Well-being Strategies Protecting against Harmful Social Media Environment

What kinds of strategies do female university students apply to their Instagram use in order to protect their well-being?

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social networking sites has opened up new opportunities regarding social relationships, social interaction and self-presentation. Women specifically have fallen victim to the impact of social networking sites by having overwhelmingly negative experiences on platforms such as Instagram. Specifically, women are now faced with immense amounts of potential for comparison, self-objectification and heightened insecurities, all these factors harming their psychological well-being. This highlights the importance to understand digital well-being especially in today's social media centered society. As a result of the negative impacts of social networking, women have started to become aware of their power and influence online and use their agency to exercise change in the harmful social media environment. Women are now curating personal strategies which help them navigate around the Instagram environment all in effort to create a sustainable and healthy relationship. This research is based off of 14 different interviews with 7 different female participants surrounding the topic of personal strategies, digital well-being and social media usage. Specifically, trying to understand how female university students implement personal strategies in efforts to protect their well-being on the Instagram platform. Through the implementation of abductive thematic analysis, three main themes emerged from the data, namely: avoidance, seeking positive reinforcement and acceptance. The main theme of avoidance showcased how participants choose to actively avoid content that negatively serves their psychological well-being to still use the platform for entertainment, whilst the second main theme, seeking positive reinforcement, did the opposite through actively following accounts that bring the participants joy. Lastly, the third main theme of acceptance displayed participants contentment with Instagram and all the complexity it brings and particularly refocused their usage in creating an uplifting platform benefitting their well-being. All of these strategies were utilized by the participants in an attempt to protect their well-being, allowing for an answer to the posed research question.

Keywords: Well-Being, Strategies, Female, Instagram, Social Networking Sites

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1. Introduction

In the first section of this master dissertation (1.1), the background for the problem of this dissertation will be discussed, which is to understand the current social media environment and its impact on women, the typically negative experience women face online and their efforts to take ownership online. The second section (1.2) will justify the research question. The third section (1.3) will explain the societal relevance, the fourth (1.4) the academic relevance, and the fifth (1.5) the business relevance. Lastly, the sixth section (1.6) will offer a chapter outline of the remaining sections of this dissertation.

1.1. Problem Background

Social networking sites (SNS) have become an important element of our everyday lives, providing society with the ability to maintain social relationships, increasing global connectivity, and establish an online identity (Faelens et al., 2021). The most popular SNS in 2020 was Instagram, establishing a billion monthly active users, showcasing its prominence in users' daily lives (Statista, 2020). Generally, SNS positively impact users' overall psychological well-being, by providing social support (Ellison et al., 2007; Gifford, 2020), improving mood and boosting self-esteem (Rook et al., 2011). However, Rook et al. (2011) highlighted the duality of social media platforms and the underlying negative effects of SNS on a user's mental health. It was found that excessive SNS usage can have highly detrimental impacts on a user's psychological well-being resulting in eating disorders (Huang, 2017), anxiety (Frost & Rickwood, 2016) and body dissatisfaction (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Researchers are continuing to investigate and understand SNS', and have started focusing their efforts on the relationship between SNS and users psychological well-being (Ellison et al., 2007; Faelens et al., 2021; Freerar, 2012; Gifford, 2020). This spurred research interest has changed the way well-being is perceived, finding new variables like digital well-being (Freerar, 2012). To underscore its importance, the Council of Europe has taken action to implement online well-being as an area of digital citizenship that needs to be understood, monitored, and potentially regulated better for the safety of society (Council of Europe, 2019). Furthermore, Jisc has formed a digital capability framework which explores several elements about digital well-being such as health, safety, relationships, and work-life balance, all necessary in understanding the psychological well-being of online users. With the use of this framework, more can be understood about the physical, emotional and social dimensions regarding digital well-being. With more understanding of the influences of variables, and

their associated dimensions, researchers can focus on creating more solutions in efforts to combat the adverse effects of social media.

Literature typically frames women's experiences in the online environment as negative, leading to a significant decrease in their psychological well-being (Tiggemann et al., 2020). This is particularly prevalent on photo sharing platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Specifically, these applications have the potential to enable women to compare themselves to others (Bauer, 2020), have a heightened sense of self-awareness, and face self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018). Social comparison theory reaffirms the concept that women are more susceptible to self-evaluation online (Tiggemann et al., 2019). Furthermore, women are experiencing what is known as 'lack of exposure' resulting in a less regulated social media environment which causes direct harm on women's psychological well-being (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Griffiths et al., 2018). This illustrates the unhealthy environment that unregulated SNS' create for women.

In efforts to take back ownership online, women have started learning ways to utilize social media to empower them (Cotter, 2018). Women are taking back ownership by following who and what they want and seeing the content that is of interest to them (Jenkins, 2018; Picone et al., 2019). Gonick et al. (2009) argues that it is important to understand women's agency in society, as it is becoming increasingly more nuanced and complex. The autonomy for women to exercise agency is unclear, due to the fact that popular SNS like Instagram and Facebook have a specific architecture that remains opaque to users (Beer, 2006). In attempts to take back the power and agency on social media platforms, users are educating themselves and implementing methods of resistance (Boulton & Zook, 2013; Cotter, 2018). Yet, research itself is still in its infancy regarding consumers personal strategies against the negative aspects of SNS'.

Currently, there is very little research surrounding women's personal strategies that have implemented in their social media usage to protect their psychological well-being. However, initiatives have been taken by large companies such as Apple and Google to provide additional features on smartphones to protect the digital well-being of their users. An example is the access that users have to their screen time, digital nudging (Purohit & Holzer, 2021) and digital detox apps (Ames, 2013). However, these features alone are not enough to protect a user's digital well-being, these are small elements to a larger phenomenon (Feerrar, 2021). Instead, digital well-being is incredibly personal, where each individual's personal needs and goals are highly dependent on their socio-cultural context (ibid).

1.2. Research Question

This research paper will investigate how female university students have developed conscious and experienced-informed strategies to navigate damaging social media content, resulting in the following research question: *What kinds of strategies do female university students apply to their Instagram use in order to protect their well-being?*

1.3. Academic Relevance

The growing body of literature around social media and women has progressively increased in recent years. Most research indicates a negative relationship between the psychological well-being between women and social media (Bauer, 2020, Cohen et al., 2019). Specifically, social media leaves room for constant comparison, resulting in body dissatisfaction or eating disorders (Huang, 2017). To combat the negative associations between social media and well-being, women utilize their agency on these platforms more than ever (Cotter, 2018; O'meara, 2019). This paper aims to fill the research gap regarding how these negative impacts can be solved or avoided, building a healthy relationship with the social media platform. Therefore, by doing an in-depth analysis on women, insights will be gathered about the conscious strategies use to avoid social media negative impact.

Moreover, Faelens et al., 2021 found that the excessive use of SNSs leads to lower psychological well-being, mainly triggered by the posting, viewing, and commenting on image-based platforms. Instagram, in particular, is one of the most popular SNS hitting 1 billion monthly active users in 2020, with an adult spending roughly 12 hours a week using social media platforms (Griesbach, n.d.). More women are creating profiles on social media, going from 56% to 81% (Statista, 2021). Explicitly analyzing the platform Instagram is relevant as little research has been done regarding Instagram usage, and the overwhelmingly large population of women that are active on this platform.

To add, little literature has been done to theorize social media usage and the personal strategies used to improve their overall well-being in the context of female university students. This is particularly relevant as Ames (2013) found that university students in particular felt a larger urge to disconnect from their smartphones in efforts to reduce a social media overuse and stress. Little research is currently available on how females – where the established online relationship is found to be negative - find their social media environment and how this niche population goes about using social media platforms (Bauer, 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Therefore, by focusing on female university students this research

aims to close this gap in the literature and learn more about the particular ways female university students feel and behave in the online environment.

1.4. Societal Relevance

Social media has proven to be a ticking time bomb regarding the adverse effects it has on people's mental health (Rook et al., 2011; Walton, 2017). Especially among young adults, scrolling habits have resulted in cyberbullying and Facebook depression (Walton, 2017). To add, users experienced addictive tendencies and developed an overreliance on their smartphones, making them anxious if placed without (Walton, 2017). At the same time, others argue that social media encourages connectivity and promotes a sense of belonging (Manago et al., 2012). Most research focuses on how social media's overall positive or negative effect influences individuals; however, it is mainly of relevance to study what individuals are doing (informally) to create a positive social media environment for themselves.

Moreover, there is an increasing relevance to studying digital well-being and what this means regarding younger generations where social life revolves around technology. Digital well-being is still a relatively unexplored topic and has now increased in importance due to the harmful effects of social media on users' psychological well-being (Bauer, 2020) . Only recently, initiatives have been instated by the Council of Europe to take digital well-being more seriously and start monitoring its effects on society (2019). Therefore, this research will provide additional information and understanding of digital well-being. This newly gain knowledge will aid society in understanding the need to regulate and be aware of its harmful impacts of social media.

1.5. Business Relevance

Users are constantly distracted by their mobile devices and even experience the need to disconnect, to ensure less stress and social media overuse (Ames, 2013). Research primarily focuses on technological-based solutions to excessive social media usage. Stemming from digital nudging, digital detox apps to screen time (Caraban et al., 2019; Lochtefeld et al., 2013; Purohit et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant in the context of businesses and organizations as people using these strategies are now shaping the online environment. This useful for organizations in the social media environment as they can use these news developments and strategies to add to online content regulations and encourage

the changing of platform design. All in efforts to create a better tailored online environment for its users.

Organizations promoting well-being reduce stress and encourage a positive working environment where employees are able to thrive (CIPD, n.d.). Ultimately, having a better understanding of what employees, especially female employees, go through when it comes to protecting their well-being, and offering a safe and open environment is an additional way an organization can move forward and develop a productive, engaging and supportive employee base. Research currently misses an understanding of the personal ways society deals with the negative social media environment. Thus, by learning about the right and wrong types of strategies women are currently using on social media, a better understanding will be reached regarding how corporations can help women in protecting their psychological well-being online.

1.6. Chapter Outline

Within this dissertation, five different chapters will be provided. To begin, Chapter 2 will cover the theoretical framework, discussing topics surrounding social networking sites, the vulnerable female gaze, agency in the digital age, digital well-being and lastly the explored strategies used by people to curate a healthy online environment, all these concepts and theories are necessary to answer the above-mentioned research question. Next, Chapter 3 will cover the method and data collection process of this dissertation, explaining chosen sampling technique of convenience sampling and providing an in-depth description of the data collection process. Afterward, Chapter 4 will cover the results obtained through the interview process, further justified by theories and concepts previously discussed in the theoretical framework. Lastly, Chapter 5 will summarize all the findings of the results and provide an answer to the research question.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section contains all relevant literature that will be used to answer the research question. The first section (2.1) will discuss the rise of social networking sites and how this development has impacted society. The second section (2.2) will discuss and define digital well-being. The third section (2.3) will discuss two different approaches toward digital well-being, namely structure versus agency, and the first part will discuss the influence of social media. Lastly, the fourth section (2.4) will discuss agency and how users are now taking ownership of their media usage to take back control of their social media environment.

2.1. Rise of Social Networking Sites

The rise of social networking sites (SNS) has led to the emergence of new opportunities for social relationships, especially social interactions and self-presentation (Faelens et al., 2021). SNS is defined as a technology that enables content creation, user sharing, and the exchange of information with online communities (Gifford, 2020). Instagram is one of the most globally utilized SNS platforms, hitting 1 billion monthly active users in 2020 (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Statista, 2020). SNS can be considered a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers a great benefits to society as it has changed the way people interact with each other. On the other hand, SNS, like Instagram, that use photo or video based content facilitate the most comparability especially amongst female users. Providing individuals with another platform that exacerbates social comparison (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). As a result it's important to understand how these users are able to cope with negative consequences associated with these SNS.

The most commonly studied category related to SNSs and the impact it has on individuals' psychological well-being is the concept of social support (Ellison et al., 2007; Gifford, 2020; House et al., 1988; Rook, 2015; Nabi et al., 2013). Social support can take various forms, such as the help and care that social network members, maintain social connections and community-building opportunities. House et al. (1988) found that this social support mitigates the harmful effects of life stress. Many researchers agree that building strong relationships with online media networks can improve mood and boost users' self-esteem. In addition, connecting with network members helps prevent other health-damaging behaviors and protects the user's mental health (Rook et al., 2011; House et al., 1988; Rook et al., 2011). Many positive impacts are mutually beneficial to one another; for example, social support and networking ensure that users are generally less lonely (Manago et al., 2012).

Rook et al. (2011) found that the negative impacts on social media occur less frequently than the positive impacts. Members who engage in positive exchanges online tend to be more numerous than those who engage in more negative exchanges.

However, several studies have found that excessive use of SNS can lead to the impairment of a user's psychological well-being. For example, a meta-analysis by Huang (2017) found that excessive SNS use lead to eating disorders, while other studies found it resulted in body dissatisfaction (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016) or anxiety (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Rook et al. (2011) examine the duality of social media platforms and the fine line between the positive and negative effects of SNS on a user's mental health. Specifically, Rook et al. (2011) argue that while social support essentially has positive effects, it can also have highly detrimental impacts on a user's health. When social support fails, social network members do not provide a user with the help they need. This help may be misjudged or reluctant. In addition, a user may also experience rejection or neglect if his or her network excludes them from social activities or actively ignores the user, all of which negatively impacts the user's well-being. Finally, a user may also be manipulated online by his or her community members by misdirecting social control and interfering with the health goals of others (Rook et al., 2011). An example could be a social network member offering unhealthy foods to a user actively dieting (Henry et al., 2013) or encouraging others to pursue a bad habit such as smoking or drinking (Cruz, Emery & Turkheimer, 2012).

Although negative impacts of SNS have been shown to occur less frequently than the positive impact, there is still a strong link between the negative impacts that SNS causes on the user's physical and mental health. Several researchers have found that negative exchanges often outweigh positive exchanges and lead to many chronic diseases (Brooks & Dunkel, 2011; Rook, 1998); for example, hypertension (Sneed & Cohen, 2014), coronary events (de Vogli et al., 2007) and strokes (Tanne et al., 2004). In addition, most research suggests that negative interactions online do not necessarily have health effects but have been shown to elicit negative emotions such as anger and sadness, leading to pronounced lower physical well-being among users (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002).

There is a plethora of research on the popular SNS Instagram but little about the impact on users psychological well-being (Faelens et al., 2021, Holland & Tiggemann, 2016, Rook et al., 2011). This is significant because Faelens et al. (2021) found that lower psychological well-being is mainly triggered by posting, viewing, and commenting on image-based platforms (Faelens et al., 2021). To add, Lup et al. (2015) reached similar findings indicating that Instagram's visual form encourages excessive social comparison which results

in negative outcomes for women. These findings illustrate how Instagram's main feature that of posting, viewing and photo sharing is a more harmful platform than other SNS's, of which have less visual displays of information (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018) and ultimately are less impactful to women's psychological well-being.

Therefore, more research is needed on how individuals use Instagram, especially to avoid these negative psychological effects. To add, current literature on Instagram mainly focuses on the impact the platform has on a user's well-being, however, there is still a large gap in the literature regarding what strategies individuals users are engaging with in efforts to mitigate the effects on Instagram.

2.2. Digital Well-Being

The concept of digital well-being has grown in importance over the years considering how instrumental social media is in society (Freerar, 20212). Scholars are now educating themselves on the impact that social media and SNS are having on the psychological well-being of users. To underscore the importance of analyzing well-being, the Council of Europe recently included online well-being as an area of digital citizenship (2019). In this area, the Council explicitly describes well-being through empathy, ethics, well-being, and personal health in relation to their online presence (Council of Europe, 2019). Therefore, it's important to create preventative strategies that protect the well-being of users online.

In this context, it is important to define and understand the concept of digital well-being. Firstly, the terms 'digital health' and 'digital well-being' need to be distinguished. Digital health focuses on providing society with technologies which provide healthcare services such as digital diaries and other forms of self-tracking (Lupton, 2018); whilst digital well-being is focused mainly on the implications which excessive screen time or internet connectivity. The main difference is that digital health is perceived as a caustic role implying any damages that have been made to an individual's well-being from being online, such as mental strain, exhaustion and reduced productivity (Büchi et al., 2019; Kushlev & Dunn, 2019; Reinecke et al., 2017).

Moreover, scholars have created several different definitions of digital well-being depending on the perceived importance of self-control concerns and the addictiveness (Monge Roffarello & de Russis, 2019). Firstly, Gui et al (2017) define digital well-being as "a state where subjective well-being is maintained in an environment characterized by digital communication overabundance" (p. 166). This definition mainly emphasizes the importance

of finding an optimal balance between the positive and negative implications of SNS to improve well-being. Secondly, Feerrar (2021) took on a different approach to digital well-being defining it as "the capacity to pursue health, safety, and happiness with regard to multiple aspects of our digital lives." (p. 4). This encompasses the idea that digital well-being cannot be viewed merely through one dimension but ultimately, is the pursuit in creating a healthy balance to their online usage. In essence, digital well-being is about whom a person is and how they portray their digital identity online.

Furthermore, the question of who and how people are protecting their well-being online is familiar to media literacy scholars. Media literacy defined is by Livingstone (2004) as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993; Christ and Potter, 1998). These four components – access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation – together constitute a skills-based approach to media literacy" (p. 5). In other words, media literacy is understanding the assumptions inherent in framing media engagement and how this then gets internalized by its users (Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2021). With that being said, previous studies have used digital literacy in efforts to better understand digital well-and are analyzing how individuals are participating with new media and the implications these actions have for a users' well-being.

Considering that digital well-being at its core is about whom a user is and how the online environment operates, scholars have looked into media literacy through the participatory culture paradigm founded by Jenkins (2016). Jenkins (2014) explains the participatory cultural paradigm as valorizing online communities based on individual freedom. The importance of this participatory culture is that users can voluntarily become part of any culture they want and have the agency to leave it whenever they wish (Mason & Metzger, 2012). The second framework that can be used to understand digital well-being is Freire & Macedo's (1987) 'literacy' as a social practice. Digital literacy, to them, is a way to view the world, going so far as to say that one must learn to read the world and then learn its language. This implies that users should prioritize learning their own media language and then learn the dominant language and the attendant discourse of the digital world (Rockhill, 1988). By learning the language of social media, users can put themselves at a strategic advantage over others (Feerrar, 2021; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Rockhill, 1988). However, understanding and learning about the community through the dominant digital communication styles remains just as important.

Digital literacy has been used to better understand digital well-being which is made clear in Ni Shuilleabhain et al. (2021) research. Ni Shuilleabhain et al (2021) found that a

growing number of school-based body image prevention initiatives have been put in place in efforts to educate adolescents on the topic of body dissatisfaction. This was showcased through large organizational campaigns such as, Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty' or BeReal "Body Confidence Toolkit" and several others (Wright and Leahy, 2016). Wright and Leahy (2016) found that these body image campaigns focused primarily on cognitive approaches to help individuals internalize what is being shown. These campaigns allow them to separate themselves from the world around them and be less affected by social media's body image ideals. Wright and Leahy (2016) and Yager et al (2013) both found that media literacy is one effective way to educate adolescent children about body dissatisfaction in school-based programs and remain critical of dominant deployments of media literacy.

Additionally, Ni Shuilleabhain et al, (2021) claim that critical media literacy is not enough to protect adolescents from immunity against the impact produced by the engagement with the visual content. The research found that young adolescent (predominantly females) experienced body dissatisfaction through their online environment. Additionally, the way of the digital world further enables this bad relationship with one's body which only worsens through lack of guidance. The article argues that the focus should lie in the capacity for young individuals to learn how to navigate themselves online, putting the focus on inter-acting with the content. This highlighting the ability to learn and grow from the things that are being shown or people they interact with, rather than quantify and compare themselves to it (Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2021).

An established framework was created by Jisc and utilizes digital literacy capabilities in efforts to better understand the concept of digital well-being. This framework identifies six different elements, one of which is: Identity and Well-Being (Jisc, 2015; Feerrar, 2021). Jisc defines this as the ability to take care of one's health, safety, relationship, and work-life balance online (Jisc, 2015). Considering this framework, a new way of understanding digital well-being has been explored, specifically through the physical, emotional, and social dimensions (Beetham, 2016; Gui et al., 2017). The first dimension is physical. The most literal form of well-being falls under the physical dimension. The physical dimension includes neck pain and eyestrain; all physical problems that stem from the overuse of digital technology (Beetham, 2016; Gui et al., 2017). Reflecting on these types of well-being challenges reveals simple behavioral or technology-based solutions. In particular, these include adjusting screen blue light settings, taking frequent breaks from technology, or obtaining resources that promote good posture.

The second dimension is the emotional dimension. Well-being is a multidimensional construct, and becomes increasingly complicated to measure and account for when psychological factors are considered. Mental health factors can range from a high emotional state to fatigue or anxiety (Gui et al., 2017). Feerrar (2021) noted that from an emotional perspective, possible solutions include actively setting limits on time spent with social media, shifting focus to nurturing pre-existing personal experiences, emphasizing the need to build a sense of belonging online, and finally, actively thinking about the potentially harmful effects of excessive media use on one's mental health (Beetham, 2016; Gui et al., 2017).

The final dimension to consider is the social dimension of digital well-being. Gui et al. (2017) examined the relationship that a user's well-being may have in relation to online communities. They found that users act responsibly and safely because they are aware of the harmful nature of the online environment. However, the user's control remains limited. One example is that no matter how carefully users are in obtaining legitimate and accurate information, they are powerless to the online challenge of misinformation. Chambers and Sandford (2018) add to these findings, pointing out that an essential element in controlling digital well-being is awareness of the larger systems and power dynamics in media ecosystems. These can range from advertising revenue and personalized search engines to algorithms (Chambers & Sandford, 2018). The article argues that a necessary solution is to educate users about the media environment and encourage them to use it more ethically and vigorously.

This research paper will explore how female university students are approaching, tackling, and, most importantly, how they are improving their digital well-being in efforts to sustain a healthy relationship with their online environment, particularly focusing on the emotional and social dimension introduced by JISC and further justified by Feerrar (2021) and ultimately improve their overall well-being.

2.3. Structure versus Agency

This section will explore the duality of both the structure and agency users have on social networking sites. On the one hand, structure will explore the plethora of existing literature surrounding the role that current structure of the digital world has in influencing the feelings and behaviors of users online. This pre-existing structure also having the power to limit the choices and opportunities of the user. Afterwards, an exploration will be done on the agency of users and the active initiative being taken by users to increase independence and

make their own choices in the online environment. This specifically relevant to lessening the impacts of their well-being online.

2.3.1. Structure

2.3.1.a. The Vulnerable Female Gaze

Since the late 2000s, a plethora of research has been done on the relationship between social media and women's well-being. Specifically this relationship has been examined on SNS such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Most research found that women's overall interaction with social media platforms was overwhelmingly negative, leading to an immense amount of potential for comparisons (Bauer, 2020, Cohen et al., 2019), self-awareness, and self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012).

Additionally, several articles found that women being exposed to thinspiration (content about desired weight loss) and fitspiration (content about desired fitness goals) lead to women experiencing body dissatisfaction and negative moods (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Prichard et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). However, despite the negative impacts of social media on women's mental health, it also provides a platform to initiate counter-movements. As a result, it has led to positive effects on women, spreading the message of body positivity and self-compassion (Cohen et al., 2019; Slater et al., 2017). Therefore, this research paper will fill in the research gap pertaining to what women are doing on social media to protect themselves from the negative psychological impacts.

Interestingly, Slater (2004) brings forth the concept of 'exposure,' a recurring theme throughout the literature. Specifically, women experience what is known as 'lack of exposure', this concept refers to the limited protection given online and lack of regulations implemented by the platforms or the government. Resulting in a less regulated social media environment for women that has a larger potential to cause harm to their psychological well-being (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Griffiths et al., 2018; Prichard et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Most research has been done through experiments by showcasing images of influencers or bodies, that resulted in tailored messages illuding to topics such as thinspiration or fitspiration (Boepple & Thompson, 2016), and requesting women's reaction before and after viewing these images. However, these experiments fail to consider the exposure women have to these images in their everyday lives, especially on social media (Ibrahim, 2015). Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) article further argue that the current style of

conducting experiments is an inaccurate way to tackle the topic of exposure. This is due to the lack of female agency and subjectivity found in the experiments, which fail to provide any information about women's experience on social media.

Through the exploration of exposure also comes an understanding of contagion. Current literature around the agency and subjectivity of females on social media indicates a need for improvement regarding this methodological procedure. Research surrounding female agency found that females who have eating disorders are misunderstanding the vulnerable and passive female gaze in an attempt to be like others around them (Bell, 2009; Burke, 2006; Gerrard, 2018; Hockin-Boyers et al., 2020). Burke (2006) is critical of the cultural discourse of contagion and found that when females are exposed to images of slender women or look at each other for comparison they have the ability to begin utilizing anorexic behaviors however, this contagion can be mitigated by the overpowering by the awareness of feminist movements online. Gerrard (2018) challenges the notion of contagion, stating that this effect is only deemed to be true for females already deeply embedded in these social media systems. Rather, Gerrard (2018) argues that the current implementation of social media moderation and regulations are aiding the people that are at risk of 'catching' the contagion of anorexic or body dysmorphic tendencies, through preventative measures. However, Chancellor et al (2016) found that although social media, female agency and contagion have significant negative impacts, pro-eating disorder content shown online has now changed in its purpose and is now used to find support through. The majority of research supports the notion that the social media environment can be seen as a negative experience for vulnerable females.

Moreover, Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) argue that women are deprived of their agency due to the language of exposure and its methodology, making them fall short of how both platforms and users operate on social media. In addition, the paper argues that it is ontologically impossible to measure 'passive exposure'; instead, it suggests the analyses of social media friction. Rose (2016) clarifies this friction as the process of the circulation of images, materializing the content with specific people in different environments that can be interpreted differently, ignored, lost, deleted, liked, or resisted. Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) argue that this friction is absent in current literature regarding women's well-being. Specifically, it is important to understand how vulnerable females strategically engage with social media, especially in their observed discourses.

This paper will aid in closing the research gap regarding females and their media use, specifically by theorizing what agency looks like when implementing personal strategies

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online. Specifically, exploring how women strategically engage with social media and how these strategies play a role in women's overall agency and well-being.

2.3.1.b. Social Comparison Theory

Social media platforms and their new editing abilities have led to increased body image concerns and eating disorders amongst users. Festinger (1954) explores this through the social comparison theory. The social comparison theory is defined as women self-evaluating themselves, leading to heightened comparison to unrealistic and idealized media images. The research suggests that comparing oneself to such unrealistic and idealized media images and an increased amount of social media usage, leads to upwards comparisons resulting in body dissatisfaction (Chae; 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2020)

Additionally, social comparisons are more prone to occur when it stems from people users are close too. When selfies or body images are shared among friends there is a heightened potential for comparison as users are already sensitive to comparison and feel a particular pressure to showcase the best versions of themselves (Chae, 2017). This highlights the importance for users to feel they belong in their particular niche group and fit in with the rest (Chae, 2017). Therefore, the more exposed users are to such idealized images the more issues remain regarding social comparison.

In efforts to combat social media comparisons, especially those that trigger body dissatisfaction, Smith-Jackson et al (2010) found that women are actively trying to change the vicious cycle they get trapped in on social media. Specifically, women are taking back ownership of these negative image issues through coping strategies. Smith-Jackson et al. (2010) found that women are employing several techniques to alleviate the pressures they feel from these comparisons online. Women using their own power and agency to teach themselves certain techniques, be more self-aware of them, and sub-consciously implement them to sustain a healthy relationship with their bodies. Positive coping strategies found through Smith-Jackson et al. (2010) and Cash et al. (2005) study were mainly related to doing exercise and eating healthy to stimulate change in mood and feelings. Women decided to speak to others about how they felt stimulating community building and most importantly self-acceptance. In particular, women are now actively working on changing the discourse around the expectations regarding body image and rather, are encouraging people to change the way they view themselves and accept who they are. Additionally, users practice self-awareness by reminding themselves that the negative feeling or situation will pass, that what

they are feeling may be irrational or triggered by insecurity rather than rationality, and that they look better than they may be mentally feeling (Cash et al., 2005).

Literature typically frames women's experiences in the online environment as negative, leading to a significant decrease in their psychological well-being due to high amounts of comparison and the lack of agency to change this vicious cycle (Cash et al., 2005; Chae; 2017; Smith-Jackson et al., 2010). However, women's active realization of self-comparison and the active attempts to combat it showcase the urgency for women to take back ownership in the social media environment. This leaving room to understand what women are doing in efforts to stop these comparisons and develop a positive social media environment to improve their well-being.

2.4. Agency

2.4.1 Agency in the Digital Age

Due to the broader developments in and critiques surrounding the topic of youth subjectivity, especially in the media, a shift has been made regarding how our society positions women's resistance and agency online (Coffey & Farrugia, 2013). After understanding the influence structure has on women's overall usage of the online environment, Coffey and Farrugia (2013) argue that agency is often positioned as simply the opposition of structure, something viewed uncritically that an individual possesses in varying degrees. This implies that agency is a quality brought about outside of the societal regulations and orders and instead can be used to display resistance to authority. By user holding power to enact their agency in their everyday lives, Picone et al. (2019) refer to this type of agency as "small acts of engagement" (SAOE). Gonick et al. (2009) argue that the need to understand women's agency in this societal context is more important than ever, as it is becoming increasingly nuanced and complex due to rapidly changing political, social, economic, and cultural conditions. This implies increasing uncertainty in what resistance looks like for women in this day and age (Gonick et al., 2009).

As an increasing awareness grows of the power of agency, the concept of convergence culture is instrumental in understanding agency. Specifically, Jenkins et al. (2008) defines convergence culture as a shift in society where consumers now hold the power to act on and through social media. This concept highlights the ability for users to utilize their own agency online through the exercise of following who and what they want, interacting

with whom they choose, and seeing content they want to view and share with others (Jenkins et al., 2008).

When applying agency to our ever-growing and relevant social media environment, Petre et al. (2019) claim that large organizations such as Instagram, Facebook and Google, are all accused of 'gaming the algorithm' considering its largely unknown and overlooked position to users. These organizations hold power to manipulate the algorithm and, as a result, have the ability to cultivate, legitimize and demonstrate their power online. A growing body of literature has now explored this topic, and as a result, social media reifies problematic social dynamics that are clear in the context of our broader society (Petre et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to understand the thin and somewhat unclear boundary of platforms to implicate legitimate action strategies or be taking part in illegitimate manipulation for their own profit-driven goals. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook run on for-profit models that focus on implementing strategies that help them gain the most visibility, amount of views, or posts popular to the general consumer often related to beauty and body ideals (Marwick, 2015). As a result, companies take advantage of this heightened exposure by capitalizing on unattainable ideals (Hocking-Boyers et al., 2020).

Additionally, the architecture of the social media environment also leads to unclear autonomy for the users. This is partly because social media relies on algorithms to function, but large organizations use the algorithms to control user data (Beer, 2006; Rose, 2016). This new emerging feature is known as the 'algorithmic media' (Carah, 2014). Algorithmic media encompasses algorithms built in by organizations that tailor content to users based on their interests (likes, saves, or previous searches) (Carah, 2014; Ni Shuilleabhain et al., 2021). This can be an issue as the feedback loops received through the algorithms further determine what each user is presented with in future interactions (Hockin-Boyers, 2020, Gerrard, 2018).

Boulton and Zook (2013) pose a similar concept to that of a feedback loop by introducing the concept of the duplicity of codes. The duplicity of codes is defined as the process of codes being formed which redefine how space is created and structured in the social media environment, having the potential to limit new knowledge in that area. This results in codes only making specific actions or knowledge available and more desirable for the user to select (van Dijck, 2009). A similar concept to the duplicity of codes is the idea of affordances of social media platforms. Affordances can be defined as the reciprocal interactions between the user, the digital technology, and the social context (Zhao et al., 2013). Specifically, affordances depend on the instincts and mental models of the user itself. In theory, affordances are there to help users find their way around the online environment to

their own benefit. However, this interaction with one another has the potential to limit the user to some elements of the online environment due to behaviors chosen by the user (Zhao et al., 2013). To reiterate, both duplicity of codes and affordances illustrate the boundaries that algorithms and affordances create in the online environment and how this can unconsciously control what the user sees and experiences online.

With that being said, Eslami et al. (2015) found that users often struggle to see the effect that algorithms have on them as the data may not be visible or evident to the user. Specifically, how the collected data can be used as leverage is not always clearly indicated, this often giving SNS the upper hand. Rich (2019) further found that these algorithms and tailored content-sharing possibilities exposed young people to images that classify and rank bodies. To add, these algorithms complicate young people's understanding of filters, photo editing, and manipulation as they are now a standard practice on social media shown in obvious but also subtle ways (Hawker & Carah, 2020). Through their research, Petre et al. (2019) and Cotter (2018) found ways in which women are using their agency online to resist the power brought forward by algorithms. Specifically, Cotter (2018) researched influencers – a niche group of the popular extremely active users – and their engagement online. The study found that influencers started educating themselves on the algorithm's architecture and their social media environment and, by doing so, we're able to use this newly gained knowledge to their advantage. This, as stated by Cotter (2018), is "playing the game" of Instagram, leading the influencers to increase their visibility online (p. 899). This reinforces the importance of navigating and helping users understand this complex social media environment, particularly by using their agency and recognizing the idealized and unattainable beauty ideals portrayed online.

Moreover, women are actively trying to navigate themselves on social media for their psychological benefit; this additional push and pull will allow them to employ personal strategies to protect themselves from the toxic environment of social media.

2.4.2 Strategies for Protecting User Well-Being

A plethora of research has been done surrounding the negative impacts that excessive social media usage can have on its users. This has triggered organizations such as Apple and Google to start using these given social facts into attributes that can regenerate profit for their companies. Essentially, these organizations generate social capital but also want to strengthen their position on the market by framing their new ideas as a contribution to social good

(Beattie & Daubs, 2020). As a result of heavy critique surrounding their products, these corporations have created digital well-being strategies to correct their mistakes, mitigate governmental regulations, and ultimately generate profits.

Large companies such as Apple and Google have attempted to open the discussion on digital well-being. Both companies have introduced features on their digital platforms that allow users to track their screen time. While these tools are an important step in the right direction, Freerar (2021) argues that this is not enough, as "screen time" is only one small aspect of digital well-being. In addition, given how digital well-being will differ per person, managing screen time may not be sufficient enough to adequately protect a user's well-being. Gui et al. (2019) support Feerrar (2021), stating that digital well-being is subjective to a user's personal needs and goals and therefore is dependent on the sociocultural context in which they find themselves (Gui et al., 2017). This underscores the importance of recognizing that there is no particular "right path to digital well-being" and that the general notion of personal well-being may vary depending on the individual and cultural expectations.

2.4.2.a. Corporation Developed Strategies

The constant availability of SNS on smartphones has led to it being an enormous distracting potential for younger users (Lochtefeld et al., 2013). Specifically, when analyzing university students - where social life revolves around technology - even the most tech-savvy and digital natives acknowledged the need to disconnect from their smartphones to reduce stress and social media overuse (Ames, 2013). As a result, third-party developers and mobile phone providers have created digital detox apps (Lochtefeld et al., 2013; Purohit et al., 2020). In addition, digital detox apps provide weekly feedback reports and time limitations (Monge Roffarello & de Russia, 2019; Purohit et al., 2020; Purohit & Holzer, 2021). Results indicate that digital detox apps lead to more mindful individuals.

Another prominent strategy implemented by corporations is digital nudging. Nudges allow individuals to unfollow friends or hide parts of news feeds (Purohit & Holzer, 2021). Several articles have found that digital nudging is a particularly effective tool for changing people's decisions (Caraban et al., 2019). Specifically to become more mindful of their time spent on social media. However, the disadvantage of digital nudges are context-specific, triggered depending on location and other contexts. The disadvantage of using nudges is that they can have the opposite effect when delivered at the wrong time, triggering negative

emotions, decreasing satisfaction, and being distracting (Mark et al., 2008). However, efforts have been made to implement nudges in more convenient moments through subtle nudges such as notifications (Purohit & Holzer, 2021).

2.4.2.b. User Implemented Strategies

Following inspirational accounts (subjective to the user) was found to increase the overall psychological well-being of the user (Ramlan et al, 2021). Specifically, when content is easily accessible, relatable, and convenient to the individual, these characteristics aid in the positive perception of the inspirational account—ultimately being a source of self-motivation and growth for young adults (Ramlan et al., 2021). In regards to self-motivation, Ramlan et al. (2021) found that social media platforms are beneficial when it comes to boosting a user's self-motivations. Specifically, posting inspirational content inspired social media users to navigate certain aspects of their life, these being: personal life or sustaining relationships (Khairul Anuar et al., 2021), and are a significant factor in boosting their self-motivations (Hazween Amanah et al, 2022). These studies indicate that seeing inspirational content on Instagram brought the young adults a sense of calmness and relief when scrolling which contributes to building a healthy relationship with the platform.

Additionally, Rieger & Klimmt (2018) study found that the topic of inspiration was frequently referred to through success stories and motivational topics. Through deep-diving into each topic and looking up hashtags such as #motivational or #motivation, they illuded to more prominent themes such as encouragement and hope (Dale et al., 2017). To add, Ramlan et al. (2021) study found that when motivational, encouraging, inspirational, and meaningful content seen on social media it encouraged users to feel of gratitude. Therefore, actively viewing this type of content on ones Instagram has an implied positive effect on a user's psychological well-being online (Rieger & Klimmt, 2018).

Moreover, a completely different approach regarding a users ability to exercise their agency by implementing their own strategies online, is by exploring the topic of digital literacy. Rheingold (2012) extensively researched digital literacy and the ability of users to mindfully engage with their social media to achieve personal and collective empowerment. With this being said, Rheingold's research which is supported by the research of several others such as, Cotter (2018), O'meara (2019), and Petre et al. (2019), indicate that users are enacting on their agency more by being aware of the internal structures existing on social media platforms and using this knowledge to their advantage (Hockin-Boyers, 2020).

However, there is currently little research surrounding the strategies created and implemented by the users to protect their well-being. Analyzing individuals' personal strategies would provide new insights tailored to users' personal preferences online and self-knowledge to close this research gap.

3. Methodology

Within this section, the methodological choices for this thesis will be explained. The first section (3.1) states the research question and justifies the papers' qualitative nature. The second section (3.2) will dive into the sampling technique used, while the third section (3.3) will explain the sampling criteria used. Furthermore the fourth section (3.4) will discuss the data collection and analysis process. The fifth section (3.5) will discuss the operationalization of this thesis by using a coding book using information from the theoretical framework and the effect framework to operationalize the concept of well-being. Lastly, the sixth section (3.6) will explain this paper's ethics.

3.1. Research Design

Regarding the research question, *what kinds of strategies do female university students apply to their Instagram usage to protect their well-being?* , a qualitative research was used as it strives to understand the traditions, contexts, and meaning of words and concepts found through the data.

This research aims to recruit female university students through convenience sampling, interviewing individuals that are particularly driven and interested in the topics of Instagram and Well-being. To add a social media diary - spanning over three days - will be provided to the participants to understand their daily Instagram usage better and particularly what affects them when on the platform. This is of particular importance as each person has their understanding and opinions surrounding the topic of social media, these form meanings around this phenomenon that can then be better understood.

Afterward, thematic analysis was applied; themes were created from the data to better understand what types of strategies this particular niche group implements in their daily lives and how they can be further generalizable to the population.

3.2. Sampling Technique

For this research paper, convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling is finding the most accessible cases under given conditions (Flick, 2007). Convenience sampling was most appropriate for this research question for various reasons. Firstly, as an insider into the community, being both female and a current university student, I used my environment to my advantage to find female university students who regularly use Instagram and have developed strategies to protect their wellbeing. Secondly, this research paper

required multiple interviews with each participant, implying that the cases selected needed to be interested and willing to participate in a longer and time-consuming interview process. Thirdly, selecting cases that were all willing to participate in an in-person environment allowed for better rapport development (Flick, 2007).

3.3. Sampling Criteria

Several criteria were considered when selecting each participant for this particular research paper surrounding the topic of psychological well-being and Instagram usage.

The first general criterion is that each participant has to be currently enrolled in a university program to obtain their master's. Ames (2019) found that university students - where social life revolves around technology - acknowledge the need for a disconnect from their smartphones to reduce stress and media overuse. Therefore, university students can elaborate on their experiences on social media and especially their agency in maintaining a healthy relationship with their smartphones.

The second criterion is the female gender. It is well-documented that women encounter unrealistic ideals and misogynistic content online, which can harm their physcological well-being (Bauer, 2020, Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Additionally, women are framed in the literature as being more susceptible to the possible negative effects of social media, such as the immense amount of potential for comparisons (Bauer, 2020, Cohen et al., 2019), self-awareness, and self-objectification (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Hence, the research is more specified and has a stronger focus by only using females.

The last criterion is the active usage of Instagram. As this research is explicitly tailored toward the Instagram application, it is crucial that each participant is active on the platform and uses it themselves. Additionally, Instagram has been known to negatively impact the psychological well-being of its users through the viewing, posting, and commenting on the image-based platform (Faelens et al., 2021). Notably, the Instagram features mentioned above have a direct relationship with disordered eating and poorer body image due to the immediate comparisons and idealized images portrayed and shared on the platform (Holland & Tiggeman, 2016). Being more familiar with the platform leads to more awareness of the applications' impacts and forms more focused opinions regarding how users' well-being is affected by Instagram. Therefore, finding people with high usage of Instagram ensures the research stays focused.

3.4. Data Collection

3.4.1. Interviews

For this research, in-person interviews were used to obtain all relevant data. Brennen (2017) defines interviews as the process of purposefully asking questions to evaluate the opinions and views of people's lives (p. 28). Specifically, semi-structured in-person interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews refer to interviews that use a pre-established set of questions but vary in order depending on the interviewee's answer (Brennen, 2017). Semi-structured in-person interviews allowed the respondents to explore their feelings, emotions, experiences, and values and openly discuss these with the interviewee (Brennen, 2017). This research greatly benefitted from using semi-structured interviews because it allowed for the possibility to dive deeper into participant's "deeply nuanced inner worlds" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002, p. 57), indicating that topics such as well-being, personal experiences, or feelings can be openly discussed and better understood. Lastly, in-person interviews led to better rapport, as respondents felt more comfortable sharing their views and opinions. To add, a backup option was created in case the COVID-19 pandemic was to have worsened, and restrictions would be strictly implemented; the interviews would have been conducted online through the Zoom application. However, there was no need to implement this backup option, and all interviews were able to be conducted in person.

In this research paper, two different interviews took place; the first interview lasted 60 - 85 minutes (see Appendix 1), which discussed general topics around social media and Instagram usage, and introduced an activity, namely, a social media diary that will be recorded for three days (see Appendix 3). A week after the first interview occurred, the second interview took place which was between 20 – 30 minutes in length (See appendix 2). This interview aimed to discuss what happened in the social media diary with the interviewee, leading to an in-depth understanding of their usage feelings on social media and what particular strategies the interviewee used to protect their well-being and reflecting on how this action and strategy benefitted them.

According to the methodological guidelines (2022), the total number of interviews required to ensure reliability was 10 to 15 participants. However, within this particular research paper, there were a total of seven participants interviewed as these seven selected participants were willing to write a three-day social media diary requiring commitment and

time from the participants to honestly and accurately fill in the diary with active reflection on the topics that were discussed in the previous interview.

To add, this specific group was also willing to be part of a lengthier interview process, which was much longer than the average of 45 - 60 minutes stated in the methodological guidelines (2022). Specifically, participants had to be willing to part-take in two interviews, one lasting up to 60 – 85 minutes and the other around 20 – 30 minutes. This took a significant commitment and energy from the participant.

To add, the seven participants were also selected due to how perfectly fitting they were in the sampling criteria, specifically their resistance actions towards negative social media messaging and their awareness of their social media usage. Additionally, each participant was willing to discuss potential frustrations surrounding social media and how these influence their overall well-being.

3.4.2. Social Media Diaries

To better understand how each participant was experiencing their Instagram's and in what context to apply personal strategies, the participants were requested to maintain a social media diary for three days. For this research, three days were deemed relevant as the diary aimed to help each participant be aware of their use of personal strategies online or feel inspired enough by the interview to try out new ones. Three days should give each participant enough space to explore that and consciously use their social media, as asking for longer may hinder the accuracy and detail in which the participants were willing to part-take in writing each entry. Each participant was given a specific set of fixed responses to answer per day, using a variety of dichotomous questions (yes/no), and one log option was provided where the participant could reflect on their own experiences per day on social media (see Appendix 3) (Given, 2008). According to Given (2008), these strategies are the most effective way to approach a diary entry, stimulating engagement and critical thinking of the participant. This is known as a solicited diary, implying that the diary is externally structured to understand a particular topic of interest; while the log question may deem as unsolicited, the guiding questions provided set the interviewee with the right understanding of what should be written within this section (Jones, 2000).

The social media diary was three A4 pieces of paper with the same questions each day, with a date and name option. Each interviewee that completed the first interview was given a hard copy of the social media diary. Upon finishing the interview, the participants

were given the social media diary to report their experience on Instagram every day and write in it as openly and honestly as they could. The social media diary consisted of eight dichotomous questions (yes/no), helping establish the interviewee's overall usage online and helping spark inspiration for the second part of the social media diary. Typically the dichotomous questions ranged from: I scrolled through my reels today, I avoided Instagram today, to I woke up feeling positive today. The second part of the social media diary provided the interviewees with one log option with some guiding questions. These questions ranged from: how did Instagram affect your mood today, or did you exercise any strategy to make your Instagram experience better for your well-being. These questions were formed to learn more about the personal strategies used by each interviewee and why they ended up using this particular strategy on that day.

Using diaries is a well-established qualitative methods technique providing insights into the day-to-day life of individuals. Gaining insights into routines and processes that would go unnoticed if not recorded (Given, 2008). Interestingly, Alaszewski (2006) stated that diaries are not only ways to identify new patterns and behaviors in the data but also describes that by implementing diary entries, a better understanding of individuals' intentional and unintentional actions that reveal information regarding the dynamics, structure, and functioning of the individual's mental life. This is particularly relevant as the social media diaries are implemented to establish how individuals think and feel when implementing personal strategies online and how this improved their well-being.

3.4.2. Thematic Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcriptions focus on providing a word-for-word reproduction of verbal data. This ensured that there was no manipulation of what was said, rather it displayed the true way each participant discussed and formulated their understanding of the questions in the interview. To add, verbatim transcripts helped the researcher get closer to the data and understand it better (Halcomb et al., 2006).

An abductive thematic analysis was implemented on the data. Abductive is seen as a middle ground between inductive and deductive research methods. Abductive research proves to be neither a hypothesis-driven nor data-driven analysis; rather there is a focus on conducting parallel and equal engagement with the empirical data and theoretical understanding (Thompson, 2022). This implies that the researcher did not enter the field with

an open mind but rather understood the theoretical background, which set the initial parameter for what had to be analyzed. The goal of this approach was for the researcher to avoid gaining any arbitrary or irrelevant results related to the research question (Thompson, 2022). However, the research also did not use its pre-existing knowledge and theoretical background to fit the data to this particular research. The aim of the abductive approach is to find the most objective and logical solution and explanation that fits the phenomenon being studied to answer the research question (Thompson, 2022). To add, Thematic analysis is a method that examines and converts research data into newly identified patterns, referred to as 'themes' (Brennen, 2017). Moreover, these newly formed themes provided essential information and added meaning to the data concerning the research question (Brennen, 2017).

Therefore, this research applied Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for conducting thematic analysis through In Vivo coding, an inductive coding style. Inductive coding refers to the process of doing coding from a ground-up approach deriving codes from the data that isn't inspired or manipulated by preconceived notions that literature provides (Manning, 2017). This framework was used to describe the data analysis procedure and showcases the conceptualization process of making codes, sub-themes, and main themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The first step to Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was to familiarize oneself with the data. The second step was to generate initial codes based on relevant information found within the text. The third step focused on open coding. Open coding is defined as creating group codes from information related to the research question. The fourth step was to create sub-themes then, and ultimately, the fifth step was to define and establish main themes from the sub-themes already created. Lastly, the sixth step was to understand and analyze the key findings related to the research question and literature (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Furthermore, the qualitative software program used to code the data corpus is Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti is a software program that allows large quantities of data to be uploaded into its system and be coded (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017). For this research paper, Atlas.ti was used to analyze the 14 different uploaded interviews and create codes, sub-themes, and main themes from the data (See Appendix 4). Ultimately, the developed coded data leads to a better understanding of the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, the codes provided the research with patterns directly linked to the personal strategies female university students have to protect their well-being.

On Atlas.ti, In Vivo coding, was implemented within this research paper. In Vivo, coding refers to a type of coding which implies coding directly from the excerpt of the participant's own words. It specifically does not allow the researcher's own interpretation but rather directly uses the quotes and statements stated by the participants themselves (Manning, 2017). This ensured a good understanding of the meaning and intent behind the participant's spoken language. Lastly, In Vivo coding is the appropriate type of coding to use because it focuses on understanding the relationship between language and social interaction that come together to form an understanding of society (Manning, 2017). This is relevant considering this research paper focuses on understanding the relationship female university students have with social media and its overall impact on society.

3.5. Operationalization

3.5.1. Mediatization of Affect and Emotion

Beyens et al. (2020) and Faelens et al. (2021) research indicates that lower psychological well-being is specifically triggered by image-based platforms such as Instagram. The term well-being is a multidimensional construct defined through various lenses. This particular research paper views well-being through two different lenses of 'affect' and 'emotion.' Critics often argue that both 'affect' and 'emotions' are synonymous. The history surrounding the use of the two terms is very different as it distinguishes the relationship between body and mind and biology and culture (Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018). However, emotions are defined as a more complex process that is often linked with the interplay of thoughts and feelings, often associated as being the fundamental skills used to deal with life tasks (Hochschild, 1983). On the other hand, Massumi (2010) defined 'emotions' as more internal processes of thoughts and feelings tailored to an individualistic experienced and are culturally significant. While, 'affect' in most social science research refers to a feeling that often captures or, in the literal sense, 'hits' us, this implies that what we are viewing has the ability to move and connect with us and our bodies (Clough, 2010).

Mediatization becomes an increasingly relevant role in the emotions and affects portrayed by others due to an extra dimension being introduced to us. Mediatization is defined as a transformative social change process such as globalization or individualization (Esser & Stömback, 2014). This social change, in particular, highlights the increasingly influential and integrated role that media has started to play in shaping society (Esser & Stömback, 2014). However, little research has been done on the mediatization of emotions

and affect, focusing mainly on the political and activism role of media (Giaxoglou & Döveling, 2018). Within this particular research paper, a focus was put on analyzing the affect and emotions of users in their online environment and learning how these play a role in their usage online and the personal strategies used to protect themselves from these effects or emotions.

3.6. Ethics

Ethical considerations were embedded into the research design due to the potentially sensitive nature of questions within the interview regarding social media. Ethical approval was obtained from participants by requesting written informed consent before the data was obtained. Additionally, the researcher has the moral responsibility to accurately inform the participants regarding the study's intention as it is the researcher's moral responsibility to protect the respondent's physical and emotional harm, implying no deception about the scope, information, or goals of the study (Flick, 2007).

It was anticipated that a specific topic regarding a person's social media experiences and writing a social media diary could trigger negative thoughts such as anxiety. When participants mentioned these struggles, signposts for various resources, such as the suggestion of helplines or information to access support, reassured the participants (see Appendix 5). However, most participants thought that the interviews provided a safe place to open up if needed.

Due to the researcher framing the interview, introducing new issues and topics, and ultimately leading the discussion, some power imbalances may exist when interviewing (Flick, 2007). Specifically, within these interviews, the researcher used honesty, fairness, and integrity to remain objective and sensitive to obtaining personal information (Flick, 2007).

Moreover, in order to ensure anonymity, each participant was given a set number (e.g. interviewee 1) to maintain consistency throughout the research paper. A table has been created (see Appendix 6), providing more information regarding the participant's demographic.

4. Results

Within this section, all the data collected from the 14 interviews and all social media diaries has been critically examined, resulting in an in-depth understanding of the strategies female university students implement on Instagram to protect their psychological well-being. The results have been divided into three main themes: *Avoidance* (4.1), *Seeking Positive Reinforcement* (4.2), and *Acceptance* (4.3). Each piece can be found in Appendices 7A, 7B, and 7C, illustrating the relationship that initial codes have to their corresponding subtheme and how this, in turn, creates the main themes for this particular research paper.

4.1 Avoidance

The first emerging theme from the data is *Avoidance* (see Appendix 7A). This theme centers around how female university students are using *Avoidance* as a strategy to ensure a healthy relationship with their Instagram. *Avoidance* is used as a way to maintain a solely entertainment-based platform and avoid content that negatively impacts them. The *Avoidance* strategy reflects the importance for female university students to create space from their Instagram that exudes a sense of safety and comfort, even if the platform itself proves to be harmful depending on the content being shown. The main theme of *Avoidance* is comprised of three different sub-themes, these being: *Full Detachment*, *Partial detachment* and *Privacy*.

4.1.1. Full detachment

The first sub-theme to be explored is *Full Detachment*. *Full detachment* refers to a participant's ability to completely disengage with Instagram if their experience starts to harm their well-being and enjoyment on the platform. This implies that by being able to fully remove yourself from the platform, the user is actively protecting themself from any triggering content, such as being online for an extended period or mindlessly scrolling on the platform's reels.

The first action that has been used by the participants in *Full Detachment*, is deleting the application. The majority of participants deleted Instagram regularly to give themselves more space from the platform and to make it less accessible on their phones. However, this regularity depended on how extreme the participants felt that Instagram was influencing them. Interviewee 1 (a 24-year-old, student at Erasmus University) found herself needing to take almost daily breaks from the platform to not feel overpowered by its addictive mannerisms. Interviewee 1 interestingly also would redownload the application when she felt

less impacted by the platform and wanted to see its content. Interview 1 typically deleted her Instagram for a week or a couple of days, depending on how affected she was by the overconsumption of the platform. Interviewee 1's response to deleting the application was:

> "I will delete it. Okay. Because I know that at that point, like my brain is so like used to the dopamine of just scrolling and getting new content and like getting that new information flow that I have to delete it because I don't trust myself to not get sucked into it again." (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1's reasoning for deleting the application is the high addictiveness that Instagram's algorithm has made the platform to be. By deleting Instagram, interviewee 1 can gain more control over how she distributes her time throughout the day without her phone. Other participants provided different reasons for deletion, arguing they do it because they need to stay focused and be more present. Interviewee 2 (a 21-year-old, a student at Erasmus University) for example, only deleted the application if there was a direct purpose behind it. She explained how she deleted the application during an exam week where she needed minimal distraction from studying. Interviewee 2's response to deleting the application was:

> "I do think that I've also sometimes deleted the entire app and not my account… because I've had some weeks that it was just my use was just too excessive, and I just deleted it to make myself feel better." (Interviewee 2)

By deleting the application, she felt better about herself and the temptation that Instagram can bring forth, especially during busy school periods or excessive usage of the platform; deleting the application became an effective way to minimize distraction. Interestingly, Interviewee 2 also provided a critical remark regarding the action of deleting the application, stating:

> "In the beginning it's very relieving. But after a while, because you're so used to the automatic use of the app, you want to use it again. And sometimes you find a way to use it on your laptop or through safari. So then again, what's the point of deleting it?" (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 2 clarifies that she believes deleting Instagram can be a useful action when there is a need to have space from the platform. However, she mentions that constant deletion can

make it less effective due the action becoming more normalized and easily undone. Therefore, with less frequency, deleting the application can be an effective strategy to avoid excessive social media usage and improve productivity.

The next action which reflects *Full Detachment* is closing the application completely. This involves directly leaving the platform by exiting the application. Exiting the platform ensures immediate disengagement from Instagram if the content is triggering, not of interest, or the interaction is not serving the participant in any positive way. Five out of the seven respondents elaborated on how Instagram often portrays a fake standard that heightens insecurities, this experienced as a triggering content. As interviewee 7 (a 20 year old, student at Erasmus University) explained:

> "I was on social media a lot and I had to realize that I'm really comparing myself to others, and that really triggered a lot of things in me. My insecurities, my anxiety… I was really comparing to myself to a fake standard that was not actually there and that really triggered my anxiety and my self-esteem." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 illustrates how this fake standard on Instagram can trigger anxiety and self-esteem issues due to more comparisons regarding lifestyle and body image. Participants illustrated how Instagram's fake standards elicits a regular need to close the application, detaching themselves from the online world and stopping themselves from direct comparisons to unrealistic standards. Additionally, participants elaborated on how closing the application allows them to gain a sense of control on what is being shown and creates a barrier between the platform's content and the participant.

According to past theory, Boepple & Thompson (2016) and Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015) elaborate on how women experience body dissatisfaction and negative moods due to constant exposure of thinspiration or fitspiration. This research paper supports these findings as the fake standard referred to by the majority of participants has a direct relationship to body image ideals portrayed on Instagram that lead to more social comparison and heightened appearance pressures. Moreover, the research found that viewing ideal lifestyle content has an additional direct negative relationship on the participants. Participants indicated feeling a sense of doubt in their own capabilities and achievements when a particularly luxurious lifestyle was shown by other people of the same age on Instagram. Ultimately, both body image ideals and lifestyle content triggered the participants to close

Instagram. By doing so, participants felt more at ease and did not feel the burden of viewing or engaging in content that negatively impacted them.

A significant amount of participants showcased *Full Detachment b*y putting their phones away. Around 87% actively did this to resist Instagram's vicious cycle. Interviewee 5 (a 21 year old, university student at Erasmus) illustrates the need to put her phone away to gain that extra sense of control in efforts to be more productive and present, stating:

> "And then I actually had stuff to do, like laundry or cleaning or just organize my week. Therefore I, like, put my phone away in this case on that day. And I actually started doing what I had to do during the day." (Interviewee 5)

This showcases the need to consciously acknowledge one's day to day responsibility and actively check out of Instagram in order to be more present. As a result, Interviewee 5 indicated that she was able to do household chores she may otherwise have put off doing because she put her phone away . Ultimately, the action of putting your phone away allowed several respondents to gain control of their day, their Instagram usage and not be consumed by the vicious cycly of content on Instagram.

4.1.2. Digital Pruning

The second sub-theme that will be explored is *Digital Pruning*. Digital pruning directly links to the theory elaborated on by Hockin-Boyers et al. (2021), who define digital pruning as the act of critically sifting through social media content and particularly reflecting on the affect this content has on the user. Within this research, *Digital Pruning* has been used by female university students to gain control of the Instagram algorithm by drawing up on their own agency to create an Instagram environment that is uplifting.

Throughout most of the interviews, a significant number of participants emphasized the importance of unfollowing accounts and how they similarly experienced a realization that they shouldn't be following accounts that did not positively benefit them. As one respondent, interviewee 7 explained:

> "I was away from, Rotterdam and it really made me reflect a lot. And that was the time I unfollowed like 500 people on the spot… Like every day I would like to go through my following list and I would always ask myself this question of 'Do I care

about this person? Does this person inspire me?' If one of the answers would be no, I would immediately unfollow the person." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 and other participants highlight the action of unfollowing accounts in a large batch as opposed to smaller batches per day. This was done through the realization that their current Instagram environment was unhealthy, resulting in a sudden motivation for change. Deleting several accounts in one go enabled them to immediately remove themselves from this environment. Similarly, other participants reflected on the importance of unfollowing accounts that encouraged a feeling of negativity, were repetitive in content or un-authentic. All these examples showcase how unfollowing people is a great step into curating a feed that showcases accounts that provoke joy.

Another way participants showcased *Digital Pruning* was by skipping content. Skipping content is defined as the active resistance towards seeing specific content by taking action to remove it from their sight. Skipping content is as simple as actively scrolling past it or clicking off of it once exposed to the content. Often times participants choose to skip content that they believed to be particularly triggering or irrelevant to their interests. Participants discussed how taking the extra step to not seeing the triggering content relieves them from any overwhelming or anxiety-related experiences in an effort to protect their well-being. Skipping content is used to allow participants to only surround themselves with content that fits their interests and tailors to their needs at that particular moment. Ultimately, skipping content can be seen as a preventative action that helps eliminate any unwanted negative emotions.

The next action that illustrated *Digital Pruning* is the ability of participants to mute accounts. Muting is defined as the ability to not see what an account is posting on their page but also on their stories. By muting, a person is able to still follow the account but choose to actively not see their content to whichever degree is necessary for the participant. To add, muting can be seen as a digital strategy that becomes possible due to the affordances of Instagram. This links to research done by Lochtefeld et al. (2013) that emphasizes the importance and responsibility of third-party developers in creating a healthy digital environment for their users.

The topic of muting resulted in quite oppositional views throughout the interviews, having almost half of the participants believing muting to be rather inefficient and preferring to directly unfollow accounts. Interviewee 4 (a 24-year-old marketing management student

studying at Erasmus) strongly emphasized her preference to unfollow accounts rather than muting, by saying:

> "Yes, but then I'm kind of like, why don't you just unfollow them, right?... because if that person is triggering so like your well-being so much, I think there's no point of following." (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 4 and other participants discuss the action of muting to them seems to be a rather inefficient and mild way to deal with triggering content on Instagram. Emphasizing how following someone should not come at the stake of your own health. Rheingold (2012) highlights the importance for users to mindfully engage with their social media to achieve personal empowerment; this reinforces the importance for participants to apply the muting strategy to alleviate themselves from further negative content and achieve personal empowerment.

However, other participants argued that depending on who is being muted and what content is being shown, muting could be a good way to temporarily rid yourself of the content and undo this action if need be. Interviewee 7, for example, responded to the topic of muting positively, stating that:

> "It actually ended up working pretty well because I was not exposed to that account and I was not exposed to that energy to say, and it affected me in a positive way." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 showcases how muting gave her agency to be in control of her own feed. By not being exposed to content or people's negative 'energy', she is able to have a more positive experience on Instagram. Both perspectives showcase relevance and illustrate the rather subjective nature of muting considering that some participants prefer direct action, and some prefer a more subtle and temporary strategy. Lastly, a noticeable shift in perspective happened after each participant discussed their social media diary, often shifting their direct unfollowing approach to one where muting may be more enticing. One of the participants, Interviewee 3 (a 21-year-old, University student studying at Erasmus) originally felt that muting was a less useful strategy to implement and preferred unfollowing. However, she changed her opinion saying:

"So for me, it was the perfect solution to combine not blocking them or unfollowing them, but not being able to always see what they have to say posting everything." (Interviewee 3)

This illustrates the importance of being educated on the usage and exercising certain strategies. Hence, muting as a strategy showcases several different perspectives but has the potential to be useful depending on the openness of the participant and willingness to try out new strategies. Furthermore, Ni Shuilleabhain et al. (2021) highlight how young individuals have the power to learn how to navigate and use their online environment, with a specific focus on inter-acting with the content shown online. The research emphasizes the importance for individuals to learn and grow from things shown online instead of falling victim to comparisons. An implication of muting is to implement media literacy interventions in efforts to shed light on the harmful digital world and positively reshape the online environment.

Additionally, another example of *Digital Pruning* was by participants actively avoiding triggering content. Participants avoided triggering content by immediately scrolling past content that is seen as triggering or harmful to them. Actively avoiding triggering content refers to being conscious of the ways in which Instagram is harming your emotional, physical, or social well-being and reinforces the need to maintain distance from this content. Interviewee 2 implemented this strategy explaining:

"Just sharing certain information that I know will trigger certain emotions or like my anxiety… I would just avoid the content." (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 2 showcases how knowing what triggers her and actively avoiding this type of content, allows her to not be as impacted by the content that is being shown on Instagram.

Moreover, a significant amount of participants used the 'do not disturb' feature on their Iphone's as a form of *Digital Pruning*. Participants did this in effort to gain control of their Instagram usage and particularly create a healthier balance between time spent online and offline. Interviewee 7 discussed her experience using 'do not disturb', stating:

"New strategies that I've done is to put a do not disturb mode on my phone. And because of that, I don't get notifications, or I get notifications at a certain period of time. So that really helped me to kind of gain control over my Instagram user usage." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 clearly illustrates how by using 'do not disturb' and not getting notifications from Instagram, she is able to function better in her daily life this having the potential to improve her overall well-being.

4.1.3. Privacy

The third sub-theme that will be explored is *Privacy*. The concept of *Privacy* refers to a participant's active resistance of Instagram's algorithm to remain anonymous. Often, participants choose to exercise this anonymity to illustrate a dislike of the negative environment that Instagram can be. These actions showcase how anonymity can protect a participants well-being by not being influenced by the comparison ideals, expectations, and pressures to showcase one's life. Instead, female university students gain control of their Instagram through the power of anonymity and, as a result, feel freed from these external pressures.

The first action taken to illustrate *Privacy* is not posting content. A small number of participants had a strong dislike for the way that Instagram functions and the impact it can have on their lives. As mentioned before, Instagram is known to target the vulnerable female gaze in an effort to idealize bodies and lifestyles (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). These heightened pressures have resulted in women who feel their privacy and life shouldn't be exposed online. Specifically, Interviewee 6 (a 21 year old, university student at Erasmus) mentions that:

> "it's always an underlying pressure to expose your life on the Internet. And I felt like the more people knew about my life, the less secure I felt about my own actions and life." (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 6 reiterates that over-exposure to unrealistic ideals and the feeling of judgment and comparison on Instagram can result in women completely disengaging. Therefore by elevating this factor in her Instagram usage and choosing to be completely anonymous online, participants are able to utilize the platform for the purpose of entertainment and combat these comparison pressures.

The significantly less popular but still relevant action that was taken by participants to illustrate *Privacy* is not liking any content. If participants did not like any content, there were

active efforts made in order to gain control over what was being shown on their feed by the algorithm. This links to the theory brought forth by Petre et al (2019) and Cotter (2018) stating that women are now using their agency on social media to resist the power brought forward by algorithms. This becomes particularly easier when being educated on the algorithm. Specifically, by not liking any content, the algorithm has less ability to influence the sponsored content that is being shown. Participants discussed how not liking content or engaging helps them remain anonymous online and provides a sense of privacy to create a more welcoming Instagram environment.

A less frequent suggestion that was mentioned showcasing *Privacy* is using the favorites tab. The favorites tab is a new feature on Instagram released in 2022 which provides users the option to favorite accounts that they want to see more of and curate their content accordingly. The participants discussed that they use this feature when avoiding any sponsored content that is shown by Instagram's algorithm.

This links to the theory brought forth by Petre et al (2019) and Cotter (2018) stating that women now are "playing the game" of Instagram in an effort to resist the impact of the algorithm. This is of particular relevant as female university students are learning how to navigate around the algorithm to create a better environment for themselves. This showcases how agency provides women with the power to change their Instagram environment to one focused primarily on positive content. Specifically, Interviewee 2 shares her experience using the favorites tab:

> "And it also is kind of overwhelming because you see so much content that you don't like or that you don't even follow. So then I go to the favorite step and I let you just see the content from people that I like and that I enjoy. So that makes it more calm as well." (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 2 illustrates how the favorite tab helps her find her calm on the platform and only exposes her to content that she likes and enjoys. As a result, a favorite tab is a useful tool used view content users like and resist feeling overwhelmed by the content shown through the algorithm.

4.2. Seeking Positive Reinforcement

The second main theme found in the data is *seeking positive reinforcement* (see Appendix 7B). This theme showcases how female university students are actively prioritizing what they follow and finding content that is uplifting and positive. As a result, participants are acknowledging the importance of following accounts that will benefit their overall experience on Instagram and their psychological well-being. This strategy embraces the ability of females to use their agency to use Instagram for its' purpose of the platform, namely, entertainment.

4.2.1. Selectively following Accounts

The second sub-theme that was found through the data is *selectively following accounts*. Participants follow accounts that brought them joy and connection. Following is defined as the act of actively curating which accounts bests fit your interests and to see more of this selected type of content. As a result a participant can experience a better Instagram feed as everything that is being seen is something that will spark joy or interest. Specifically, these accounts were followed to combat the triggering content experienced by the participants regarding body image ideals, lifestyle, and fake standards.

The first type of account that typically is followed by participants is friends. Friends are people that the participant is close to and has a connection with. As a result, all the posts and stories being shared by this 'friend' are things that the participant is interested in seeing and supporting. To add, participants also followed friends living far away giving them the possibility to still be updated on each other's lives. This evokes a sense of joy in the participants as they enjoy viewing the content of their friends. However, following friends does not always elicit feelings of joy, Interviewee 1 for example explains that:

"So, like it's a person that I don't like anymore but that I used to be very close to…I didn't like that I wasn't happy for them when I saw good content." (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 showcases how changes in friendship dynamics quickly change the emotions felt and experienced by the participant. As a result, these circumstances can evoke negative feelings and harm the well-being of the participant.

The second type of account that the participants followed was family members. Similar to that of friends, participants followed the accounts of their family in order to

maintain connectivity and support each other online. This connectedness helped them feel closer to one another and ultimately aided in their enjoyment and well-being on the Instagram platform.

The third type of content typically followed by participants is following celebrities. Celebrities are known as famous or important individuals in society. Celebrities, in general, were less followed by participants than influencers; however, when following celebrities it was to establish a sense of connection. Interviewee 3 elaborates on this by saying:

"And then of course there's a few celebrities here and there that I just like seeing because it gives me a bit closer… relationship with them." (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 3 highlights the importance for her to create a closer relationships with the celebrity and the positive feelings which she associates with that. Most participants highlighted the importance of feeling closer to the celebrities they admire and following their day-to-day lives.

One of the most popular types of accounts that are followed by the participants is following influencers. Influencers are influential people on Instagram that post about a particular interest online. The participants discuss their liking towards following influencers who show their interests in a fun and light-hearted manner. They also discuss their liking towards influencers that are more authentic as this makes their content more relatable. Following influencers illustrates how female university students are tailoring their Instagram content to accounts that fit their interests which positively benefits their well-being.

The fifth type of content typically followed by the participants is acquaintances. Acquaintances are defined as people that the participants did not particularly feel a close connection to but know of. Following acquaintances showcases the ability for participants to be able to stay connected with people and follow their day-to-day lives.

The sixth type of content regularly followed by the participants is positive content. Positive content is content that is uplifting, and motivating. By following accounts that regularly post positive content, users are able to positively be influenced by uplifting content they are exposed to. Participants further discussed how they go out of their own way to find these types of accounts, Interviewee 5 elaborates on this by saying:

"I recently follow accounts that have positive things, either quotes or whatever. And I like, I like seeing things that make me feel good." (Interviewee 5)

Ultimately, by participants following positive content, they are actively making their Instagram an uplifting and positive environment to be in, which results in an improvement in their psychological well-being.

This seventh type of content followed by participants is cooking content. Specifically, cooking content allowed them to utilize the platform as a source of inspiration regarding recipes, how to make certain dishes, what they should eat. Instagram offered the participants guidance and allowed them to be inspired by and view food content they enjoyed.

The eighth type of content followed by participants is fashion content. The majority of participants discussed the frequent searching for inspiration on Instagram. Interviewee 6 elaborates on this by saying:

"Like if I follow like an influencer or something, it's because I like their style and I like it for fashion advice." (Interviewee 6)

Instagram offers participants fashion content and advice that can help reinforce their hobbies to make the platform more enjoyable. Additionally, Ramlan et al. (2021) found that inspirational content is relatable and easily accessible which helped stimulate users to become self-motivated and grow. Fashion content, therefore, provides users with the ability to grow and develop their passions as well as build their confidence regarding their hobby and outward appearance.

The ninth type of content followed by participants is motivational content. Motivational content is rather subjective to the user. However, motivation often refers to accounts that promote reasons to act and behave in a particular way. Dale et al (2017) found that motivational account often illuded to larger themes like encouragement and hope. To add, Rieger & Klimmt (2018) state that viewing this type of content has positive effects on a user's psychological well-being. Within this research, it became evident participants follow accounts that motivate them to be a better version of themselves and encourage a healthy lifestyle. Participants discussed how being exposed to motivational messages builds their confidence and how these messages help inspire them to be more content with themselves. Ultimately, the motivational messages are used by the participants as a tool to feel inspired and to be happy with themselves.

4.2.2. Small Acts of Resistance

The third sub-theme that has been identified is *Small Acts of Resistance.* The concept of *small acts of resistance* embodies the small actions done by each participant in order to sustain a healthy relationship with their Instagram. In efforts to resist the power of the algorithm and triggering content. By participants taking part in their small acts of resistance, female university students are able to exercise their agency on Instagram and take control of their own feeds. All of these actions are implemented by participants in order to build a healthy and sustainable relationship which leads to an improvement in their psychological well-being.

Small acts of resistance showcases similarity to small acts of engagement which was found in a study conducted by Picone et al. (2019). Small acts of engagement refers to the ability for users to have power to apply agency in their everyday lives. Similarly, small acts of resistance showcases direct examples of how female university students have been able to apply small acts of engagement to create a more positive and uplifting Instagram environment for themselves. Small acts of resistance further elaborates on what can be done by female university students in order to gain back control of their Instagram's and curate an environment suited to benefit their psychological well-being.

The first action the participants utilized in efforts to showcase *Small Acts of Resistance* is posting own content. When participants are able to post content on Instagram, they are able to take full ownership over what they are posting, creating, and showing to others. Participants particularly emphasized how they enjoyed posting on Instagram and how the action of posting made them feel good and full of joy. Interviewee 5 elaborates on this by saying:

"I see it… as a place to show who I am and also makes me feel good in a way to see all these memories and photos together in one place." (Interviewee 5)

Participants emphasize the contentment and joy they gain from the ability to post content that makes them happy. By posting photos or videos which are evoking a sense of joy in the participants, it motivates others to do the same. This spreading of awareness and good content builds a more uplifting Instagram environment.

Another way in which participants showcase *Small Acts of Resistance* is by looking up accounts. Participants discuss how if the algorithm doesn't showcase the content that they

would like to see or is personally something which is missing from their feed, they will actively look up the content. Interviewee 2 showcases this by saying:

> "I also deal with influencers like the ones that I really like. If I noticed that I don't see that content or stories, I look them up myself." (Interviewee 2).

Therefore, the action of looking up accounts helps maintain a healthy relationship on Instagram whilst still being able to enjoy the content that the participants really want to see.

The last way in which participants showcase *Small Acts of Resistance* is selectively choosing stories. Some participants discuss the need to selectively look at particular stories to not be over-exposed to content on Instagram. As a result, they are able to curate a feed with only content that is of interest to them. Selectively choosing stories helps participants feel more at ease on the Instagram platform and be less impacted by the triggering content. Specifically, interviewee 4 only looks at content from friends, family, or influencers. Interviewee 4 discusses this by saying:

> "And then also I look at stories like I select the stories I want to look at. I don't look at all of them." (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 4 explains how selectively watching stories prevents overstimulation and helps her navigate on Instagram in a healthier manner. Ultimately, selectively choosing stories is one way to maintain a healthy relationship with Instagram.

4.3. Acceptance

The third main theme found in the data is *Acceptance* (see Appendix 7C). The concept of acceptance focuses on how female university students are learning about, understanding, and accepting the complexity of the Instagram platform. Ultimately, *acceptance* highlights how female university students have refocused their usage on Instagram to create a more sustainable and healthy environment for themselves whilst actively ignoring the harmful elements of the platform.

4.3.1. Self-Awareness

The first sub-theme that has been found is *Self-Awareness*. Self-awareness is the ability to be conscious of one's own character and feelings. It is important as participants need to understand the impact that Instagram can have on themselves but also others. By participants being aware of their own triggers, it opens more ability to tailor the platform in a way that suits their usage and feelings. The participants discussed how self-awareness is built over time through the exposure of the platform. Therefore, self-awareness can be seen as a building block to creating a more healthy and sustainable Instagram environment that leads to a happier individual.

Smith-Jackson et al. (2010) and Cash et al. (2005) report similar findings emphasizing the need for women to practice self-awareness. According to their studies, self-awareness allows women to recognize that the current situation they are in and the negative emotions felt will pass and are temporary. To add, through self-awareness women are able to exercise rationality and objectivity when scrolling to remind themselves that the situation online may look better than the reality.

The first way that *Self-Awareness* is portrayed is by reflecting while scrolling. This allowed participants to understand how they were using Instagram and if this was benefitting them. Through higher awareness, they are able to make better choices regarding what they can handle, increasing the ability to recognize triggers and utilize the platform in a way that is beneficial to their psychological well-being.

Another way in which *Self-Awareness* is portrayed is the conscious use of Instagram. What this implies is that users are building an understanding of how they are using the platform, and the importance of educating oneself on the impacts and negative environment which Instagram can be. As a result, the participants indicated that by using Instagram more consciously it became healthier environment to be in. Interviewee 7 indicates this by saying:

"I really got to understand better how I'm interacting with people online, especially on Instagram. And I was more cautious and more conscious of my Instagram usage in general." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 and other participants showcase how being more self-aware and understanding the way in which the platform affects the participants allows for a more conscious use of the platform. Beetham (2016) and Gui et al., (2017) support this by saying that the more aware a

user is of the harmful effects of excessive media use the more it will improve ones mental health.

The last way in which *Self-Awareness* is portrayed is through awareness of personal boundaries online. Participants discuss the importance of learning what impacts them online but also by understanding their boundaries. Interviewee 7 elaborates on this by saying:

"But I do believe that you really have to be aware of how you connect with those people and what are the boundaries that you're setting for yourself in general." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 highlights the importance of setting internal boundaries and knowing your limits when it comes to utilizing the platform. Ultimately, the act of setting boundaries will vary per participant, however, in the research boundaries were set by: only using Instagram for a certain period of time, not using filters as frequently, and by knowing what content triggers the participant. As a result of setting boundaries the platform becomes more enjoyable.

The concept of *Self-Awareness* relates to the literature conducted by Smith-Jackson et al (2010) which discussed how women are currently trying to find ways to alleviate themselves from the pressures and comparison they feel online. It is clear that female university students are more focused on becoming self-aware. To add, Chambers and Sandford (2018) discuss how more awareness of the media ecosystem brings users one step closer to controlling their digital well-being online. Women are now showcasing the ability to learn and adapt to an ever-complex Instagram environment and prove to be actively changing the discourse around body image and comparisons on Instagram.

4.3.2. Self-Education

The second sub-theme that has been created through the data is *Self-Education*. The concept of education encompasses the ability to learn about Instagram. Participants reflected that through others around them, their own experience on the platform, and simply deep diving into research online they were able to educate themselves on the positive and negative impacts of Instagram. By doing this, participants had more motivation to change their Instagram use to protect their well-being. Education is, therefore, an essential element to

understanding how to change, curate, and refocus one's usage on Instagram in order to create a healthier Instagram environment.

The first way that *Self-Education* has been sought out by the participants is through their current life stage. Each participant who participated in this research paper ranged from the ages of 20 to 24. This is particularly relevant as a significant amount of the participants discussed the importance of maturing as an element to understanding how to use their Instagram's better. Particularly emphasis was put on being more confident, comparing less to others online, and understanding how Instagram illustrates only a snippet of reality. Interviewee 4 elaborates on the concept of education, saying:

"you wanted to have the most likes, the most comments, the prettiest picture you would use filters and like make yourself look different than you're actually look. And that right now I don't care about at all anymore, but I guess that's the age and my life stage." (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 4 showcases how with age, she has been able to change her mindset and understand the way Instagram works. As a result, she now has created a more healthy, less comparison, and competition-based platform for herself; and rather uses it for the sake of connection and entertainment.

The last way in which *Self-Education* is showcased is by the ability to learn from other people's experiences. Often participants discussed how learning from other people around them helped them understand that they are not alone in feeling insecure or going through comparisons. Specifically, Interviewee 7 discussed this, saying:

"And what was a very big eye opener for me was the fact that when I would be talking to a girl… and I see like she she has like 10k followers, and she was at the house party and overheard a conversation. She was saying how mentally unwell she was. And that kind of clicked in me." (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 7 reflects on how learning about others that are also struggling with their well-being due to Instagram opened her eyes to making her own Instagram a better place for herself. Therefore, learning from other people's experiences allows the participants the recognize the negative impact Instagram can have on others and create a sense of relatability

with others. This will further help the participants navigate their way on the platform in a positive way.

Interestingly, there is little research on how users have learnt or understood how to exercise their agency online; rather the focus lies more on the need for agency in the online environment. To add, current research done by Cotter (2018)'s only analyzes influencers when it comes to educating themselves on Instagram and the ability to obtain high visibility. This research emphasizes the importance of generalizing this concept, so that it involves all active platform users and not just influencers, as education is crucial in understanding navigation on the platform. Furthermore, Chambers & Sandford (2018) support the findings that by being more self-educated, users are able to actively resist the negative impacts of Instagram and instead use it in a healthy and sustainable manner holding greater enjoyment.

5. Conclusion

This final chapter provides an answer to the research question discussed in section 1.2. The first section (5.1) will explain the conclusions taken away from the main themes created within the results section of this dissertation namely, *Avoidance*, *Seeking Positive Reinforcement* and *Acceptance*. Then the second section (5.2) will discuss the theoretical implications of this research by critically analyzing the intersection between the results (4.0) and theoretical framework (2.0) referencing back to the topics such as inspiration, education, digital strategies. While the research in this paper is valid and reliable, the third section (5.3) will discuss the limitations of the results and lastly, the fourth section (5.4) discusses suggestions for future research regarding media coping strategies.

The objective of this research paper is to investigate what strategies female university students have created to protect their well-being online. The research question, *What kinds of strategies do female university students apply to their Instagram use in order to protect their psychological well-being?* aims to better understand these strategies, why they are used and how it helps protect female university students' psychological well-being.

Every chapter has been instrumental in understanding and finding the conclusions which will be elaborated upon below. Chapter 1 introduces the study and establishes its relevance. Next, Chapter 2 provides a detailed theoretical framework which elaborates on relevant concepts and theories. Subsequently, Chapter 3 justifies the methodological and data analysis choices of this research. Lastly, Chapter 4 provides the results which were formed after data analysis of this research.

5.1. Conclusions on Main Identified Themes

All participants experienced the negative impacts of social media and were actively trying to navigate themselves on Instagram to build a healthier relationship with the platform. Specifically, the participants did this through using three different strategies, namely: *Avoidance*, *Seeking Positive Reinforcement* and *Acceptance*. These strategies allowed users to create a healthy and uplifting Instagram environment which relieved them from any harmful content.

The first main theme found was *Avoidance*. This theme is connected to how female university students choose to actively evade content that negatively influences their psychological well-being. In particular, females showcased partial detachment or full-detachment to create distance from the platform so as to not be confronted with triggering

content. Additionally, an avoidance strategy of privacy was implemented when female university students felt that Instagram overstepped their boundaries online. These strategies illustrate the need to create and take space from Instagram if it proves to be an unhealthy environment.

The second main theme found was *Seeking Positive Reinforcement*. This theme takes on an oppositional approach to *Avoidance,* as female university students seek out and follow content that benefits their psychological well-being. Instead of avoiding the platform altogether, female university students focused on seeking sources of inspiration in efforts to be exposed to uplifting content. By selectively following accounts that benefit their well-being and utilizing small acts of resistance towards the algorithm allows them to create a better experience on Instagram.

The last theme found was *Acceptance*. This theme is connected to how female university students understand - and be content with – the complexity of Instagram. Women refocus the way they use Instagram by utilizing it in a way that benefits their well-being. This acceptance was created through female university continuous self-awareness on the platform, the progressive education of the Instagram environment, and the ability to gain agency online. All these elements are necessary in creating a healthy and sustainable relationship with Instagram.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

Within the current discourse surrounding digital well-being not enough studies focus on the link between the implementation of coping strategies and the social media environment. As of now, Ramlan et al (2021) study found that inspiration is one coping strategy used by individuals to maintain a healthy social media environment. However, there is a significant gap in the research on how these personal strategies look like for women, especially in the persistent social media environment individuals live in today. Within this research, there was a direct link to the literature of Ramlan et al. (2021), indicating that users actively seek sources of inspiration in order to curate a feed which is uplifting and beneficial to their needs and interests. This made participants feel more engaged with and interested in the content being shown on their feeds and aided a more positive experience on Instagram, improving their overall well-being.

Furthermore, in Rieger & Klimmt (2018) study they found that the topic of inspiration in the context of social media is mainly seen as a source of motivation to others. To add, Ramlan et al (2021) study found that motivational, encouraging, inspirational and meaningful content seen on social media encouraged a feeling of gratitude by the user. Both of these studies reinforce the findings of this research as the participants similarly discussed how they intentionally follow motivational content in order to improve their psychological well-being online; confirming that the motivational messages found on inspiration accounts are used by the participants as a tool to feel inspired, to be more content with themselves.

Moreover, the concept of agency proves to be an important recurring theme that resurfaces in most of the research paper. Gonick et al. (2009) reflects on the importance for women to utilize their agency in the online environment. Picone et al. (2019) adds that, in their research, agency is reflected in users' everyday lives through the concept of "small acts of engagement" (SAOE). Through-out this paper female university students are seen exercising their agency by using the platform for their own benefits and not allowing body image and social comparison pressures to intertwine with their usage on the platform. This ultimately has resulted in happier and more confident female university students that use the platform for its main purpose, entertainment.

This aligns with the findings by Rose (2016) that found that women are increasingly more aware of the algorithm and by being educated can help women navigate themselves online. However, this research paper also found that education goes beyond simply understanding Instagram's algorithm and encourages female university students to educate themselves on Instagram as a platform, focusing primarily on the negative impact Instagram has on women regarding body image and comparison pressures. By women educating themselves about these issues pertaining to the platform, they showcase resistance and the ability to tailor their Instagram usage to one that is healthier and sustainable.

Current research primarily focuses on the strategies users are using to directly lessen the impact of social media. These strategies can be seen as digital strategies that are monitored by the users' phone and the settings which the users put in place. Specifically, Lochtefeld et al. (2013) discuss how third-party developers and mobile phone providers have created digital detox apps, screen time and digital nudging (Purohit & Holzer, 2021). All digital strategies have been implemented by these third-party developers in efforts to have users recognize their excessive usage of certain platforms and protect their overall well-being. However, this research paper showcases completely different findings than the aforementioned digital strategies. Instead, the research suggests that personal strategies deem

to be more effective in their usage as all participants discussed doing personalized strategies tailor to their needs. To add, there was no indication of the usage around any digital strategies within any of the interviews that showcase the lack of relevance and effectiveness it has particularly for female university students. Moreover, this indicates a shift in the general discourse around strategies and showcases a transition from digital to personal strategies that are more effective and personalized in their usage. These personal strategies showcase more effective usage as each strategy implemented by the users is tailored to their personal needs and therefore, provides the most direct and positive result on the participants well-being. This dissertation fulfills the lack of research done regarding the personal strategies female university students implement to protect their psychological well-being. To conclude, this topic brings new opportunities to research more in-depth about personal strategy and find more factors relating to personal strategy usage.

5.3. Business Implications

Organizations promoting well-being reduce stress and encourage a positive working environment where employees are able to thrive (CIPD, n.d.). Ultimately, it is important for businesses to gain a better understanding of what employees, especially female employees, go through when protecting their well-being online. An additional way businesses can benefit from these findings is by creating a safe and open environment for women to discuss their struggles regarding the online environment and create a supportive employee base. To add, it is particularly relevant to implement these strategies in businesses which work closely with or in the social media environment.

Within the introduction of this research paper, it was made clear that there is a significant gap in the research regarding the personal strategies implemented by users to deal with the negative social media environment. Moreover, this research has attempted to close this gap finding three main strategies namely, *Avoidance*, *Seeking Positive Reinforcement*, and *Acceptance*, as approaches to dealing with the negative social media environment. What is particularly relevant for businesses is the importance of educating their employees in these newly found strategies. It was found that participants who were more educated on the topic of Instagram and all its negative impacts on females, body image and social comparisons were more adamant on changing the way they use the platform to create this positive and uplifting Instagram environment (Beer, 2006; Rose, 2016). Thus, it would be beneficial for businesses to teach their employees - with specific emphasis on women - about what kind of strategies to

use on their Instagram and make them aware of the negative environment which Instagram can turn into this helping employees protect their well-being online.

5.4. Limitations

Within this section, the limitations of this research will be critically discussed and suggestions will be made on improvements for each limitation.

The first limitation is that a total of 14 interviews have been conducted with 7 different participants. Although this was a feasible amount in order to obtain relevant and in-depth data; it would be beneficial to include more participants in order to improve the data's generalizability as well as gain more insights into the consistency of patterns which have been created. More participants would lead to more responses with different opinions, which improve the accuracy of the findings.

The second limitation of this dissertation is the length of the social media diary created. Due to the time constraints of this particular dissertation a three day social media diary proved to be sufficient. However, if this research were to be conducted in a more long term scale, a week long social media diary would be beneficial to really showcase an accurate representation of how participants are using the platform without having too much influence from the interview. This would ensure that the social media diaries had more data to analyze and ensure more accuracy of data received.

The third limitation of this dissertation is the style in which the data presented itself. This dissertation focused on using interviews to gather in-depth data on the participants and their experiences online. However, the participants may feel some pressure to answer questions according to what they believe the interviewer wants to hear, creating a bias to the interview. This has the potential to create less accurate results as data may not be as authentic as the participants may really think and feel about certain introduced topics.

To add, the dissertation covered the topic and well-being in the scope which was acceptable regarding ethics. Certain more thought provoking questions can cause emotional strain to the participant who may feel the questions feel too invading of their privacy. Considering topics such as well-being or agency were mentioned these emotional strains can arise more easily than with other, less personal topics.

The last limitation of this dissertation is the lack of studies which were conducted on the topic of digital well-being. Arguably the topic of digital well-being has risen in importance in recent years due to the prevalence of social media in our lives. Therefore, there

is little past research present regarding the topic of digital well-being. This meant that the research had to approach digital well-being from different angles which do not directly come close to defining and understanding the concept but through a different framework namely, digital literacy.

5.5. Future Research

Within this section of the research, potential ideas will be suggested for the future research of this dissertation. Currently for the feasibility and specification of the research, only women were invited to participate due to the susceptibility women face regarding body image and comparison related pressures online. The first suggestion for future research is including males in the analysis as this would be beneficial in doing a cross- genders comparison, understanding how strategies differ per gender and what strategies are most used by each gender.

Secondly, this research paper analyzed the strategies that females implemented on the platform of Instagram specifically. However, a suggestion for future research is analyzing and comparing different social media platforms and how these different platforms change the ways in which strategies are used by the participants. For example, how and when do participants use strategies on the platform of Tik-Tok and how does this differ to that of Instagram. This cross-comparison between different social media platforms would provide a more in-depth understanding of the usage of strategies by female university students and if these result in potential patterns.

Additionally, the current research focuses on analyzing female university students with an age range between 20 – 24 years of age. However, it would be beneficial to analyze this research with the youngest section of the Generation Z (people born between 2008 – 2012). The youngest section of Generation Z is relevant to study as it would be interesting to learn how a generation that has been brought up with technology uses the platform and how this changes the way in which generation z uses the platform. To add, a cross- comparison between different generations could also be added as an additional dimension to the research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: First Interview Guide

Research question: *What kinds of strategies do female university students apply to their Instagram use in order to protect their well-being?*

Welcome to this interview. Thank you so much for your willingness to let me interview you and thank you for your participation in my research. I hereby confirm that I am allowed to interview you and use your thoughts and opinions to guide my research. This research is about the strategies that female university students have created on Instagram to protect their well-being. I will briefly explain the structure of the interview, first I will be asking more general questions about yourself and your experience and thoughts online and then progressively go into more focused topics regarding digital well-being, how you feel online and potential strategies implemented?
Before we start are there any questions?

Part 1: Personal

1. What's your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your nationality?
4. What are you currently studying?
5. Are you currently enrolled as a university student?
6. What are your interests and/ or hobbies?

Part 2: Social Media Usage

1. How often do you use social media?
2. On average how many hours are you on social media?
3. What are the main platforms that you use?
4. How do you feel when you have spent over 5 hours on social media?
5. When do you decide to go on social media?
6. What are the reasons to scroll on social media?

Part 3: Instagram

1. How active are you on Instagram?

2. How many hours a day are you typically on Instagram

3. Do you post a lot on Instagram (stories/ posts)

4. How do you communicate on Instagram? (Direct message (DM), comments, stories)

5. Do you feel you have a good relationship with Instagram: please elaborate on why or why not

Part 4: Social Comparison Theory

1. Do you often compare yourself to others online? Why?

2. How do the actions or opinions of others effect your own opinion online? Why?

3. How are you with dealing with trends?

4. Have you ever used editing or filter apps? If so why?

5. How do they make you feel about your own body image?

6. How do other people posting selfies or body images make you feel? Why does it make you feel that way?

7. Have you ever felt left out on social media? why did you feel that way?

8. What triggered those feelings?

9. How did you tackle this left-out feeling regarding social media use?

Part 5: Vulnerable Female Gaze

1. Is there any specific thing about being a female that you think can impact your relationship with social media?

2. Why do you think this can have an impact?

Part 6: Agency

1. How in control do you feel of your social media use? Why?

2. Why do you follow people on Instagram?

3. What types of accounts do you follow on Instagram?

4. Why do you typically follow these types of accounts?

5. Have you ever unfollowed someone?

6. Can you describe to me an example and reason why you decided to unfollow someone?

7. What were the main reasons to unfollow them?

8. How did you feel after you unfollow them?

9. How does it make you feel when you are able to choose the content you see online?

10. Why does it make you feel that way?

11. How aware of you of the algorithm?

12. Does it make you do anything differently?

13. do you have any strategies that help you navigate through the algorithms?

14. Why?

Part 7: Digital Well Being

1. Do you think your social media, in particular, Instagram is a healthy environment? Why?

2. How would you say Instagram impacts your overall well-being?

3. Can you provide an example of this?

4. In what ways have you created a healthy relationship with Instagram?

5. What are things that can trigger your well-being on Instagram? If yes, do you avoid these triggers online, or have you found ways to deal with them?

6. Can you think of a negative experience you've had on Instagram? Are you willing to share?

Part 8: Current Strategies

1. How do you try to make Instagram a healthy and sustainable environment for you?

2. Do you currently have strategies you use on your Instagram to make it a nicer place for you? I'll give you a moment to think about this:

3. When do you implement such a strategy? How do you often feel went doing this? Upset, anxious, happy?

Technological Strategies

Screen time: track the amount of time spent online and can show reminders

4. What are your thoughts regarding screen time reminders on your phone?

5. Do you find them useful?

Digital nudging: app sending reminders of overuse of Instagram through pop up notification

6. What are your thoughts on nudging apps that remind you of the amount of time you have been on your phone?

7. Do you find that useful? And why?

I will now go over a series of examples where I'd like you to reflect on your own personal Instagram use and if these actions ever occur.

Personal Strategies:

Unfollowing:

If yes

- Have you ever unfollowed an account that harmed your well-being (with that made you feel small, bad about yourself, or wasn't good for you)?
- Can you describe the type of content you typically see from those accounts?
- How did this action make you feel?
- What was the experience on Instagram after the unfollowing occur?
- Did you feel better and safer online?

If yes or no:

- In general, do you feel unfollowing is an effective strategy to protect your overall well-being online?

Following:

If yes

- Have you ever followed accounts in an effort to create a more healthy relationship with your Instagram?
- Typically what kinds of content did you then start to follow?
- How did this make you feel?
- What was your experience with Instagram after following these types of accounts?
- Are there other things you follow that benefit your overall well-being?
- Can you describe the type of content you typically see from those accounts?

If yes or no:

- In general, do you feel following is an effective strategy to protect your overall well-being online?

Muting

If yes:

- have you ever muted someone on your Instagram?
- Why did you mute them?

- Can you explain the type of things that made you want to mute that account? Did certain emotions come up, did they make you feel bad, insecure … etc
- Typically what kinds of accounts have you muted if ever

If yes or no:
- In general, do you feel muting is an effective strategy to protect your overall well-being online?

Hiding Likes:

If yes:
- In your current Instagram settings do you have likes visible or hidden?
- Why did you choose this?

Visibility:
- Do you think that this impacts your overall well-being?
- Do you think seeing your likes affects you in any way?
- Are you very focused on the likes when posting photos?
- How do you feel if your friends have more likes than you?
- Why you do feel that way?

Hiding:
- When hiding:
- Do you think this has increased your overall well-being?
- How has hiding your likes made your Instagram usage more pleasurable for you?

If yes or no:
- In general, do you feel hiding likes is an effective strategy to protect your overall well-being online?

Lastly:
1. Besides all the above-mentioned strategies do you feel you use any others that are unique to your own experience online? Please take a minute to reflect. e.g. personalized screen time, Instagram day routine (only use it during x hours), avoidance of not using it
2. And please explain how this experience helps you protect your well-being?

The second step to this interview process is to ask you to take home this curated social media diary where I ask you to reflect on your social media use given the strategies that have been discussed and your general feelings towards social media. After these three days, I ask you kindly to participate in a shorter and diary-focused interview where we discuss your social media usage in those days. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions if this process is unclear to you or send me an email through my school email which will be given to you. Is everything clear?

All right, to end our first interview:
I'd like to thank you for participating in this interview about the current strategies that female university students are implementing to protect their well-being. Before the interview ends do you have any questions:
If not thank you so much for taking the time to answer the questions so openly and I look forward to hearing about your social media experience in three days' time!

Welcome again to your second interview! I hope you enjoyed learning more about your social media usage and I thank you again for taking the time to participate and write down your thoughts regarding non-tangible/personal strategies to facilitate an improvement in one's well-being online. Again I want to confirm that I am allowed to interview you and use your thoughts and opinions to guide my research.

Part 1: Personal

7. What's your name?
8. What is your age?
9. What is your nationality?
10. What are you currently studying?
11. Are you currently enrolled as a university student?

To start off this interview, I want to ask you to provide a brief reflection of each of yours days and how you felt these three days have been regarding your social media usage and your overall experience with reflecting in this social media diary.

Part 2: Instagram Usage

1. How often were you on Instagram in the last few days?
2. Did you post any content on Instagram in the last three days? If yes how did that make you feel, this could be stories or posts?
3. How active were you in scrolling through your reels in the last 3 days? Did the content shown on these reels affect you in any way?
4. How did the content you experienced on your Instagram make you feel?
5. Did you experience any triggering content on your social media? If yes, please elaborate on what?
6. Did you decide to avoid the usage of Instagram in any of these three days: if so why and what made you avoid this platform in particular?

Part 3: Mood & Emotions

1. In general, did you experience any intense moods during the three days?

2. How did these moods play a role in the way you used your Instagram? And if yes what did you change?

3. How did these changes make you feel?

4. Did it make it easier or harder to use your Instagram?

Part 3: Current strategies

1. Did you make use of any non-tangible strategies on Instagram to create a more healthy and sustainable environment?

2. If yes, please elaborate on what it was?

3. How did this action make you feel?

4. How did this action make you feel several days after you did that particular act? Did you feel better online, did it encourage you to be online longer, and enjoy the platform more?

5. Are you still using the same strategies or did you apply or try out any new strategies inspired by our previous conversation?

6. If yes, what new strategy did you decide to implement and why?

7. How did implementing this strategy in particular help your overall psychological well-being online?

I'd like to thank you for participating in these two interviews and answering so openly and honestly. I will be using all your insights to guide my research and help me understand the non-tangible strategies that people use and find effective in efforts to protect their well-being online. So thank you for your time and efforts. If you have any questions or would like to know more about my master thesis please do not hesitate to contact me and I will gladly share my findings with you once the paper is completed.
Before this interview ends do you have any questions?
If not thank you so much for your time.

Appendix 3: Social Media Diary Template

Name: Date:

Social Media Journal – Day #1

1. I posted something on Instagram today	yes	/	no
2. I had a meaningful conversation with someone on Instagram today	yes	/	no
3. I scrolled through my reels today	yes	/	no
4. I viewed my follower's stories today	yes	/	no
5. I avoided Instagram today	yes	/	no
6. I woke up feeling positive (happy, cheerful, calm, energetic) today	yes	/	no
7. I woke up feeling negative (sad, tired, angry, frustrated, moody) today	yes	/	no
8. I woke up feeling neutral today	yes	/	no

Please provide a brief journal entry reflecting on your overall Instagram usage today:
- How did Instagram affect your mood and experience online today?
- Did you exercise any strategy to make your Instagram experience better for your well-being?
- How were you feeling when implementing this strategy?
- How did you feel after?

every mind matters

Social Media Journal – Day #2

1. I posted something on Instagram today	yes / no
2. I had a meaningful conversation with someone on Instagram today	yes / no
3. I scrolled through my reels today	yes / no
4. I viewed my follower's stories today	yes / no
5. I avoided Instagram today	yes / no
6. I woke up feeling positive (happy, cheerful, calm, energetic) today	yes / no
7. I woke up feeling negative (sad, tired, angry, frustrated, moody) today	yes / no
8. I woke up feeling neutral today	yes / no

Please provide a brief journal entry reflecting on your overall Instagram usage today:
- How did Instagram affect your mood and experience online today?
- Did you exercise any strategy to make your Instagram experience better for your well-being?
- How were you feeling when implementing this strategy?
- How did you feel after?

every mind matters

Name: Date:

Social Media Journal – Day #3

1. I posted something on Instagram today	yes / no
2. I had a meaningful conversation with someone on Instagram today	yes / no
3. I scrolled through my reels today	yes / no
4. I viewed my follower's stories today	yes / no
5. I avoided Instagram today	yes / no
6. I woke up feeling positive (happy, cheerful, calm, energetic) today	yes / no
7. I woke up feeling negative (sad, tired, angry, frustrated, moody) today	yes / no
8. I woke up feeling neutral today	yes / no

Please provide a brief journal entry reflecting on your overall Instagram usage today:
- How did Instagram affect your mood and experience online today?
- Did you exercise any strategy to make your Instagram experience better for your well-being?
- How were you feeling when implementing this strategy?
- How did you feel after?

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Appendix 4: Atlas.ti Coding Visualization

Figure 1: Code Manager – illustrating proof of coding
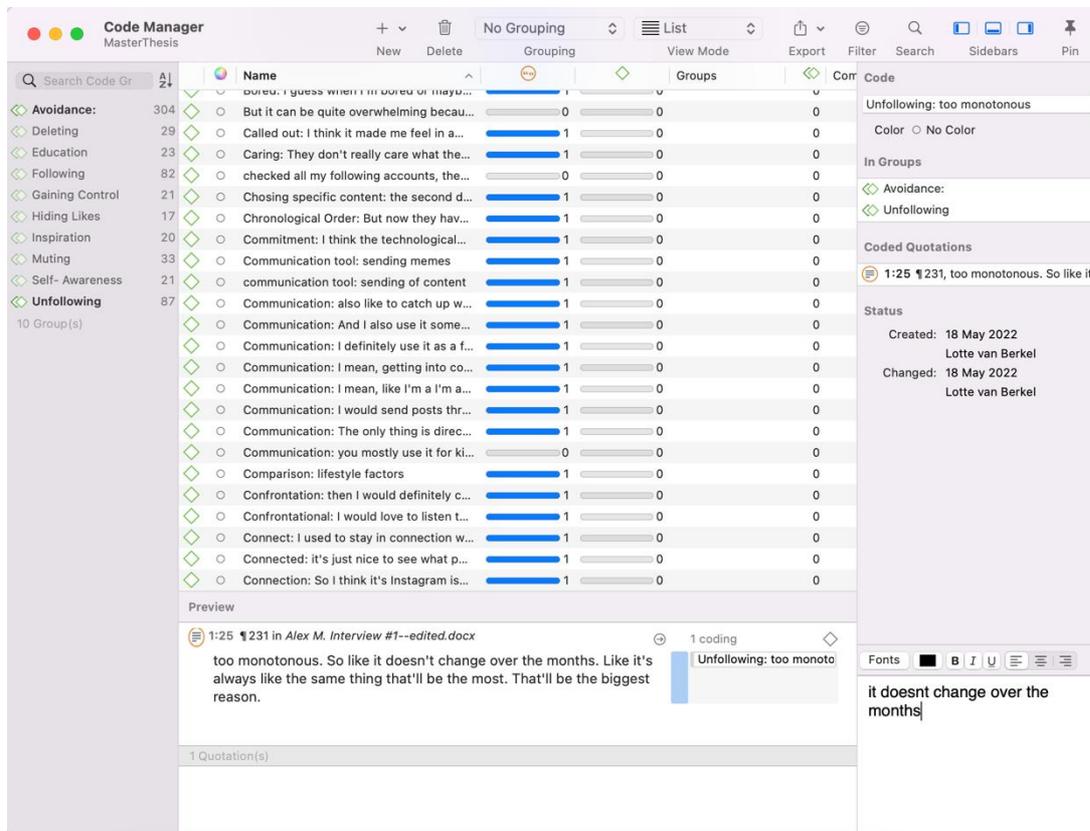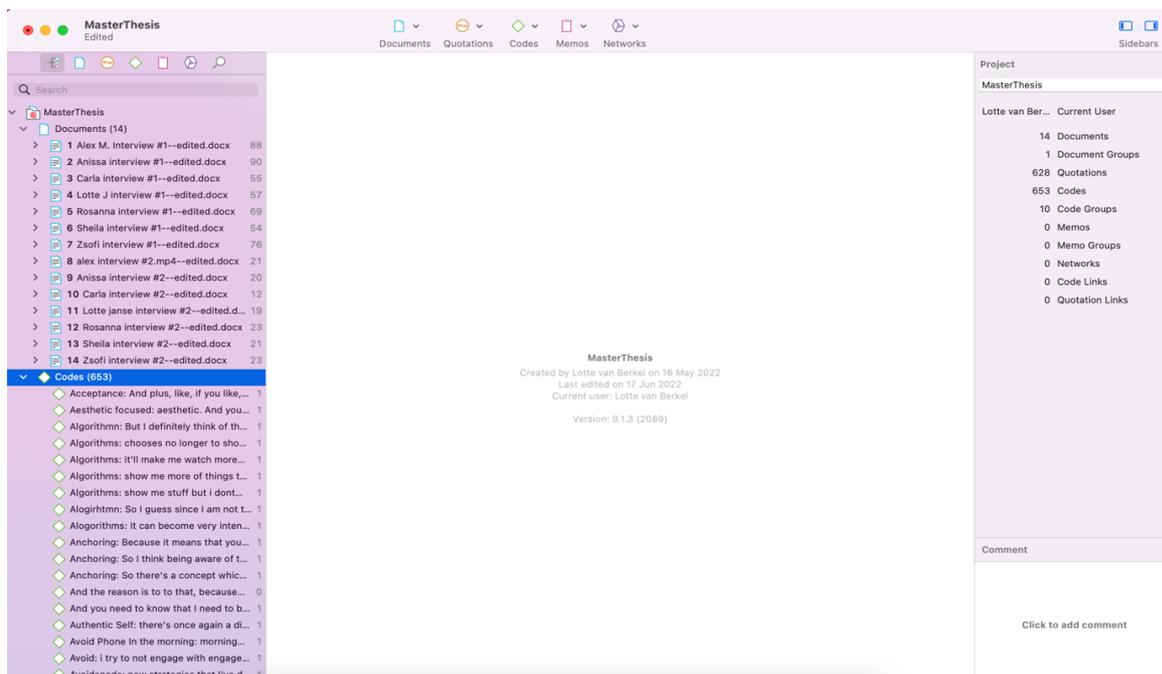

Figure 2: Main Screen Atlas.ti – illustrating total codes created and the distribution regarding each 14 interviews coded

Appendix 5: Helplines and Support

In the this section are helplines and resources that offer support for any participant that felt any unease during the interview or are looking for the resources to guide them in their mental health journey. This was used for the purpose of providing support options in case of any negative reaction caused within the duration of the interviews:

| **Websites to with more information about mental health + Referral links to get more support:** |
| --- |
| https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/anxiety-fear-panic/ |
| https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress/ |
| https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/peer-support/finding-peer-support/ |
| https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/mental-wellbeing-audio-guides/ |

International and Dutch Helplines:
Helplines Available in the Netherlands:
Call **113** – Dutch Suicide Prevention Line
Letsbreaktheshame.com – Public Speaking & Education around Mental Health
Online Therapy Options – Better Help
Online Therapy Options – Regain

Appendix 6: Pseudonym Names for Participants

| Pseudonym Name	Age	Currently Studying	University Enrolled In
Interviewee 1	24	Global Business and Sustainability	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 2	21	Marketing Management	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 3	22	Creative Industries	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 4	24	Marketing Management	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 5	21	Marketing Management	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 6	21	Business Information Management	Erasmus University of Rotterdam
Interviewee 7	20	Psychology	Erasmus University of Rotterdam

Appendix 7A: Coding Tree - Avoidance

From Left to Right: Theme, Subthemes and examples of open code
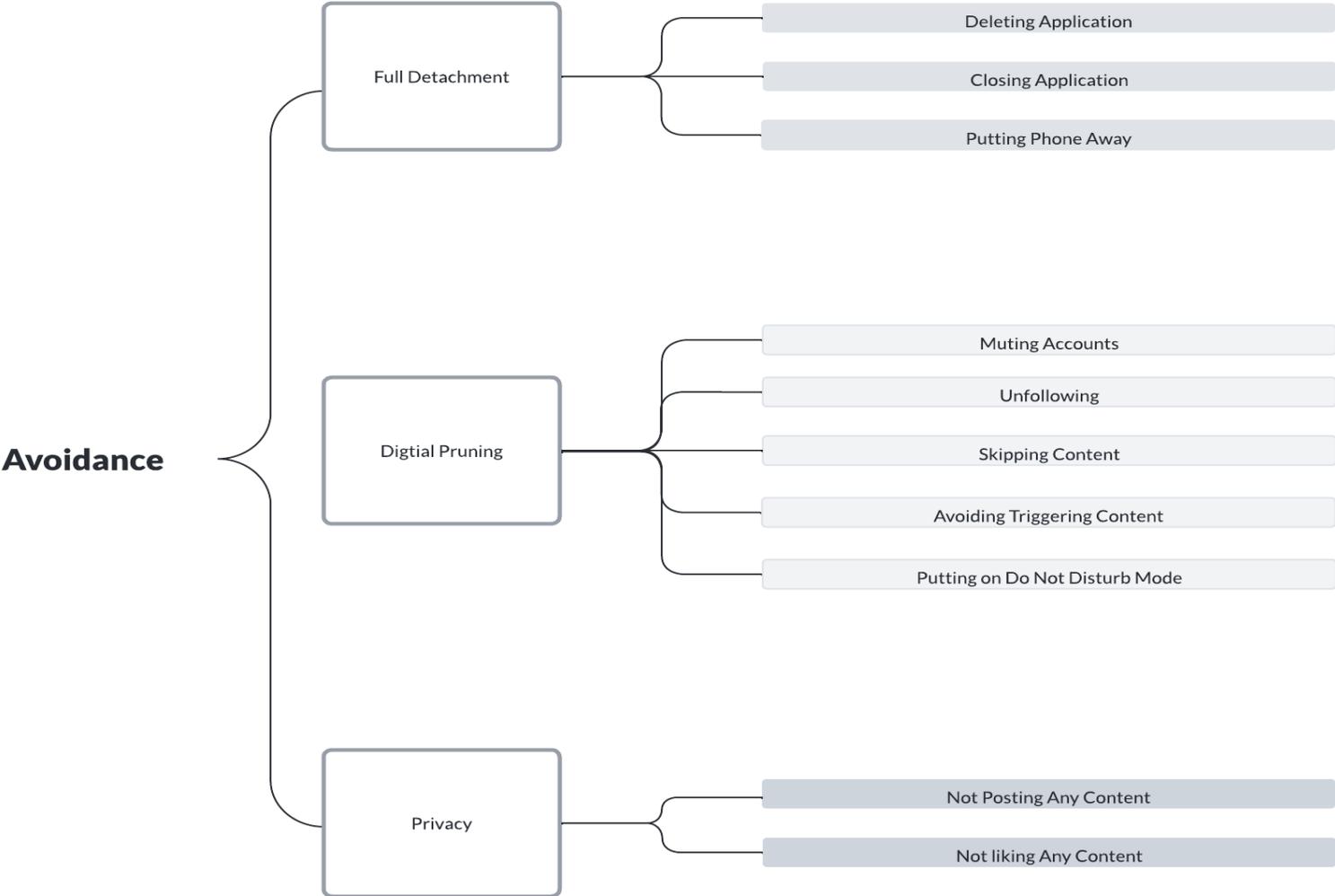
Appendix 7B: Coding Tree - Seeking Positive Reinforcement

From Left to Right: Theme, Subthemes and examples of open codes
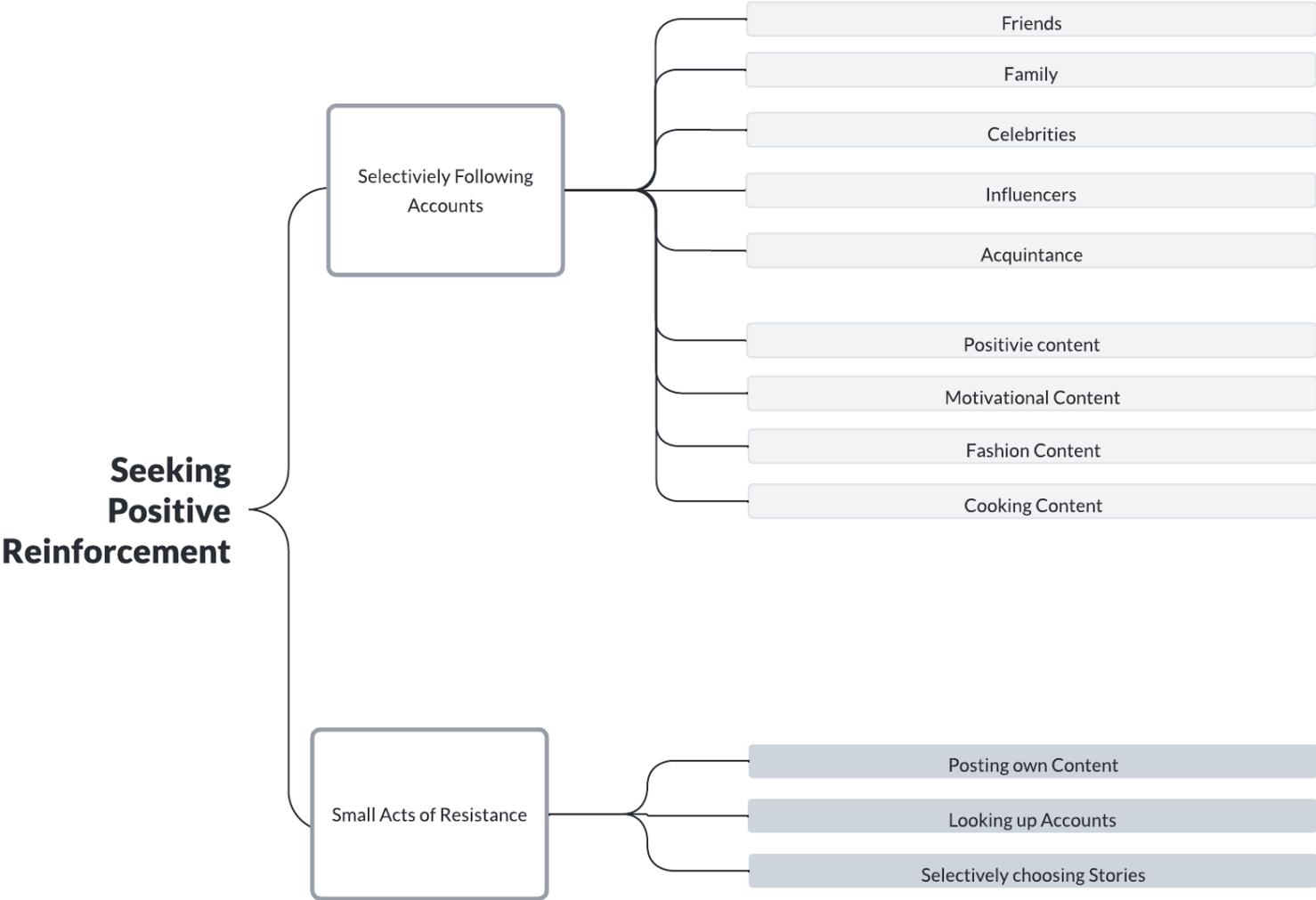
Appendix 7C: Coding Tree - Acceptance

From Left to Right: Theme, Subthemes and examples of open codes