't want to be exposed to. However, driven by curiosity, these young women view their content repeatedly. Then, they engage in frequent conversations about the influencers, attempting to decipher their posts and assign a narrative that explains the 'scandal'. While other young social media users 'stalk' to keep track of those in their real-life network on SNS (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008) these influencers only exist digitally for Laura's friends. A possible reason for their continued curiosity may be the connection they developed prior to the behaviour they perceive to be objectionable. As argued by other research, social media habits are difficult to break (Andreassen et al., 2017; Cabral, 2008; David & Roberts, 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Sofiah et al., 2011). Respondents in the current study show that this may be worsened through developing an attachment to particular bodies on Instagram.

An additional component that may increase the difficulty of Instagram management efforts for respondents is social pressure. The same norms that encourage body fascination behaviours make it more challenging for participants trying to decrease their attachment. This is evident from Laura's contribution, as she reported that her friends were curious as to specific influencers they had connected with, but became increasingly invested in viewing the content they post through talking about them socially. This happened despite these users making the active decision to unfollow them. Georgie is a participant who tries to 'break' away from Instagram, only to be drawn back on by a friend.

“The other day even there was this one girl, a Christchurch one, who's like younger than us and has, like, a couple of thousand followers. She must have posted, umm, something during the day that was controversial and got backlash or something and then she made an Insta story about it saying umm sorry, I took... like apologising for it but the content had gone. So Sarah messaged me and was like 'do you know what that was about?' And I hadn't stalked her or looked at her for a bit so I didn't. So I was like 'no, but I want to find out' and she doesn't follow her so yeah I'm sure lots of people do it.” (Georgie, 24).

For Charlotte - the participant who decided she needed to delete her Instagram - the return to Instagram was gradual. She experienced a similar emotion to other consumers who use SNS in an addictive manner who 'feel out of touch' when they've been absent from social media (Sofiah et al., 2011).

“But, Instagram I reinstalled because I went to a party and I wanted to see the pictures that people posted from that party.” (Charlotte, 22).

Initially, Charlotte resumed her use of the platform so that she could see pictures her social network had posted from a recent party. Despite a self-imposed goal that she would only look at posts from people she knew, she soon re-engaged with influencer accounts by habitually viewing their content. Rather than total app removal, her management efforts shifted and she now tries to spend less time on the app. This may indicate the significance of her attachment to Instagram, as she finds ways to justify using it despite describing how hurt such behaviour makes her feel.

The tension between respondents desire to reduce their app usage, and the connection to influencers and peer group norms that encourage Instagram use is also evident in Ellie’s return to the platform. In comparison to Charlotte however, the pressure from her friends was explicit rather than subtle.

“A little bit when my friends would be like – ‘you didn’t like my photo’, or ‘you didn’t see my photo’. I was like, sorry, I just haven’t been on, and so, a bit of that. And just, I came back on it also cause, some of the um, like I say (influencers) or whatever had kids and stuff. And I just kind of wanted to be a part of that in a way.” (Ellie, 22).

Ellie wants to continue to use Instagram to ‘keep up’ with the influencers who she has developed a connection to, through initially repeatedly viewing their content. Like other consumers, Ellie can be motivated to use social media because of the fear of missing out, ‘FOMO’ (Blackwell, Leaman, Trampusch, Osborne & Liss, 2017). However, it isn’t the real events happening in the networked lives of her peers that cause Ellie to experience this. She views the photos of her friends because they make her feel pressured to do so. Instead, it’s milestone occasions shared by influencers that cause genuine ‘FOMO’ in Ellie. Where other consumers describe receiving complaints from friends and family if they spend too much time on social media (Cam & Isbulan, 2012), some respondents in the current study share an opposing sentiment.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed findings that emerged from in-depth interviews and participant observations. Initially, body fascination was proposed as an unhealthy attachment to viewing others and comparison to ones’ own body. The chapter then explored sub-themes that

contributed to the understanding (inclusive of: device and platform, repetition, visually-focused medium, connection, social norms, idealisation and idolisation, and influence) that lead to body management and media management efforts in the consumers studied. The following chapter presents a model that conceptualises these themes, includes a thorough discussion of the themes and examines potential explanations for why these behaviours manifest in young women.

Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the interrelationship between body fascination, body management and social media management, and how these three themes emerge in consumer behaviour. The discussion will demonstrate the cyclical nature of these themes, and how this manifests in repeated practices. Specifically, it shows that extended attention directed towards influencers who post body-prominent content on Instagram can lead users to negatively compare their own body and experience harm to their sense of self. Young women looking to regain control of their identity may try to alter their body and develop a presence on the platform, drawing on the self-presentation strategies of influencers to do so. Users who adopt such practices may then try to divest from the platform, only to return to their habitual viewing practices as their self-imposed restrictions did not address the factors that initially encouraged their gaze. Sub-themes presented in the previous chapter are included, and their relevance to the central findings explained. Further, potential justifications are offered for the patterns prominent in the dataset. The data collected by this research is conceptualised in Figure 1 and 2 below. Finally, this discussion calls for a need to better understand how and why users are engaging in body fascination practices. It concludes with managerial, theoretical and policy implications focused on younger social media users.

This research addressed young, female social media users, in order to develop an understanding of the online behaviour of this group. Specifically, the study explored image-focused social media, such as Instagram, and the role of social media influencers on the platform. Understanding was sought as to how and why these users engage with social media influencers. An additional focus of the research was whether such prominent users impact the self-concept of those who follow them, and if this effect was positive or negative.

The previous chapter presents findings from the in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted to address these exploratory research questions. While the complexity of the emergent patterns requires further attention from scholarship, the researcher proposes an initial interpretation of the findings.

In the behaviour investigated by the study, three main themes became apparent. That is, understanding the way young females use image-focused social media sites like Instagram involves explaining body fascination, body management and social media management. In addition, the interrelationship of these practices must be addressed. Initially, it is proposed that

this user groups actions can be described as body fascination. The reported and observed behaviour involves gazing at social media influencers who have captured the attention of users. This gaze practice may contribute to body management behaviours in some women, where they develop their own social media content driven by what others will think when viewing it. Users who want to refrain from body fascination and body management may develop social media management practices. These intentional efforts in platform divestment are unsuccessful, and consumers are drawn back into body fascination behaviours. Figure 1 below summaries the cyclical nature of the three main findings.

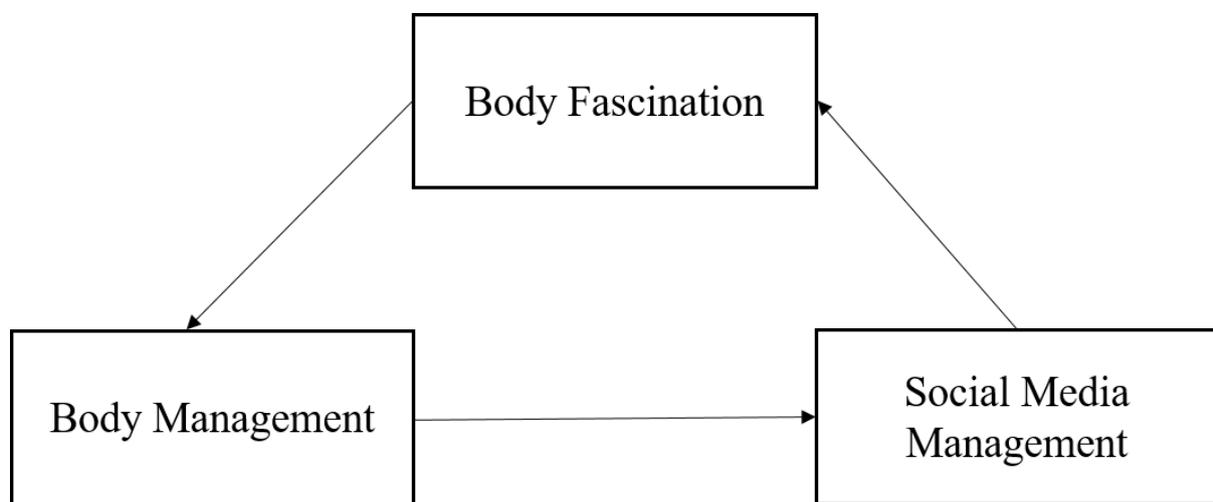


Figure 1: Interaction of User Behaviour Online

The basic conceptualisation shown by Figure 1 does not offer the full initial explanation of the findings proposed by this exploratory research. Body fascination is a practice facilitated by two component categories; technology and the way consumers use and adopt that technology. The technology itself pertains to the device consumers use, the platform, it's highly visual nature and the repetition it fosters. This technology is a conduit that enables consumers to connect to, idealise, and idolise social media influencers. Consumers develop social norms around these practices that endow the influencer with power over them. Users may then develop body management practices that include attempts to alter their body, and posting content to social media with the intention that others will view and discuss their appearance. Such users may want to remove themselves from the platform, and implement social media management practices to do so. These actions may be unsuccessful for users who implement them; divestment attempts fail due to boredom, curiosity and social pressure. Because of these

factors, users may reengage in body fascination. As shown from the SNS users in this study, these practices could negatively affect young women, especially those vulnerable to self-comparison. The three primary themes, and their contributing sub-themes are shown in Figure 2 below. These are then expanded upon throughout the chapter in discussing the behaviour of the female Instagram users who participated in this research.

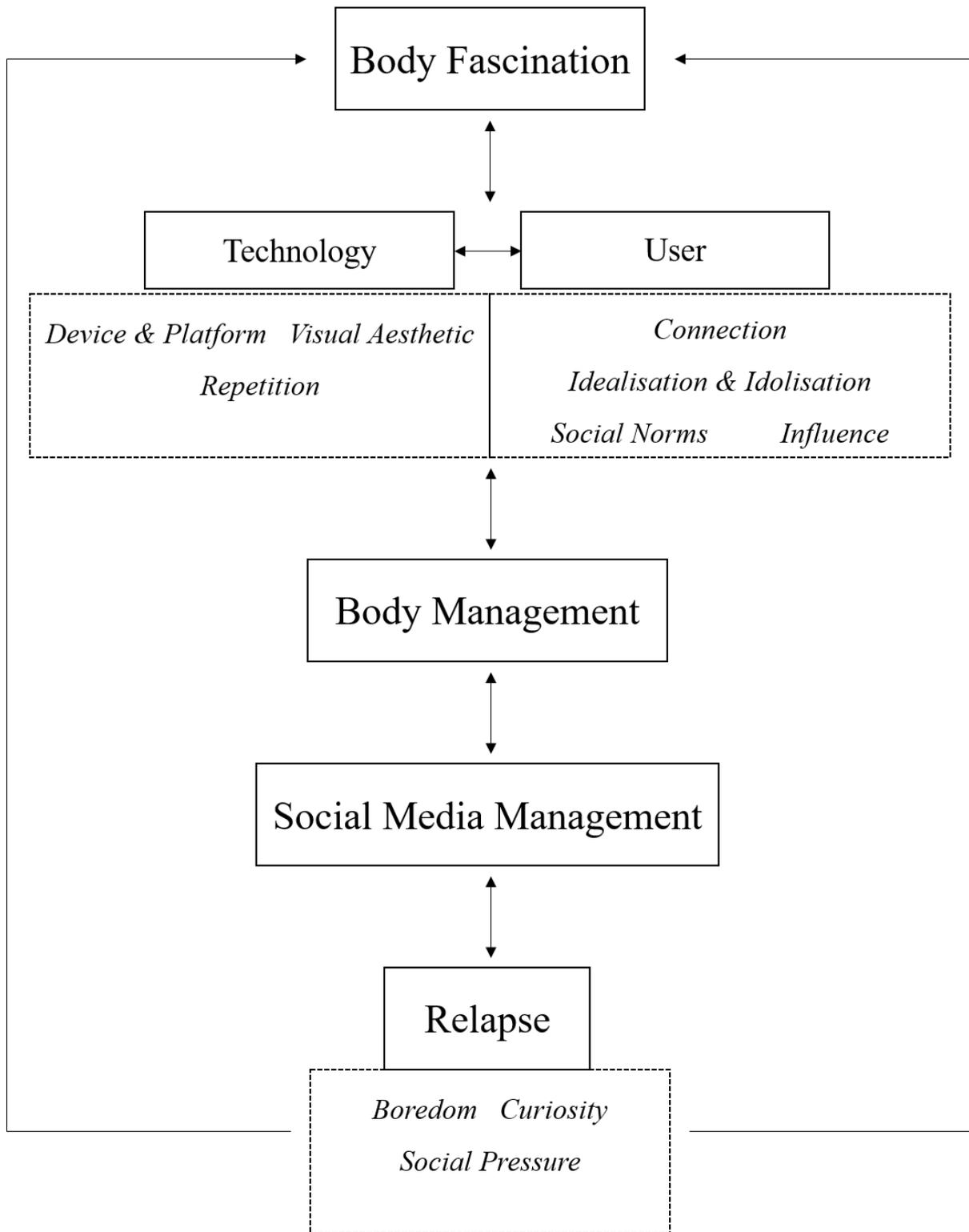


Figure 2: Body Fascination Behaviour Online Model

6.2 Body Fascination

Emerging as a significant finding from the dataset, participants regularly engaged in gaze practices, and were immersed in viewing others on social media. Specifically, gazing was directed towards influencers that prominently display their physicality.

As outlined above and in the preceding chapter, gaze practices reported by respondents are enabled and encouraged by a series of sub-themes to contribute to body fascination; an unhealthy attachment to viewing others and comparison to ones' own body. However, the observed behaviour is complex and more accurately discussed when the interrelationships and inherent ties between its components are addressed. As conceptualised in Figure 2, body fascination represents two primary factors; technology, and the way consumers use and adopt that technology. These are not isolated elements, rather related and cyclical components that have a compounding effect on users' behaviour online and offline.

Body fascination is user behaviour that is facilitated by technology. Participants use their cell phones to access Instagram, and displayed an unconscious connection to their device and their social networks. These devices were a regular source of distraction during interviews. Several participants paused mid-discussion to check notifications on their phone. Even without receiving explicit alerts, the presence of their device repeatedly drew their attention. Respondents were in a constant anticipatory state; of both notifications and their impending device use. Such subconscious use that limits an individual's focus to a task is indicative of social media addiction (Cabral, 2008), which was also self-reported by some respondents.

This subconscious connection between user and device enables gaze practices when the platform accessed is a highly visual medium. Respondents view influencers who cultivate attention by sharing body prominent posts on the platform. One respondent reported evaluating and ranking influencers, judging one woman to have 'the best body on Instagram'. Another describes how extended viewing has allowed her to identify multiple ways influencers can manipulate images of their physicality to be perceived as more attractive, such as changing their body shape or editing their skin. Some report taking screen shots and saving images of influencers, 'zooming in' to more closely view digital depictions of bodies that have captured their attention. These participants are using the capabilities of their device to increase the opportunity to gaze that the platform affords them.

Saving influencer images not only allows users to better view digitally depicted bodies, it is a form of repetition that increases both the volume and frequency of body prominent content

they are exposed to. This repetition is driven by the user's behaviour, but is also an underlying aspect of the technology itself. Participants view influencer accounts and images that prominently display their physicality. The Instagram algorithm repeatedly boosts content that a user has previously looked at, without them explicitly searching for it (Gotter, 2019). Respondents report and show the manifestation of this, with explore feeds containing high proportions of body-prominent and influencer content. When linked with evidence that exposure to perceived attractive images of peers and celebrities through Instagram, in particular, encourages appearance based comparison (Brown & Tiggemann 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2017), it can be reasoned that repetition may increase this behaviour.

Users who participate in extended gaze practices can develop connections to the specific influencers they view. The more body prominent content they engage with, the more likely they may be to feel connected. Through repeated exposure, whether intentional or because of the underlying algorithm, the user has greater opportunities to engage with the influencers visual and verbal narratives, finding aspects within these that resonate with them. Prolonged gaze directed towards the body in particular allows the user to find parts of that body they can connect to, even though it is a digital depiction. This is not necessarily because these connections are 'real', but because the technology enables the user to find them, through the enhanced, detailed visual aesthetic they frequently view. This effect was particularly prevalent when the influencer shared personal aspects of themselves with their audience (Hogan, 2010) A particular respondent epitomised this connection through her reports. She noticed that an influencer's body had changed, so started to pay more attention and increasingly spent more time engaged with her content. Over time, the more she viewed this body, the more she thought she understood that body, and the woman presenting it on the platform. She believes that a body image disorder, something she herself has experienced, is causing the woman's body modification behaviour as she too tried to alter her body through weight loss and by digitally manipulating her Instagram images. The respondent has connected with this woman and her body, related her own history and body to what she views, and as such, her gaze practices increase.

Extended gaze practices emerged from the dataset as an individual, but also collective behaviour driven by social norms. Respondents report that they engage in prolonged viewing of influencer content and share conversations about it with their female friends, both offline and online. Discussion is orientated towards the digitally depicted bodies they see and negatively comparing their own appearance to the influencer. The implicitly understood rules

guiding group behaviour (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) increase use of the device, the platform, their exposure to its visual content and repetitive nature. This finding aligns to the position that social norms determine group behaviour, but not necessarily group welfare (Festre, 2010). Some respondents report that they view influencer content in anticipating conversations revolving around the body and life of such women, not because of a genuine personal interest. Self-degradation is recognised as a normative response for a female young adult when other women degrade their bodies (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin & LeaShomb, 2006). If such research is coupled with fears of exclusion from the group (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) this may increase gaze and negative self-comparison behaviours in image focused social media users.

Participants who direct their gaze practices towards a specific influencer may begin to idealise and idolise the poster. Idealisation and idolisation is representative of a user who perceives an influencer to be wholly positive and aspirational, despite only existing as a digital depiction. Quasi-religious elements such as worship, devotion and adulation emerged from the reports of respondents who had such a sense of an influencer. This theme is a manifestation of the link between technology and the way it is used. The extended gaze practices of participants are supported by social norms which can encourage the behaviour, increasing a user's exposure to the influencer, and affording them with more opportunities to identify with and feel connected to them. For a particular participant, posting a makeup free and unedited selfie is an aspirational act, not a form of self-objectification behaviour among young women as suggested by Veldhuis, Alleva, Bij de Vaate, Keijer & Konijn (2018). This respondent believes the associated narrative as shared by the influencer, that revealing her face is an act of bravery to empower her female audience to embrace – and post images of – their own natural beauty. The image elevates this users perception of the influencer and she uses it as evidence that the woman is worthy of the time she has spent viewing her social media content, and of the connection she has developed to her. The woman's other posts are body prominent self-images that the participant thinks are enhanced by professional makeup, hairstyling and photo-editing.

The visual platform and underlying influence of the algorithm may contribute to the glorification of the influencer resulting from one post. Users repeatedly view influencer content which the algorithm then boosts in the explore functionality without an explicit search (Grotter, 2019). Respondents show device screens with a high proportion of body prominent, edited images of young women compared to other content. Amongst these images, a makeup free and 'natural' selfie may stand out as an anomaly. This deviation from what the user has experienced as typical influencer content may attract more attention from the viewer, drawing their

extended gaze and perception that it is inspirational. If such images were removed from the social media context where they were viewed, users may not perceive them, or the poster, as inspirational. This emphasises that influencers, users who have cultivated fame on social media, are dependent on this interaction between technology and user behaviour for attention.

The final aspect of user behaviour contributing to body fascination is influence. The social media influencer has significant persuasive power (Freberg et al., 2011) to perform and sell their personal brand, enabled by social media platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). Influencer commerce has grown exponentially and contributed to the development of new online behaviours in an industry predominantly comprised of women attempting to influence other women (Abidin, 2015a; 2016a). While body dissatisfaction, poor mood and low self-esteem has been identified as prevalent in female social media users (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2018). Exposure to perceived attractive images of peers and celebrities through Instagram in particular facilitates appearance based comparison (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2017). Respondents show that influencers that draw on their physical body were able to exhort addiction-like behaviours from their followers. Body prominent posters could capture the extended gaze of some users, who then repeatedly viewed, connected with and idolised their images, affording the poster with a greater potential to influence them. A duality emerged from the dataset as respondents reported a desire to gaze, while simultaneously feeling controlled and disempowered by imagery that creates a body ideal that the user may feel unattainable (Dittmar and Howard, 2004). This can negatively affect users, their sense of self and worth in comparison to the poster

6.2.1 User Vulnerability

Vulnerability is shown as an underlying and contributing factor to body fascination in Figure 2. This draws on the age and gender of the user group, possible traits that may affect individuals as discussed by prior studies, and also new facets to user susceptibility to influence that have emerged from this research.

In regards to age, young adults have grown up surrounded by digital technology that influences a perception that the real physical self should be critiqued and altered in the way the online self can be (Drenten, 2012). Emerging adults are inclined to repeatedly seek recognition and approval from their peers in developing their self-identity (Arnett, 2000), and rely on social media for affirmation (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014). This extant work can be coupled with the current findings, to suggest that young adults grew up with and depend on their

devices, but that they also feel pressured by their peers to use the Instagram platform to consume influencer content. This may increase social media engagement among those who are already understood to be heavy users, and increase the potentially negative effects of SNS use. Furthermore, the pressure respondents cited was not limited to that perceived from their social network. Their prolonged viewing of particular women who they formed digitally mediated connections to influenced a perception that they too should direct time and effort into managing both their online presence, and their real physical body.

In addition, participants in the study identified as young adult females. The latter aspect of gender sets a historical, cultural and social precedent for appearance-related expectations and body-image disturbance among women (Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Thompson et al., 1999). Research has also acknowledged the connection between idealised female physicality presented by media images and body image disturbances in an ongoing capacity for young women (Greenwood & Pietromonaco, 2004). More recently, social media's role in encouraging young female users to self-objectify and compare their appearance to others has been recognised (Cohen et al., 2017).

An extension of the vulnerabilities inherent to the demographic aspects of age and gender are the individual characteristics which can worsen a user's susceptibility to body presentation. Previous work has identified internalisation of the thin-ideal, centrality of appearance to self-worth, perfectionism, depression and low self-esteem as relevant concerns for young women who use SNS (Perloff, 2014). However, this study shows ways that these traits may manifest differently compared to the way they are traditionally understood. In the context of internalisation of the thin-ideal, some participants showed that they admire women who are slender, while others discussed and demonstrated a variety of other idealised and highly specific aspects of female physicality that they venerate. This included a thin and toned appearance, slight muscle definition – but not too much – as evidence of physical fitness, curves in desirable places, white teeth and blemish free skin among other visual attributes. Centrality of appearance to self-worth can also be understood differently in that respondent's draw on their physical appearance and body in real life as fundamental to their self-esteem and worth. However, another component central to their perception of self is the way they present on the platform, and the way others will perceive their appearance and body as depicted on Instagram, in comparison to and influenced by the prominent women they follow and connect to. These online representations they habitually view may only be achievable on the digital platform they

are experienced on, yet they add to the aforementioned pressures this particular population may be vulnerable to.

6.3 Body Management

Respondents engaged in body fascination behaviours report a duality between their desires to gaze, and feeling controlled and disempowered. This can lead users to develop body management practices, as shown in the diagram.

This study draws on existing research, contending that experiences are the biggest contributor to an individual's identity (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Self is co-constructed online (Belk, 2013) and online and offline social lives are inextricably linked (Veldhuis et al., 2018). Users' online behaviour, therefore, contributes to their perception of identity, self and worth, both online and offline. It can then be reasoned that users who want to view influencers despite the negative impact they report to their sense of body and self may try to resolve this tension. Some respondents attempt to do so through body management.

SNSs are different to traditional forms of media, as they let individuals be both consumers and producers of content (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Body management is a form of consumer behaviour that takes advantage of this affordance, as users produce and post their own content. It also comprises a user's thoughts as to how other people will perceive their appearance when they view it online, and attempts to alter their body. This finding draws on self-presentation and impression management, as these are underlying factors motivating other young women to post self-photos on social media. Such users attempt to present themselves as happy and physically attractive in genuine and non-genuine images (Pounders, Kowalczyk & Stowers, 2016).

Some respondents report adopting strategies used by influencers to bolster their own presence on the platform, such as using hashtags, tagging brands and engaging with other accounts. These are online actions, but body management can also involve a user's real life personal identity. Individuals may use social occasions as opportunities to take their own images specifically for the platform. Respondents show examples of the content they have produced, that imitates influencer images they have referenced. Some users replicate their poses and facial expressions, others share body prominent self-photos. Users who feel controlled and disempowered by their body fascination behaviours may be trying to develop their own form of influence, using the visual aesthetic of the device and platform they demonstrate an unconscious connection to.

A particular respondent reports editing her body in her images to make it appear slimmer, while trying to lose weight to make her real body look this way. This young woman may be trying to control her body to meet an ideal that other respondents may feel is unattainable (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). Another possible explanation is that she is a user who is more vulnerable to body fascination and self-comparison. Therefore, she may go to greater lengths than other respondents to resolve the tension between the ideal she views and her own body.

Users who are more vulnerable to body fascination and self-comparison may also be more susceptible to body management. Hawi & Samaha (2017) suggest that social media users who use their networks to enhance their self-image risk lowering their self-esteem but also their life satisfaction. Young females in particular, can be driven to post self-images anticipating recognition from others through ‘likes’ to enhance their self-esteem. However, ‘likes’ can also negatively impact their self-esteem if the quantity they receive is less than the amount hoped for or anticipated (Pounders et al., 2016). Additionally, young women involved in self-photo practices such as devoting time and effort into the selection, editing and posting of images are also more likely to self-objectify (Veldhuis et al., 2018).

Therefore, users who try to regain autonomy by behaving like influencers they simultaneously view and feel disempowered by through body management practices may actually be increasing the negative impact of their body fascination. Because of this disconnect, the tension inherent to body fascination as reported by respondents is unsuccessfully resolved through body management.

6.4 Social Media Management

The tension that develops in body fascination that is unresolved through body management may lead users to social media management. This is online user behaviour to divest oneself from the platform. The current dataset suggests social media management manifests in multiple practices intended to decrease the user’s exposure to visuals that may harm their sense of self when using their device and the platform.

Some respondents manage what they view on Instagram by ‘curating’ a newsfeed of meaningful content through carefully selecting and editing the accounts they follow. This expands on the understanding of curation presented by Zhao & Lindley (2014) that pertains to what users choose to post on the platform. A user may also decide to unfollow influencers that encourage their body fascination and self-comparison behaviours. Another possible explanation is that young women use these practices to manage their desired impressions on

Instagram (Pounders et al., 2016). These participants may not want others to know that they view body-prominent influencers on the platform. Other users attempt to reduce the time they spend on the site (Cabral, 2008) and some remove the app from their device.

As reported by respondents, social media management can be unsuccessful as users return to platform use. This relapse suggests that participants use social media in an addictive way (Cabral, 2008). More specifically, it shows users' subconscious connection to the device, attachment to the visual aesthetic of the particular platform they view and their repetitive use. This is a possible explanation for why some respondents report boredom as the factor that motivated them to return to Instagram. They may have dismantled their ability to gaze, but their desire to do so that emerged from the dataset as body fascination is unresolved by the reported management practices.

For some respondents, the draw to engage in online body fascination practices is exacerbated by social norms that neglect group welfare (Festre, 2010). Exposure to social media cues can trigger a desire to use the platform in individuals who may have an addictive attachment to it (Turel, Brevers & Bechara, 2018). Where reduction is encouraged by friends and family of other users exhibiting signs of addictive social media use in other behavioural SNS research (Cam & Isbulan, 2012), some participants report feeling excluded, whether by their real friends or from influencers they share a connection with after making divestment attempts (Buglass, Binder, Betts & Underwood, 2017).

Despite attempts to divest from the platform, respondents report continued Instagram use. This suggests that the appeal of body fascination behaviours is stronger than the forms of social media management that emerged from the data set. Users feel compelled to view influencers (Veer, 2011), are exposed to social cues that trigger their desire to gaze (Turel et al., 2018) and feel excluded by their peers (Buglass et al., 2017). These findings offer a possible explanation as to why users who report negative impacts to their sense of body and self, return to body fascination behaviours after implementing social media management practices.

6.5 Managerial Implications

As identified by this study, the online behaviour of some social media users can be described as body fascination; an unhealthy attachment to viewing others and comparison to ones' own body. When coupled with the concern shared by participants regarding the impact that Instagram's reliance on visual aesthetics has on younger, more vulnerable users, this suggests education could be constructive for such individuals. Learning materials could be developed

that discuss the specific interaction between user, influencer and platform that can negatively impact one's sense of body and self. These educational tools could be disseminated to schools.

Consciousness-raising may be an additional benefit if such tools were created. Young women who view body-prominent influencers may feel controlled and experience addiction-like behaviours as a result. Education may develop an awareness amongst users that their potentially negative personal experience is shared by others. Such a realisation can be empowering to women and can facilitate both personal and social change (Carr, 2003).

Another practical implication of this research is that there are consumer social media management practices in existence that are ineffective. The finding that users unsuccessfully try to divest implies that achieving improvement in this regard is unlikely on an individual basis. Therefore, change is required at an upper management level. This research highlights a need for image based social media platforms, such as Instagram, to manage gaze practices and the power of prominent 'celebrity' influencers. Instagram is currently testing a variation where users cannot see the amount of likes other user's posts receive (Instagram, 2019b) which indicates that the company is prepared to make changes. However, Instagram reports being motivated by a desire for users to focus on images and videos, not likes (Instagram, 2019b). This change is therefore unlikely to disrupt the body fascination behaviour identified by this research, as the prolonged focus participants directed towards body-prominent images was an underlying factor in the negative sense of self and body they experience.

A possible alternative is that Instagram evaluate their Community Guidelines that prescribe what content can be posted to the platform. However, this could risk censoring women which this research does not advocate. Instead, the company could communicate with users who are exposed to body prominent content. The platform could implement educational posts at regular intervals in both the following and explore functionality. Such posts could inform users of how long they have spent on the platform, and the potential negative impact of prolonged viewing of body prominent influencers if that is the type of content that they are frequently engaged with.

6.6 Policy Implications

National policy intervention could be beneficial in making platforms such as Instagram safer spaces for users, especially those vulnerable to body fascination and self-comparison. The government could increase social media safety education, and promote positive online user behaviour.

One of the study's participants was on placement in a high school classroom, in the process of qualifying as a teacher; she taught year 9 and 10 students, aged 13-15. She frequently found herself asking students to put their cell phones away during class, citing that it was "always" Instagram they were using. The respondent stated that students used the platform to follow people they didn't know and negatively compared themselves. This is in line with the body fascination behaviour identified by the study.

Another participant was a registered primary school teacher with a class of even younger students, aged 10-13. She stated that the majority of these children had Instagram accounts which they accessed from personal mobile devices. After learning that some students had public accounts, which is the minimum level of security offered by the platform's settings, the teachers identified a need to host an online safety workshop. The respondent was involved in this process. Like many of the students she is a young female Instagram user, and was able to draw on her own understanding of the platform to guide discussion.

This research suggests that a similar concept could be introduced to schools around the country, led by a social media user close to students' age. While generalisations about social media education in New Zealand schools cannot be made, the participant stated that the workshop was a teacher-led initiative. The Ministry of Education offers information through their website about social media as a tool to enable learning and engage with the community (Ministry of Education, 2019), but does not reference safe online user behaviour for students, parents or teachers. Therefore, programmes and resources could be created about the potential risks of social media. Specifically, about the impact of body comparison by younger users as called for by this study's participants.

6.7 Theoretical Implications

This research has contributed to the extant literature on consumer cultures by exploring the online behaviour of young women who use image based social media platforms. Specifically, it investigates the concept of consumer culture exchange facilitated by technology. This was achieved from a purposeful consideration of the interaction between a user, their device, the platform and influencer. Findings show that consumers can develop loose ties to an influencer, mediated by Instagram, as the platform enables users to engage in extended gaze practices. Influencers who promote their physicality in posts were able to strengthen these ties, and exhort addiction-like behaviours from their followers. It is therefore suggested that body prominent images increase the draw that users feel to gaze at influencers, enabled by the platform.

Secondly, this study demonstrates how social media can capture and maintain attention from its user base. This finding emerged from the dataset, as consumers in this study described a transition from feelings of apathy to interest in a specific influencer. This occurred when the influencer shared personal information, bolstering a user's sense of connection to the poster. If extrapolated, this finding could suggest that social media engagement is more likely to be successful for people, brands and businesses if their online behaviour has personable or humanistic traits.

Further, this research shows how loose ties to an influencer can impact consumers' sense of self and worth in comparison to the poster. Extant work in social psychology shows that image-reliant social media can negatively affect younger, more vulnerable users (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014). Consumers in the current study reinforce and expand upon that understanding. As discussed above, influencers who promote their physicality and share personal information were able to strengthen loose ties with their follow-base. This bolsters the sense of connection between user and influencer, increasing the draw to gaze at the influencer's self-presentation, which can therefore encourage comparison behaviours in users when they view it on the platform. This comparison can lead to negative perceptions of self, body and worth in users, and may lead them to develop their own impression management strategies.

6.8 Limitations

As is inherent to academic research, this study is subject to limitations. In regards to data collection, interviews and observations were concluded when the additional information resulted in little to no change in themes emerging from analysis (Bowen, 2008). As this study is qualitative and exploratory in nature, increasing the number of participants may have yielded a larger amount of data to evaluate and conceptualise (Bryman, 1984). However due to time and resource constraints, data is limited to that provided by ten respondents.

Furthermore, this research addressed young female users of image based social media platforms such as Instagram, limiting the sample by age and gender. This restriction was purposeful, drawing on research that shows body dissatisfaction, poor mood and low self-esteem has been identified as prevalent in female social media users (Fardouly et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo 2015; 2018) and exposure to perceived attractive images of peers and celebrities through Instagram, in particular, facilitates appearance based comparison (Brown & Tiggemann 2016; Hendrickse et al., 2017). However, this sample was also limited by geographic location and socioeconomic status. Due to time and resource

constraints, the researcher employed snowball sampling to recruit participants, resulting in a group of university students and graduates living in Christchurch.

6.9 Future Research

This research has contributed an initial understanding of the online behaviour of young women who use image focused social media platforms, such as Instagram. The finding that users unsuccessfully attempt to break their body comparison exemplifies the need to better understand how and why users engage in this behaviour. The study's exploratory nature presents several opportunities to increase knowledge in this area. Firstly, this study could be repeated by increasing the number of respondents. Considering the definition of qualitative research, it would be beneficial to know if a greater amount of data resulted in the same conceptualisation after analysis (Bryman, 1984). Another avenue for research is apparent from the concerns expressed by participants as to Instagram's potential to impact younger users more vulnerable to its visual aesthetic. A study could be conducted with females currently at high school to investigate this. Expanding this study to include male participants would be another interesting area of inquiry. While research recognises that body dissatisfaction correlated with low self-esteem is more prevalent among females, boys also suffer (Cohane & Pope Jr, 2001). The draw to gaze at influencers could be examined with a content analysis of the images shared by prominent posters. This could offer additional insight as to their self-presentation strategies. Lastly, future research could address the disparity in some of the Instagram-related attitudes and behaviours as initially described by respondents, compared to what emerged through further discussion, observation and thematic analysis. That is, participants first report automatic use such as mindlessly opening the app and letting stories run whilst engaged in another primary activity. Subsequently, the dataset revealed indications of being invested, feeling a sense of connection and desire to know more about specific influencers on the platform.

6.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the main findings that developed from the in-depth interviews and observations conducted to inform this research – that is, a purposeful exploration of how young, female users interact with prominent influencers on social media. Initially, the chapter diagrammatically presented three primary themes; body fascination, body management and social media management which represent the main findings from investigation. The chapter went on to propose a body fascination behaviour online model, representing the key themes and contributing sub-themes that lead to the emergent consumer behaviour. Possible explanations for the cyclical nature of the users SNS practices were also included. Discussion

then outlined potential managerial, policy and theoretical implications of this exploratory research, before identifying the limitations of the study and avenues for future research.

6.11 Conclusion

This thesis submits a thorough exploration of the way in which young female users of image based social networking sites, such as Instagram, can be influenced by prominent women on the platform. The research shows the powerful role that social media technology has in capturing and retaining the attention of its user-base. It was found that influencers who utilise the affordances of this technology, and draw on their physical body in visual content, were able to exhort addiction-like behaviours from their audience. This was to an extent that user's sense of body and self was negatively impacted. Despite this, users found it difficult to divest from the platform due to the intensity of their desire to gaze, as well as normative expectations that encouraged them to do so. The findings also offer insight into the ways this population of social media users (i.e., young adult females) may be particularly vulnerable to self-presentation online.

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Appendix 1 - Interview Guide

Semi-structured protocol for guidance, follow cues of the participant.

Introduction

- Introductions (interviewer and interviewee)
- Thank you for participating
- Casual chat
 - Get to know the participant (how day has been, what they do for work or study etc.)
 - Introduce my own background and interests

Housekeeping

- Information sheet
 - the participant has already seen this but go through it again
- What the research is looking to explore
- Why I chose this topic
- Consent form
 - go through the form, ask for verbal confirmation as to voice recording, ask them to sign form

What to expect

- An informal conversation
- I will ask questions, there are no right or wrong answers, take your time
- Total confidentiality and anonymity

Please feel free to use your device if you would like to show examples

Any questions?

Interview questions

- How do you access Instagram?
- When do you look at the app?
- What do you typically do while using it?
- What accounts do you enjoy following?
- Can you describe what you think when you see that post?
- What would you do if your phone was broken?
- Has there been a time when you have accessed Instagram with an alternative device?
- How would you feel if (Social Media Influencer) did not post for a while?
- How would you feel if a close friend did not post for a while?
- Do you consider any accounts you follow to be role models?
- What particular qualities does (Social Media Influencer) have that makes you follow them?
- Do you engage in any activities or behaviours because of what you have seen (Social Media Influencer) post?
- Can you tell me what happens when you see a notification on your device?

- If you've opened Instagram, can you tell me what you might do first? And then?
- Who do you follow
- Why do you follow them?
- What images/videos/stories do you see?
- What is it about an image/video/story that encourages you look at it?
- What is a social media influencer?
- What would make you unfollow someone?
- How do you feel about that?
- How do you feel when you use Instagram? After using Instagram?
- Can you tell me more about the way you use Instagram? Do you post your own pictures?
- Do you think your friends use Instagram in a similar way?
- How do you think your friends feel about Instagram? Why do you think that?
- Have you ever tried to change the way you use Instagram?
- What did you do?
- Do you think it worked?

Prompts

- What happened then?
- How does that make you feel?
- What was that experience like?
- Can you tell me more about what you mean by that?
- Can you give/show me an example?
- Do you think that impacted anything else?
- Why do you think that?
- You were talking about...
- Have you had similar experiences?
- Has that happened to anyone else you know?

Wrap-up

- I think we might be coming to the end of our conversation
- Thank you, really helpful
- Is there anything I haven't asked you that I should? Anything you haven't talked about that you'd like to share?
- Assure confidentiality and anonymity
- Do you have any last questions?
- Remind them they can get in touch at any time if they would like to – questions etc.
- Thank you again and give voucher (sign voucher form)

Appendix 2 – Information Sheet



Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship
Email: ella.crosswell@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

08/09/2018
HEC Ref:

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Identity Information Sheet for Participants

My name is Ella Crosswell and I am a Master of Commerce student at the University of Canterbury. The purpose of this research is to inform my thesis that will be completed for the course. This research seeks to explore the impact social media influencers have on the identity of their followers.

You are invited to participate in this research, having been identified as a female aged 18-24 who follows influencers on Instagram. Your role would require an interview of approximately one hour to discuss the topics of identity, social media influencers and your experience using Instagram. Questions intend to uncover participants' behaviours, opinions, values and emotions. As such, sensitive or stressful subject matter may come up. It is however, not the intention of the project to specifically illicit such a response. Support services and follow up support will be made available should you feel distressed at any stage. No subsequent tasks are required. You may receive a copy of the project results by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.

With your permission the interview will be audio recorded, however your name will be removed from the transcript and data. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove the information relating to you, however once the thesis is published (estimated to be before March 2019) then removal will be impossible. The results of this project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, audio recording and interview transcripts will be coded so your name will not be included in the findings. You have the right to check and amend your interview transcript. Only the researcher and the supervisor will be privy to this information. Data will be stored on a password protected computer and destroyed after 5 years. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

This project is being carried out as a requirement for my Master of Commerce degree, by Ella Crosswell under the supervision of Ekant Veer who can be contacted at ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz to discuss any concerns you may have.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to:

*The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800,
Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).*

If you agree to participate in the study, please confirm this by emailing Ella Crosswell (ella.crosswell@pg.canterbury.ac.nz). You will be asked to sign the consent form prior to the interview. Provide an email address if you are interested in receiving the research results by email.

Email address:

Thank you for your time,

Ella Crosswell.

Appendix 3 – Consent Form



Department of Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship
Email: ella.crosswell@pg.canterbury.ac.nz

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Identity Consent Form for Participants in the Study

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- I understand that interviews are recorded. I understand that recordings will be used as part of the data analysis
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and supervisor, and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed. I understand that support services and follow up support are available to me in the event that I become distressed.
- I understand that I can contact the researcher Ella Crosswell at ella.crosswell@pg.canterbury.ac.nz or supervisor Ekant Veer at ekant.veer@canterbury.ac.nz for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)
- I would like a summary of the results of the project.
- By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project. Participants will sign this document prior to their interview.

Name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Email address to receive research results:

Appendix 4 – Human Ethics Approval



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson
Telephone: +64 03 369 4588, Extn 94588
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2018/90

1 October 2018

Ella Crosswell
Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Ella

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Identity" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 10th and 24th September 2018.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

R. Robinson
pp.

Professor Jane Maidment
Chair
University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee

