

Exploring the Effects of Self-Esteem on Self-presentation and Consumption on Instagram

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Abstract

Self-esteem is one contributing factor to a person's self-presentation in accordance to their perceived contextual expectations. The theory of self-presentation compares life to a stage on which people perform and engage in impression management to display their best selves. The introduction of social media has created an online world in which social networking sites (SNS) possess sub-cultures that promote self-expression that reflect how people present themselves on, and use, social media. Instagram is among the most popular social media apps in the world and provides users with a public platform on which to perform for their audience. While the literature has indicated that Instagram consumption both positively and negatively affects users' self-esteem, the role self-esteem plays in online use and self-presentation remains unclear and is the focus of this research study. Through a mixed methodology including interviews, a questionnaire, and Instagram profile reviews, 127 participants responded to an online survey or participated in interviews specifically created for this study with the purpose of gaining insight into their self-esteem level and Instagram consumption and self-presentation behaviours. The findings suggest that there is a weak correlation between users' self-esteem and Instagram self-presentation. However, it provided insight into other influential factors of self-presentation on user profiles and Instagram consumption, which could serve for future research into how everyone's unique social media profiles can be utilized and studied to support their mental health.

Keywords: Instagram, consumption, self-esteem, self-presentation, impression management, social media, social media platforms, social networking sites (SNS), nano-influencer, social users.

Introduction

While social media connects young people to their world, its use has potential to impact mental health, such as one's self-esteem. A Social Networking Site (SNS) can be defined as a webpage that "allows individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those of others in the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They have erupted in popularity in the recent decades with people of all ages who join for various reasons.

Self-esteem can be understood as "the evaluation one makes of oneself, an assessment carried out by means of a process of comparison between how one perceives oneself and one's personal values," (Errasti et al., 2017, pg. 999) and can influence how people view and portray themselves on social media (Hill & Denman, 2016; Uddin & Wok, 2020; Biolcati & Passini 2018). While my background and the following literature review is related to youth ages 12-20, the research study was conducted with young adults ages 18-30. Through questionnaires, interviews, and profile reviews, this study seeks to explore how self-presentation, and consumption behaviours (the content and accounts users look at and engage) are displayed on Instagram, based on users' self-esteem.

Theoretical Approaches of Self-presentation

This study was conducted from the lens of Erving Goffman's Presentation of Self theory. Goffman (1959) states that individuals engage in impression management, the conscious control of one's appearance to prevent an audience from witnessing a performance not meant for them. Individuals present themselves according to the expectations of the contexts in which they find themselves, a concept he referred to as "frames." He compares self-presentation to a dramaturgical stage. On the front stage, we present our best and idyllic selves. On the backstage, we do not have to perform for anyone and can be our truest selves, the one to which nobody else

is witness. From this perspective, deductive analysis was utilised for this study. I examined whether this self-presentation theory can be seen online as it can offline, and if so, how it presented itself on participants' personal and influencer Instagram profiles and usage.

Inductive analysis was also utilised, as self-esteem presentation on Instagram specifically, is an under-researched topic. Further literature was extrapolated to gain an understanding of how Goffman's Presentation of Self theory is evident in social media with supplementary theoretical approaches. As such, observations were made when conducting in-depth interviews, reviewing participant questionnaires, and examining various Instagram profiles.

Literature Review of Instagram Use and Self-esteem

Background of Instagram

Eleven years after its launch, social networking platform, Instagram, has stood the popularity test of time and remains the second preferred SNS app among young women, and the third among young men in the USA in 2020 (Hill & Denman, 2016; Romero-Rodriguez et al., 2020; Ceci, 2022). Although Instagram is owned by Facebook and has since merged some features, they are used differently. Instagram is image and video-based, while Facebook is article-based (Paramboukis et al, 2016; Uddin & Wok, 2020). One common SNS feature is "profiles of users available for the public or friends to view and scrutinise, allowing them to pass on their judgments or provide feedback through comments" (Jan et al., 2017, p. 331). According to Hu et al. (2014), an important social aspect on Instagram is users' ability to follow people without the need of them following back. Users can follow strangers, celebrities, and "influencers," social media personalities that shape audience attitudes through their personal brand, observed in the way they engage their audience (Freberg et al., 2010). Where other SNS force users to follow one another back, Instagram does not (Mosseri, 2021).

Instagram Usage Among Young Adults

Hill & Denman's (2016) and Romero-Rodriguez et al.'s (2020) studies found a new social hierarchy is created that leads to a competition to have as many followers, likes, and comments as possible. More followers made young users feel better about themselves and provided the opportunity for social comparison, which impacts their self-esteem (Errasti et al., 2017) and, thus, online self-presentation (Uddin & Wok, 2020). Instagram offers the use of engaging captions and hashtags, and has added the ability to use animated images, music, tagging (mentioning a specific user in a post), and questions to make posts more interactive with followers (Mosseri, 2021). The intention behind this is fun and playful user interactivity, however, it invites judgement and social comparisons (Errasti. et al., 2017), influencing their self-evaluation (Uddin & Wok, 2020).

The relationship between social media and self-esteem remains equivocal due to a lack of longitudinal research and the evolving nature of SNS (Uddin & Wok, 2020; Lup et al., 2015). SNS are often used as avenues for self-expression (Berry et al., 2018, Adamkolo & Elmi-Nur, 2015) and identity formation (Boyd, 2008; Zhang, 2017), which can reflect self-esteem (Hill & Denman, 2016; Uddin & Wok, 2020). Social media habits have potential to reveal mental health implications and research into the topic is critical to the understanding of consequences of, and reasons for, SNS use (Lup et al., 2015). Paying attention to self-esteem, a factor that influences other aspects of life, may provide insight into how to support young adults during this transitional stage.

Social Outcomes of Social Media Use

People have unprecedented access to technology and as a result, spend much of their time consuming it (Twenge, 2013; Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020). Rapid widespread use of social media

resulted in its infiltration into the lives of young people and has raised questions about its relationship with their mental health. According to Shane-Simpson et al. (2018) and Boyd (2008), adolescents overwhelmingly highlight the preference of communication through SNS to connect with others, a statement echoed by Twenge (2013), and Valkenburg et al. (2017). Clinician Diane Barth (2015) states that in her practice, she has found social media and technology are common tools adolescents use when they need to “manage feelings that language does not help them process” (p. 204). Technology-mediated communication enables users to edit and ponder their words prior to sending a message, elevating feelings of control lacking in face-to-face interaction (Shane-Simpson et al. 2018). Barth (2015) suggests professionals who work with this population support them in becoming wiser in their technology consumption to be self-reflective, self-aware, and self-assured, both on and offline, particularly those who struggle with anxiety or insecurity.

Theory of Self-Presentation

The majority of youth interactions take place online (Valkenburg et al., 2017) to pass the time, seek information, for entertainment, and interaction (Barker, 2009). SNS have become a platform for young people to express themselves and explore their identities. Erving Goffman’s (1959) Presentation of Self theory centres around the dramaturgical metaphor of life as a stage on which we are actors performing for an audience. On the front stage, we present our idyllic selves. The backstage is where we find our true, most authentic self, the one nobody else sees (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) states that human interactions among themselves and within the world gives an understanding to human behaviour. Through impression management, individuals can build social connections that enable them to perceive the world and act according to societal expectations. Goffman (2010) predicates the way individuals perceive themselves and

their world dictates how they behave in the world and in relationships with others. The basic prerequisite for rules, Goffman (2010) argues, “are assumed ... but never made explicit” (p. 18). Individuals must trust the actions of others to be true in order to act in meaningful ways.

Self-presentation on Social Media

Does this happen online as well? According to Boyd (2008), Adamkolo & Elmi-Nur (2015) and Yang et al. (2017), youth seek validation and approval from others resulting in their online performance, a reflection of the norms during this developmental stage. Their unstable sense of self allows them to experiment online, impacting how they perceive themselves and thus, how they present themselves online (Adamkolo & Elmi-Nur, 2015). SNS are designed to be interactive and encourage users to post a variety of content. While this can provide users with an outlet for self-expression and validation, someone with high self-esteem can have a considerably different experience online than someone with low self-esteem (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020), which can impact their offline well-being (Jan et al., 2017).

Instagram is a visual platform, putting content selection in the control of the user. As such, impression management and self-presentation play key roles in the user’s intention to enhance their appearance (Kapidzic & Herring, 2014). Similar to Zhang’s (2017) claim that time spent on Facebook has an indirect relationship with adolescents’ self-esteem, depending on the feedback from their friends, Hill & Denman (2016) found that “the self-esteem of some depends on the recognition and appraisal that is gained from pictures posted to Instagram” (pg. 60). For others, it was reversed, their self-esteem was reflected in their posts (Hill & Denman, 2016). Combining this feedback with their self-perception may have an effect on how young people present themselves online, an evident trend with Kapidzic & Herring (2014) and Biolcati &

Passini (2018), who found that increased selfie posts, where a user takes their own photo, presents a dominant form of online self-presentation.

Self-esteem on Social Media

Self-esteem may increase with exposure, thereby impacting how users present themselves (Hill & Denman, 2016; Jan et al., 2017). Hill & Denman (2016) found a strong correlation between selfies and self-esteem, suggesting that teens may use selfies to boost popularity, and in turn, self-esteem. However, this can lead users down unhealthy paths that involve engaging in risky behaviours to enhance their appearance. Swingle (2015) points out that it is important to consider the purpose behind social media use and what they get from using the app. Biolcati & Passini (2018) discovered that youth with varied levels of self-esteem use and post for different reasons. Examining selfies, they found those with higher self-esteem posted for sharing purposes, whereas those with lower self-esteem posted for attention or entertainment and therefore, posted different types of images than their higher self-esteemed counterparts. Higher engagement with social media can be a reflection of self-esteem (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Barth, 2015; Jan et al., 2017; Romero-Rodriguez, 2020; Uddin & Wok, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2017). Romero-Rodriguez et al. (2020) found that intensive and frequent Instagram use had no effect on self-esteem, but self-esteem did impact Instagram consumption and posting behaviours.

Self-esteem is sometimes revealed in the way adolescents consume social media, as well as how they present themselves to their online audience; habits that may continue into adulthood. Uddin & Wok (2020) stress the importance of knowing how people acknowledge themselves within various contexts in order to understand their self-esteem. For parents or professionals who work with youth, understanding youth online behaviours is an important step in supporting them in their transition into independence and autonomy, something that follows them in adulthood.

This research aims to explore how self-esteem affects self-presentation online and what young people and mental health professionals can gain from the knowledge.

Research Design

Methodology

This study utilised a mixed methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative methods. In-depth interviews were the qualitative method, supplemented by a review of 25 participants' Instagram profiles. The quantitative method was a questionnaire. Combined, these methods were used to gain a meaningful and holistic understanding of how participants with varying levels of self-esteem use, and present themselves, online. The questionnaires provide basic consumption information while the profile reviews and interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' first-hand online experience from adolescence into adulthood.

An initial self-esteem assessment was administered to determine all participants' self-esteem scores (SES) using the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. The scale produces a score between 0 and 30, with 0 being the lowest self-esteem score and 30 being the highest self-esteem score.

Following this assessment, a one-hour in-depth qualitative interview was conducted with 10 participants to obtain their Instagram consumption and posting habits. Consumption includes who they follow, the content they look at, look for, like, comment on, or share, and what they gain from browsing or posting. After following participants' Instagram accounts, we examined their profiles together during the interview, where I asked about their consumption behaviours using select questions from the questionnaire. This provided insight into individual experiences and lent a voice to their feeds. This includes their favourite original posts, bio sections, use of captions, hashtags, emojis, and other touches that made their accounts unique to them. Self-

presentation and expression were evident in various forms, from having jokes and song lyrics in their bios, to using humour or wit in their captions, to the reasons for using Instagram.

Participants who could not be interviewed were invited to fill out a 50-item questionnaire that I designed based on what I wanted to investigate, my knowledge as a user, and on patterns I witnessed in youth trends. Lisa Wise, co-author of An exploratory study of the relationships between narcissism, self-esteem and Instagram use (2016) was gracious enough to give me ideas they used in their study’s questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and 50 yes/no and Likert-scaled questions about consumption and posting habits. The Likert-scaled questions had a range from 1: Strongly disagree, to 5: Strongly Agree for simple rating. The questionnaire provided participants the opportunity to enter their Instagram handle for review. In concert, these methods provided insight on how participants with varying self-esteem scores consume and post to Instagram. The goal was to determine how self-esteem factors in on their Instagram self-presentation and consumption.

For this study, the self-esteem categories were divided into four different self-esteem rankings outlined in the chart below.

Self-esteem Group	Self-esteem Score (SES)	Number of participants in group (n)
Low self-esteem (LSE)	0-10	n=14
Medium-Low self-esteem (MLSE)	11-15	n=34

Medium-High self-esteem (MHSE)	16-20	n=32
High self-esteem (HSE)	21-30	n=37

Sample

The study consisted of a total of 127 participants from across Canada. The criteria for inclusion required participants be between 18 and 30 years old with an active Instagram account. For this study, an active Instagram account was defined as an account that was used to browse or post to Instagram at least once per week.

Participants were recruited via Convenience Method, in which a sample is taken from a group of people that were easy to reach. This recruitment method included postings in the Royal Roads University newsletter to students, a newsletter to the staff and program participants of the YMCA of Northern Alberta, and posts on Instagram and Facebook from my personal social media accounts, which were shared by friends and colleagues. A second inadvertent recruitment method was the Snowball Sampling Method. In these cases, participants were referred to by others that were aware of the study. Referrals came from YMCA staff and other participants that saw the study on social media and shared with people that fit the inclusion criteria.

Questionnaire and Profile Review Sample Breakdown

A total of 117 Instagram users ages 18-30 took the questionnaire. This sample was divided into 4 categories. The Low self-esteem (LSE) group had 14 respondents. The Medium-Low self-esteem (MLSE) group had 34 respondents. The Medium-High self-esteem (MHSE) group had 32 respondents. The High self-esteem (HSE) group had 37 respondents.

Of the 117 questionnaire respondents, 25 volunteered their profiles to be reviewed for consumption behaviours. These included who they follow, who they let follow them, what content they look at from the accounts they follow, and what content they engage with by liking, commenting, or sharing.

Interview Sample Breakdown

Among the interview participants, 5 were in the LSE group and 5 were in the HSE group. Both groups had small-scale influencers with an aspiration to reach a higher influencer status, and regular users who only have Instagram for personal or social reasons. For the purpose of this study, all aspiring influencers in this sample will be referred to as “nano-influencers,” defined as “everyday social media users with 500-10,000 followers [who] aren’t professional influencers ... and the majority of their posts feature typical content like photos of their family, friends, and memes” (The ETHOS Team, n.d.).

Table 1: Interview respondents and account types

Name	Gender	Self-esteem group	Account type
1. Rebecca	Woman	LSE	Nano-influencer
2. Riley	Woman	HSE	Nano-influencer
3. Mary	Woman	HSE	Nano-influencer
4. Maddie	Woman	LSE	Nano-influencer
5. Shelly	Woman	LSE	Nano-influencer

6.	Julie	Woman	HSE	Personal
7.	Limin	Man	HSE	Personal
8.	Kelly	Woman	LSE	Personal
9.	Tessa	Woman	HSE	Personal
10.	Charlotte	Woman	LSE	Personal

Data Collection

The Rosenberg self-esteem assessment was chosen due to its prevalence and efficiency in qualitative research surrounding the topic of self-esteem. The questionnaire format ensured the privacy and identity of participants. While they had the option to provide their Instagram handle for a profile review, no other identifiable markers were collected.

The reviews provided further insight into how the questionnaire respondents consume and post to Instagram. Participants' Instagram profiles were studied from December 2021 to February 2022 to examine posting habits and behaviours, including the types of images and videos they posted, how often they posted, whether it was a permanent or temporary post, the captions and hashtags they used, who they follow, and who they allow to follow them.

Through anecdotes and recounting their online history, the in-depth interviews provided a thorough count of how participants consume and post to Instagram. The purpose of the interview provided participants the opportunity to elaborate on their engagement with Instagram.

Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

The survey was created and distributed using Google Forms. The results were then imported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and later converted to graphs for efficient analysis. The interview questions were pulled from the questionnaire and during the interview, probing questions were used to encourage participants to further elaborate their experiences. All interviews were one-hour long and recorded with participant permission, which were transcribed on a Google Docs sheet for later referral. I created an Instagram account specifically for this study and used it to follow all participants that provided Instagram handles in the questionnaire as well as all interview participants.

Ethical Procedures

All participation was done on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Each participant was given a pseudonym of their choosing and their personal Instagram profiles or images are not shared publicly. This research required that participants be over 18 in order to provide their own consent. Consent was requested at the onset of the online questionnaire and the interviews, and they were informed it could be withdrawn at any point throughout, resulting in the permanent deletion of their data.

Results

Consumption: How Participants Use and Post to Instagram

The most common reasons among questionnaire respondents for using Instagram among all self-esteem levels was to pass the time in between browsing other apps, connecting with friends and family, and to grow a brand. This same pattern emerged with interview participants.

Questionnaire respondents across all self-esteem levels preferred to post to “Stories” over their main feed, with the HSE group posting to Stories the most. Interviewees also preferred to

post to their Stories rather than their permanent profile. When asked why, interview participants said they favour the temporary nature of Stories versus the permanency of profiles. The expectation for visual perfection in the profile posts also contributed to their preference for Stories, which are taken less seriously. Riley, a personal trainer with a fitness-focused nano-influencer profile in the HSE group, captured the sentiment of most interview respondents when she said she only posts as necessary to maintain a social media presence for her budding brand. She added that “Instagram’s boring now ...and the whole point is to be appealing to the eye and keep a person’s attention long enough to like or read the description.”

Figure 1: Posts to feed per month.

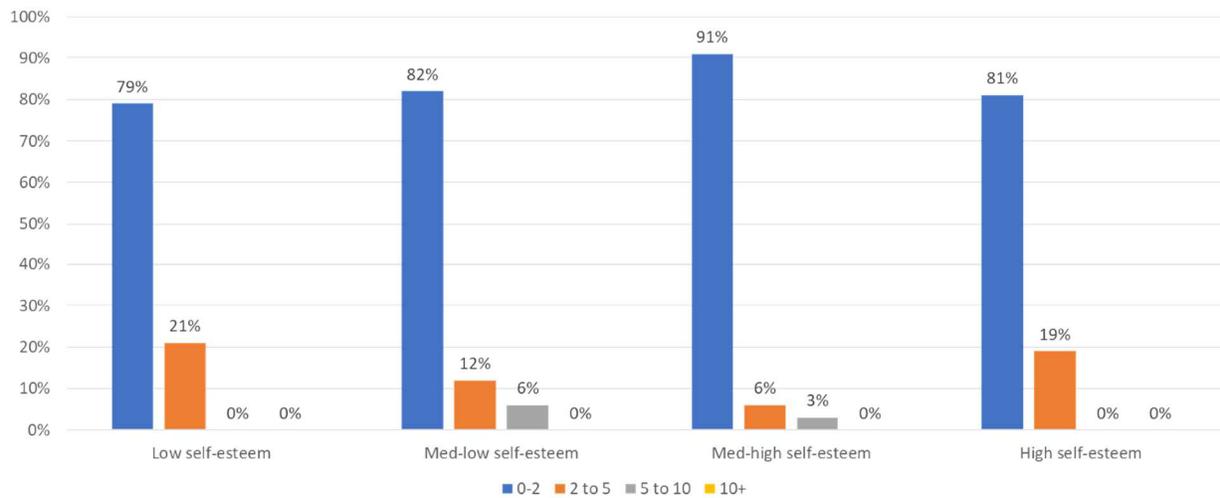
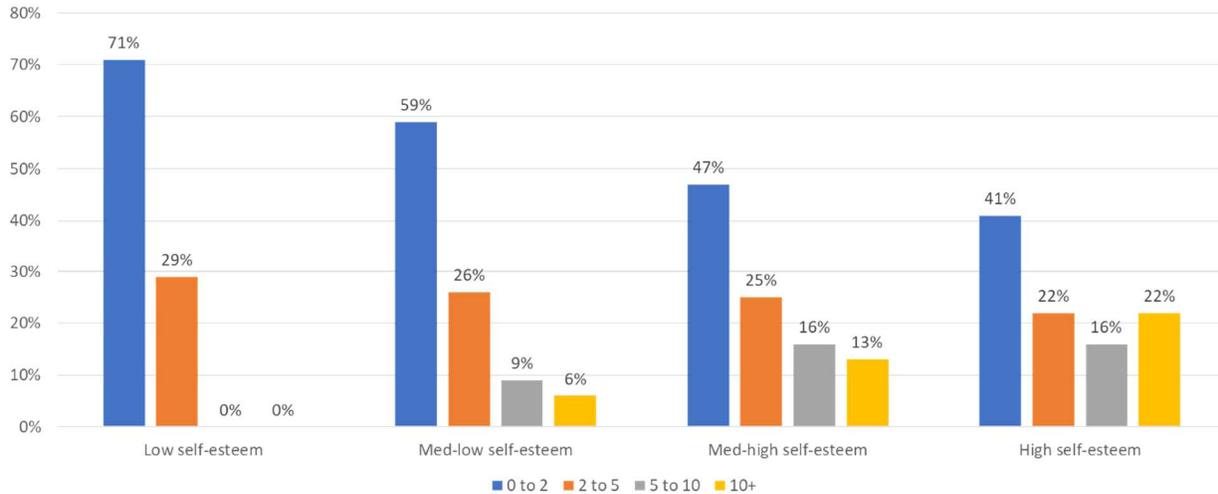


Figure 2: Posts to Stories per month.



The main use for Instagram among questionnaire and interview respondents is connection and communications with friends and family, as well as establishing an influencer social media presence for overall growth. However, it was only the preferred platform among nano-influencers growing a brand. Instagram is utilised as more of a hub for content creators whose focus is brand growth. Social Instagram users in this sample rarely post to Instagram and primarily browse.

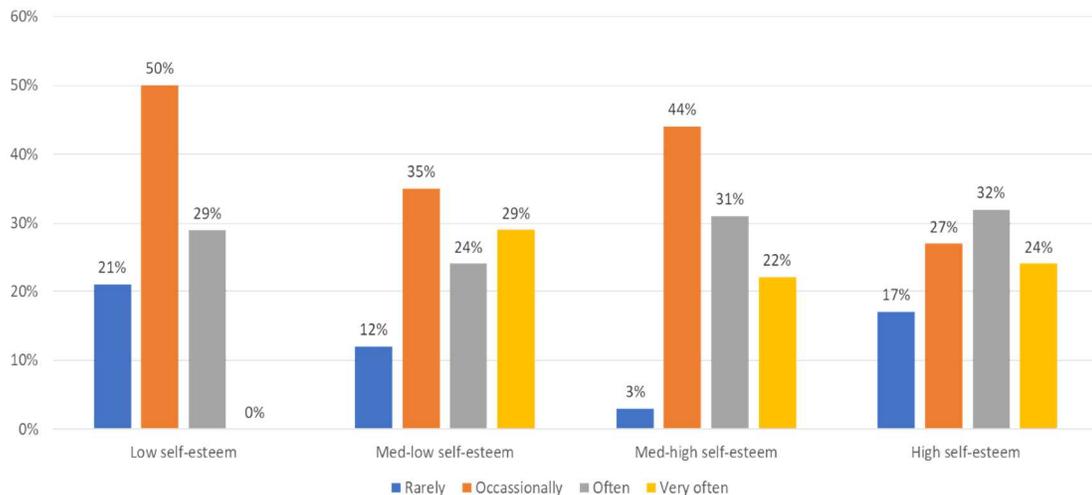
Nano-influencers' posting habits do not stem from their interests and passions as much as they do from their attempts to align with how they believe Instagram algorithms function. As Shelly, a LSE nano-influencer in the motherhood niche, told me, "It's all about trying to learn the algorithm. And it's always changing . . . That's why I need to be able to post more so I can have more engagement and . . . people are more likely to see my feed."

When asked about whether her following-to-follower ratio mattered to her, Maddie, another LSE group member with a baby and motherhood-focused nano-influencer status, echoed sentiments of other interview respondents by informing me she is "concerned about [that] ratio, because apparently, that does affect how your posts go into the algorithm." These unspecified

algorithms had more of an effect on how often they posted than self-esteem or how they were feeling. When probed about whether the algorithm, her feelings, or self-esteem at the time had more to do with the type and frequency of posting, she answered, “probably the algorithm.”

Users with regular accounts consume Instagram heavily, with 50% all self-esteem levels visiting Instagram often (6-12 hours per week) or very often (12+ hours per week). The LSE group was the exception, with 29% reporting that they visit Instagram often and nobody reporting to use it very often. This group also has the highest number of people that visit Instagram rarely (0-3 hours per week) at 21%. Similar results were evident in the interview sample. Please see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Instagram visits per week.



Two survey questions inquired whether respondents felt better after browsing Instagram and after posting to Instagram. Posting had more of an effect than browsing did. Further, when asked if other users’ Instagram accounts affected their own self-esteem, answers ranged between having a positive effect, having a negative effect, having no effect, and some claiming to be unsure. There were no significant differences among the groups of varying self-esteem levels

except that 50% of the MLSE group answered that they are affected negatively by other users' Instagram profiles, which was more than double that of all the other groups. Among the LSE group, 50% said they were not affected at all, while 45% of the HSE group also had the same response. Please see figures 4-6.

Figure 4: Do other Instagram accounts affect your own self-esteem?

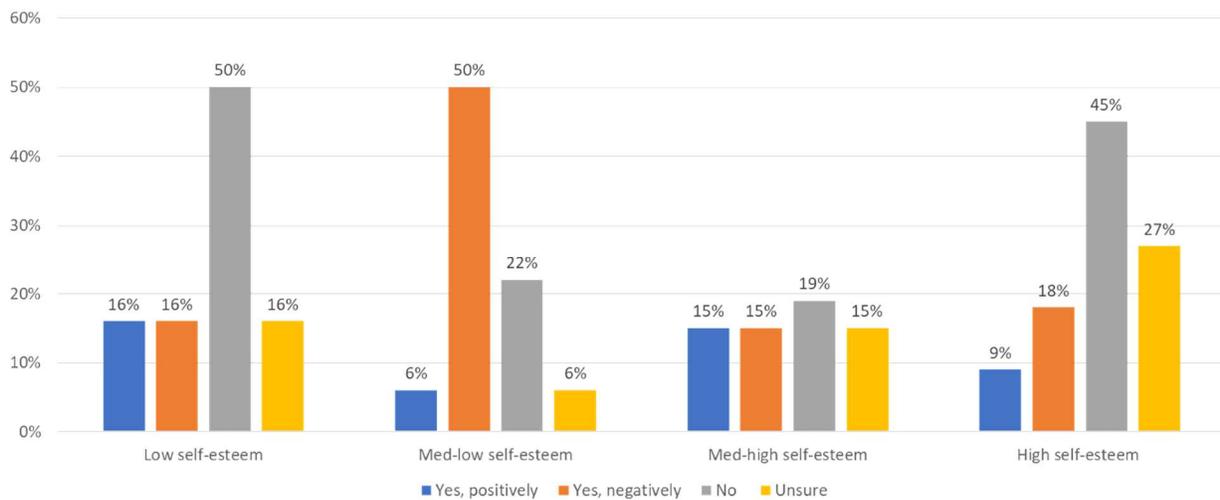


Figure 5: Do you feel better after browsing?

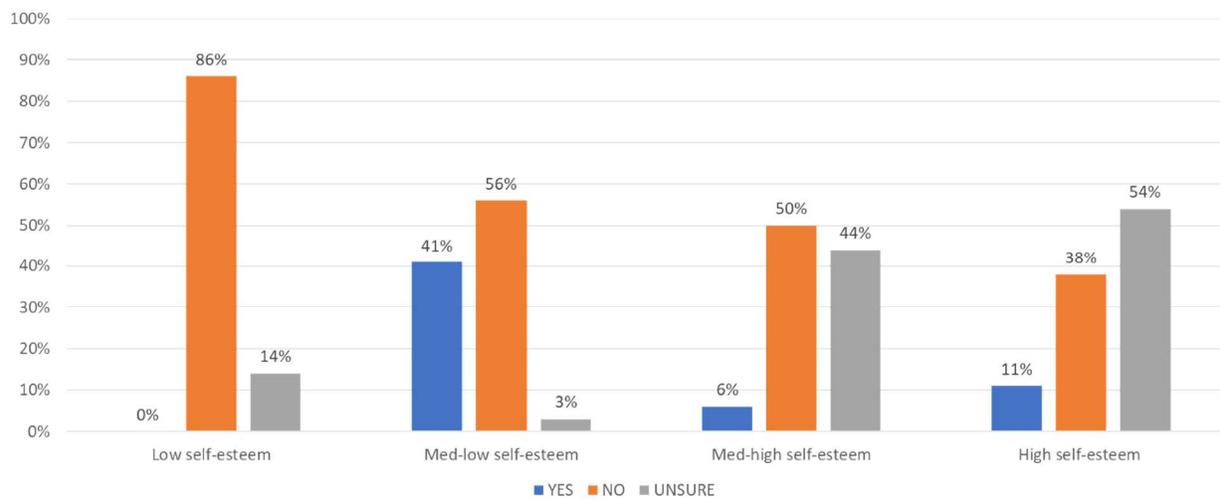
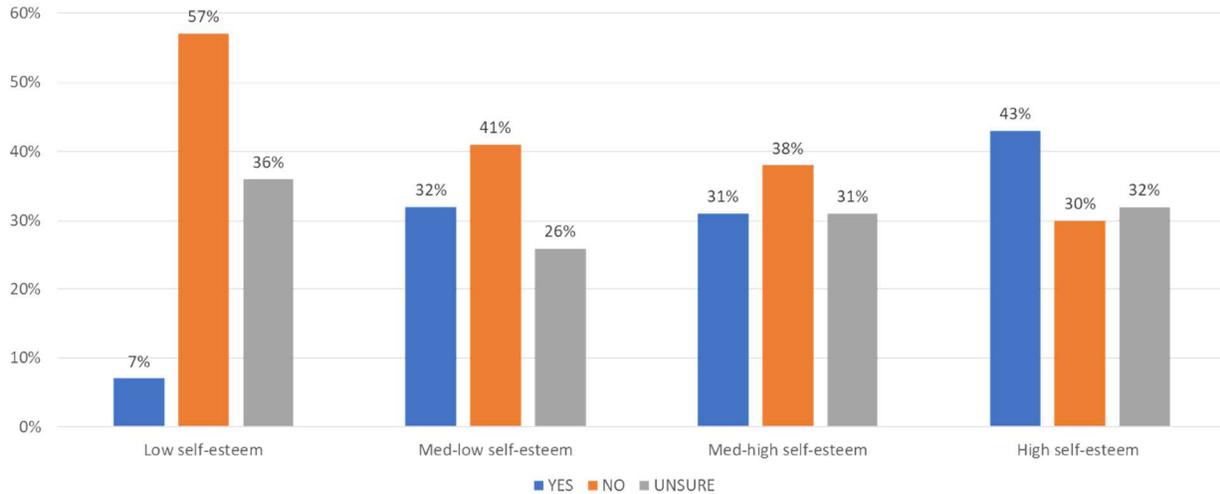


Figure 6: Do you feel better after posting?



Instagram has been seen as a platform where users post for attention. Some believe this is a strategy to increase one's self-esteem. However, among the questionnaire respondents, a significant percentage of every self-esteem group reported to have posted for attention before.

Charlotte and Kelly, both social users in the LSE interview samples, reported visiting Instagram a couple times per week, at most, for very short periods of time. Charlotte uses other platforms more often, such as Snapchat, for connecting with her family, and Tumblr for discussions in topics like art and politics. She created an Instagram account because her "friends were bugging [her] all the time," but she did not immediately start posting. "It was more to add my friends so that they saw that I was following them." This action in itself was a form of impression-management and self-presentation. It was her non-verbal cue that she values her friendships and is willing to create a social media presence to nurture them. She only frequents Instagram to check messages from friends and family or to quickly scroll to see what they have posted lately.

Self-Presentation on Instagram

Goffman (1959) compared self-presentation behaviours to dramaturgical front and back stages. Today, his theory can be seen online with platforms having different expectations of online behaviour. Among interviewees, the most common SNS outside of Instagram were Facebook, Snapchat, Tik Tok, and Tumblr. Goffman coined the term “frames” to describe how different contexts in life have different behavioural expectations. In the same way, these platforms are used for different purposes.

As previously mentioned, Instagram was only the top-rated platform for follower growth and exposure, making Instagram the ideal platform for influencers, content creators, and businesses looking to expand their reach. Social users consume more than they post. In this regard, Instagram is surrounded by a culture that expects visually appealing content with high user standards and expectations. For this reason, social Instagram users prefer to post on other platforms, such as TikTok, Snapchat, or Facebook.

Social users interviewed stated that their main reason for not posting to Instagram was the pressure to post visually perfect content. Oftentimes, they do not have content to post to Instagram’s standards. When asked, each one had an account on another SNS where they felt more comfortable posting, the most popular being Facebook, Snapchat, and TikTok. Interview participants Riley, Limen, Charlotte, Julie, and Maddie claimed these SNS made them feel more comfortable posting their real, authentic selves and prefer to post there over Instagram because of it.

Users circumvent Instagram’s high standards by creating the “Fake Instagram” or “Finsta,” also referred to by some participants as a “Spam Instagram account.” A couple of interviewees admitted to having such an account, which is usually a private account with fewer

followers, that tend to be close friends, than their main account. These accounts boast their true selves, full of content they do not post on their main account, usually for feelings of reservations or insecurities or the ability to be their authentic “silly” selves without judgement.

When asked on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 if their Instagram feed was an accurate portrayal of their real lives, the majority of questionnaire respondents selected a 4 or 5, meaning their Instagram was an accurate portrayal of their lives. When this question was further explored in interviews, participants said that while they do try to maintain an authentic profile and accurate portrayal of their lives, they still presented themselves in the best light possible, opting to only post their best looks, something they admitted to not worrying about on other SNS. Another aspect of their life they were asked about was their achievements. Those in the LSE group posted fewer achievements on their profiles than people in the HSE group.

Follower numbers, once a critical piece of Instagram consumption, self-presentation, and self-esteem is no longer as relevant as it once was. When introduced, an Instagram users' follower count was a determining factor on whether other users would follow them or not. Maddie used to think a large follower count meant that people liked her more, which made her want to post content that would gain her more followers more often. It was such a priority that she felt envious of those who had a higher follower count than her and refused to follow them, claiming, “it drove me nuts seeing other girls posting very similar photos to what I was posting, and they were getting more likes or more followers out of it . . . I didn't understand.” That no longer matters to her. Less than 50% of all respondents reported to being envious of those with higher follower counts.

Deleting content from their feed is another form of self-presentation. Many people have deleted posts from their profiles for reasons that include a change in their posting style that no

longer reflects who they are, a lack of engagement, or evolving interests. Interview participants explained other reasons for the deletion of content on their page. Entering adulthood and wanting mature or professional-looking profiles were the most common answers for deleted content.

Tessa, an interviewee in the HSE group, has a personal public account she treats as if it were an influencer account to share her dancing, but not for brand growth. When asked why she had deleted posts, she stated “it was just more stuff I didn't feel I needed there anymore. Like pictures of girls I wasn't friends with anymore or just a time of my life that kind of came and passed and I moved on from that.” The majority of respondents who had deleted content did so for similar reasons. Julie, a HSE interview participant for whom likes and comments were especially important for her self-esteem, said that she had deleted posts because of the lack of engagement, but was the only interview respondent to have deleted content for that reason. However, the respondents who filled out the questionnaire had a higher percentage of participants who deleted posts due to lack of engagement than the interviewee group.

Rebecca, a content creator from the LSE group connects to her audience by posting what she thinks they like and want to see, “Instagram is as much my space for sharing content as others' space for consuming [it]. I post more for other people ... than I am just for the sake of sharing stuff about myself.” The same can be seen in Biolcati & Passini's (2018) study. Rebecca's presentation strategy revolves around technology-enabled relationships that can span across space. The way she presents herself is influenced by her audience and her relationship with them. These social practices by influencers shape the way they communicate with, and are perceived by, their audience.

The nano-influencers in the LSE group posted what was trending for their followers. Thus, their profiles often shift with new trends. In contrast, Mary and Riley, in the HSE group,

had Instagram accounts focused on one main theme from the start. All of them intend to make a living on Instagram, either by selling products or creating partnerships with prominent brands. This reflects the nature of social-shaping platforms used by content creators to display a version of themselves that will attract a wider and engaged audience. In this way, content creators capitalise on the aspects of technology that allow them to connect to others, evoke social change, or profit from their audience. After pondering whether her self-esteem influences the way she posts, Mary said she is mindful of her words and tries to be positive on her nano-influencer page, but posts whatever makes her feel happy on her personal page, while still maintaining a professional presentation. Like others in the HSE group, she also stays positive by posting milestones, achievements, and successes. She admitted she posts more to her nano-influencer page for the sole reason of expansion in order to put her in line with other content creators. Goffman's (1959) explication of such strategies follows that this is an important aspect of the relational development and is evident in the strategies employed by content creators online "to convey an impression to others which is in his interest to convey" (1959, p. 4), especially in order to grow their brand and gain the attention of prominent brands.

Interview and questionnaire respondents were asked how important it is to appear smart, physically attractive, or likeable. The answers varied widely, based on how each respondent used their Instagram accounts. Nano-influencers tended to answer that appearing likeable was more important than appearing smart or physically attractive. Rebecca, an avid cosplayer and nano-influencer in the LSE group, captured the overall sentiment given from fellow content creators by stating that appearing likeable was important for her brand, "not so much in a sense that I want people to like me, but likeable in the sense that [they] like my content. I want them to

interact with my content. You don't have to like me, just [what] I'm putting out." Others preferred the term "relatable."

Maddie and Shelly, from the LSE group, and Mary, from the HSE group run motherhood and baby accounts and stressed the importance of being relatable to their audience to gain a sense of connection and community among their followers. Riley, whose account focuses on fitness, also stressed the importance of appearing relatable but acknowledged that the fitness industry also requires some level of physical attraction to be more successful. Appearing smart was the lowest rated answer among nano-influencers but still quite high among questionnaire respondents. Interview participants noted the difficulty of appearing smart on a platform that rewards visual appeal with minimal room for intellectual activity. It is important to note that the question was the importance of *appearing* attractive, smart or likeable—not actually being any of those.

Figure 7: How important is it to appear physically attractive?

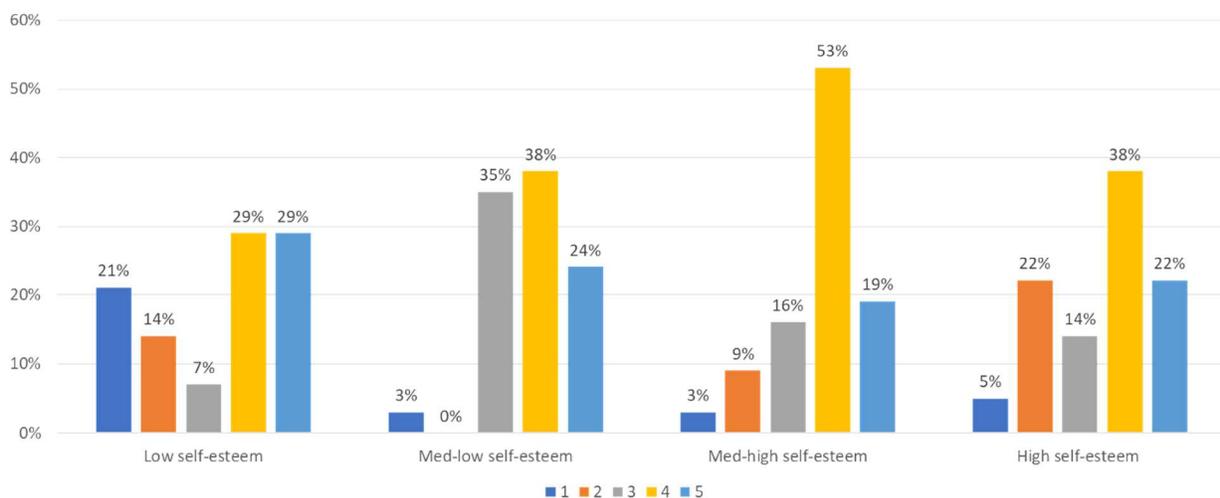


Figure 8: How important is it to appear smart?

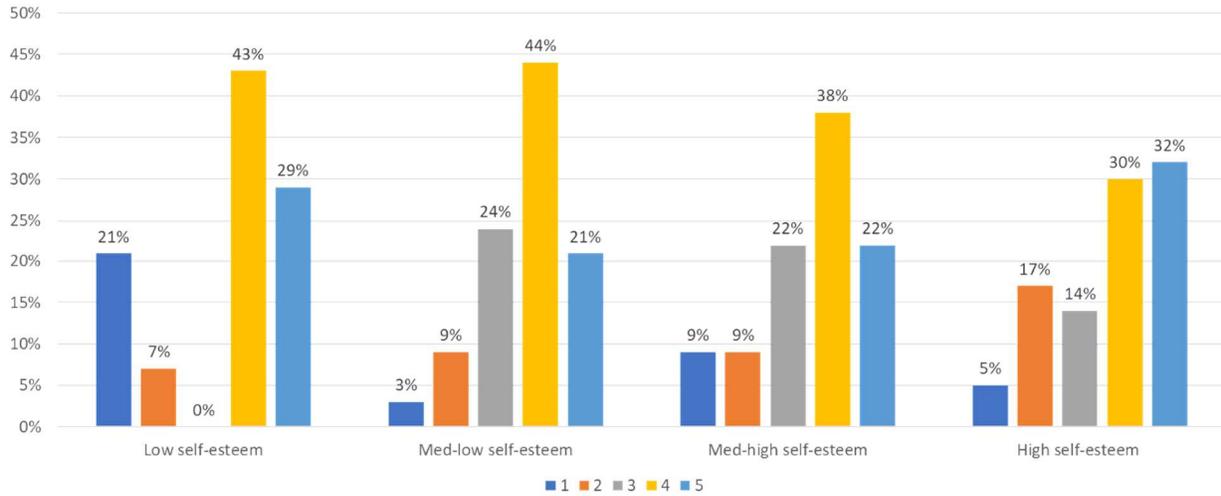
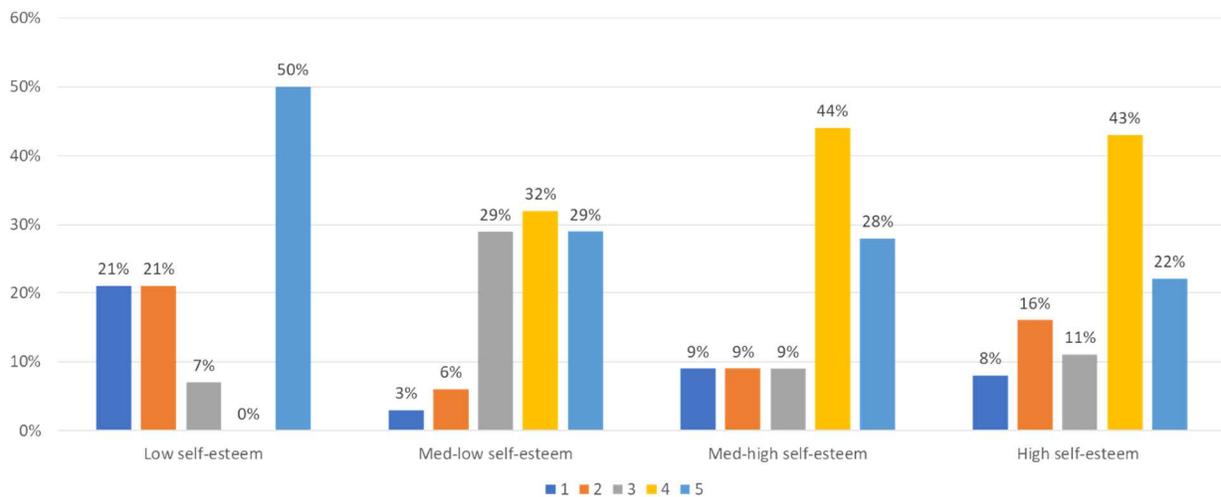


Figure 9: How important is it to appear likeable?



Discussion

Relationships and Social Connections Among All Users

This study aimed to seek how self-esteem impacts users’ consumption of, and self-presentation on, Instagram. Instagram provides users with a stage to perform for an audience. The result is the formation of relationships between users and their followers. Relationships are the cornerstone of social media. The type and purpose of relationships that stem from these

performances can vary based on what each user is attempting to accomplish on Instagram. Some user-audience relationships become reciprocal, while others remain one-sided.

Nevertheless, all connections and performances are beneficial to users because they remain at the heart of their Instagram account. On this stage, they have the control to portray themselves as they wish— and they have the option and ability to create an entire new persona. Goffman (1959) believes the best way to understand humans is to see the impression they create of themselves, not only for the benefit of their audience, but also for their own. The question that remains is what are other factors that determine online self-presentation?

Interviewing participants of LSE and HSE groups demonstrated that Instagram users can be divided into two categories. In one category are those that use Instagram for exposure and brand growth with influencing aspirations. In the other category are social users that use it for personal purposes. Whereas social users are not incentivized by monetary gains, content creators often do have such incentives. Between these two categories, the LSE and HSE groups tend to consume Instagram similarly, but post differently, based on their own goals. This study aims to understand the role self-esteem plays when both categories post.

From Goffman's (1959) perspective, Instagram is an example of one social frame with the expectation that users post the most idyllic version of themselves and their lives. By doing so, they engage in impression management. Shelly puts it best, "We just lived in the whole movie, but this part of life is the highlight reel." This online social identity might contain aspects of a user's offline identity and may affect how they react to the online world, perceive it, and behave. It allows us to fit into our social settings and achieve social and personal goals. To understand people's behaviours, it is important to understand how and why they present themselves the way they do in varying contexts. The goal of influencers is growth in online engagement and sales

that lead to eventual monetary compensation through connections with their audience and other brands. The goal of the average social user is often social connections without other motives.

Instagram continues to be a social hub where users can connect with their friends, family, and their followers but the platform is constantly evolving, forcing users to keep up. Across users of all self-esteem levels, social connection was the highest rated reason for continuing to consume Instagram without posting. In many cases, social connection was also the reason users created an Instagram account to begin with, saying anyone who was not on the app a few years ago was seen as outside of the norm. Four interviewees admitted to creating an account for the sole reason of receiving posts from their friends. Goffman viewed the notion of impression management as the foundation for relationships as a means to feel a sense of belonging in our world. In order to maintain these relationships, the acting must continue onstage, whether it is sincere or not.

In recent years, the importance of displaying life on Instagram has dwindled, but not because it is no longer relevant. On the contrary, Instagram has stood the test of time and has maintained its popularity among those between 18 to 30 years of age, as they have grown with the app. Posting has significantly decreased among all users in the interview sample as well as with users who opted to have their profiles reviewed. In fact, Facebook is where more interviewees claimed they maintained long-term connections and was the account they kept strictly for connections and updates on current events. Snapchat was a close second due to its design that auto-deletes posts after 24 hours, a feature Instagram later introduced to their platform called Stories. Tessa commented she uses Instagram mainly for reposting from other accounts rather than original content, something echoed by other interview participants.

Facebook and Snapchat reduced the pressure of impression management and expectations because the platforms offer a different context and expectation for posting.

Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that Stories are more widely used among all self-esteem levels, except the LSE group, who rarely posted at all. This result was also consistent in the interview sample and the profile reviews. While completing the profile reviews, I watched participants' Stories for 2 months and noticed that they were not posting to their feed nearly as often as they were to their Stories. According to interview participants, the popularity of the Stories feature stems from their short, instant, and temporary nature making them an effective stage on which to share the genuine and candid minutiae that would otherwise saturate their profiles, rendering them overwhelming. Stories can also be personalised with captions, words, phrases, filters, and stickers, allowing for subtle bursts of impression management and self-presentation. Stories can only be watched if followers click on them. This means there is likely a connection with investment, intention, and purpose behind watching others' Stories. They are also an effective tool for reposting content from another page, providing influencers with an opportunity to support each other and gain a network of like-minded content creators and an audience. Influencers of all self-esteem levels most often use Instagram as a networking tool, one with the potential for exposure.

Having complete control of one's own presentation is appealing to users who embellish information about themselves to attract a niche or wider audience. However, there is a delicate balance between the pressures of impression management and the desire to be seen as authentic and honest, which influencers in interviews claimed is more likely to earn them a wider and larger audience.

Among the LSE group interviewed, the growth of their brand is accompanied by the phenomenon of downward comparison. This act of comparing themselves to others to the point of feeling bad or worse about themselves happens effortlessly but can have devastating effects. Shelly and Maddie reported to not follow certain accounts, mainly models, for this reason. When talking about a brief break she took from Instagram, Maddie felt a relief that she did not have to perform for anyone anymore, and that her closest and true friends remained on her Facebook account, where she felt she could post her more authentic self. The cost of positive self-presentation of some can come at the detriment to the mental health of followers, adding to both the expectation of visually appealing content and the decreased incentives to post. Shelly and Maddie have both chosen to let the object of their passion represent their brands. Maddie's brand is represented by her homemade baby items. Shelly's brand is represented by her baby. Every so often, they emerge from their backstage to display a vulnerability and relatability to their audience by posting a candid photo of themselves enjoying their lives. In these moments, their self-presentation becomes a relational technique to connect with their target audience.

In contrast, Mary engages in upward comparison behaviours with people she knows. When her friends post adventures she has not experienced, she is inspired to do the same. Her comparisons are exclusive to followers she personally knows, rather than comparing herself to celebrities or other influencers. Having experience working with youth, Mary recounted noticing adolescents' posts with different purposes in mind than her now but may have been similar to when she was younger. She explained, "I find more so that they post because they're posting based off of a social media trend, or they're posting for attention, and less so that they're posting because they want to share a genuine experience or feelings." Mary's observations match what interview participants experienced as they get older. They, too, posted based on trends and

whims in their younger years. As they matured, they presented themselves in a way that matched their growth. Some deleted only the content they felt no longer reflected who they were becoming, while others deleted everything to start from scratch.

All interview respondents shared similar trajectories of their Instagram histories from their first few years on the platform compared to now. After a few years, Instagram's lustre faded, and they posted less—but more intentional—content. From a Goffman lens, their self-presentation fluctuated over time as they managed the impressions they gave off to the world, resulting in more mature content. Most interview participants said the reason for their evolving self-presentation was for professional purposes. As Instagram grew, it became saturated with influencers and content that elevated the pressure to keep up. Rather than put more effort into a platform that was making them feel bad about themselves, the posting slowly ceased for many users.

Strategies of self-presentation are crucial in the initial stages of relationship-formation because an audience will use the message conveyed to decide if they want to follow and engage with a person or not. When interacting with strangers in person, Goffman (1959) theorises individuals engage in self-enhancement techniques. This appears to be a trend among Instagram users as is evident by all interview participants admitting putting their best foot forward online. This is especially important for continual follower growth. During Instagram's initial years, follower count and following-to-follower ratio was viewed as essential; that is no longer the case. The only respondents who were concerned about follower count were nano-influencers. However, they were more concerned with engagement than follower count. As such, they engage in a meticulous balance of posting their passions, impression management for relationship-formation, and relatable content that attracts engaged followers.

Shelly, Riley, and Maddie explained that having a smaller number of engaged followers is more effective than a high number of unengaged followers who scroll by their posts. To achieve an engaged audience, their self-presentation is of utmost importance. However, they admit the pressures to highlight their best attributes compete with presenting their true selves. They also stated that they prefer being followed for displaying their true selves. Who followed them was also more important than their number of followers. They prefer the attention from other users who can help catalyse their own growth.

Participants from all self-esteem groups from both the questionnaire and interview samples have a seemingly love-hate relationship with Instagram. They love scrolling but hate the implicit posting rules. Instagram appears to be an instrument for social connections and brand exposure, rather than a place for true self-expression or self-representation. Instagram has become a frame in a sea of online platforms in which people can engage in self-presentation for creative or social purposes. Contrary to popular belief, it is not their phones that people are addicted to; rather, they are addicted to social connections. Many of today's social connections are maintained and established online, resulting in online etiquette that varies from platform to platform.

Nano-Influencer Self-Presentation

To nano-influencers, their brand is a form of self-presentation. All of them indicated their desire to be understood and relatable. According to Goffman (1959), this serves as a motivation to disclose honest and open versions of themselves, rather than deception to appear in a more positive light. The online nature of their brand affords them the ability to exercise control in strategic self-presentation that is malleable and more likely to be authentic and open. Nano-influencers can showcase their brand using themselves as models or other images that represent

that brand. The consensus among interview respondents that are nano-influencers is that Instagram is the optimal place for brand exposure and growth. They all expressed their intention to grow their brand, acquire partnerships with leading brands in their field, and make a full-time income from it. The hope is that this will allow them to obtain financial security using social media. Thus, the way they represent themselves and their brand is pivotal. The relative freedom of self-presentation enables them to express themselves openly and honestly in a way that may not be promoted if their brand were to be displayed in-person.

When it comes to self-presentation, nano-influencers from the LSE and the HSE groups have different determining factors behind their posts. The relationship to their self-esteem insofar as their self-presentation was concerned, was less of a factor than the relationships they aimed to establish with their audience through their posts. In the interview group, two nano-influencers were in the LSE group and three were in the HSE group. A recurring theme among the HSE group was that they post what they are passionate about, regardless of what their followers think about it, to an extent. The engagement then, hinges on the pre-established relationship they have with their audience. The relationship with their audience must be strong enough to give them the confidence to post something under the assumption that their followers will not only enjoy the content but will engage with it. This demonstrates the importance of authenticity and reliability with their audience that comes from the authentic self-presentation they strive to display. Because they have niche audiences, their followers have similar interests and are likely engaged in their posts regardless of what it is, as long as it falls under the niche topic.

Riley expressed a professional aesthetic is crucial to the self-presentation of her fitness brand. The posts she made were mainly fitness-related laced with personal milestones. This is an attempt to “not appear so ad-ish, like all [she] wants to do is sell.” She states that she wants to

come across as a friend and not as someone who is pressuring her followers to purchase. Since impression-management and self-presentation go hand in hand with disclosure in terms of how much a person will reveal about themselves to their audience, the cost-benefit-analysis of being authentic pays off for users like Riley who want to both sell their brand while appearing agreeable and relatable. Posting about personal matters makes her feel a stronger connection to her audience. In this way she posts what she wants, not what she thinks her audience wants to see while still earning their engagement.

Mary is the only interview participant in the HSE group that had both public personal and nano-influencer accounts. While she posts to both, her main focus is her nano-influencer account, for which she has chosen a new motherhood niche and posts content relating to that topic. Her importance on family and motherhood is the vessel that connects her to her followers on both accounts. Her online self-presentation surrounds her family life. Because her nano-influencer focus is on wellness for mothers, she is mindful of her content and how she communicates it on her page. Through her nano-influencer account, she strives to motivate, inspire, and educate new mothers, whereas she describes her personal page as her “journal.” As with other members of the HSE group, she focuses on making posts that bring her joy and personal achievements, which in turn have a higher likelihood of appearing authentic and relating to her audience.

Contrastingly, Shelly and Rebecca, interview participants from the LSE group, keep their Instagram profiles fluid, adapting their content based on the evolving interests of their audience. They want to be an influencer, regardless of what the niche is. Based on the rewards of effective self-presentation, it makes sense that their content would reflect the interests of their audience if their main goal is exposure and growth.

Rebecca, a cosplayer who is thinking about switching her niche to video game streaming, admits her profile has changed over the years based on what her evolving interests are and what her audience prefers to see after asking them about it in posts. Rebecca's profile is packed with information about her and often changes with her posting styles and trends. Her central priority is social connections, which can be created and nurtured through impression-management and positive self-presentation. She craves engagement and connection to her audience and places importance on her content relatability. This requires more than self-presentation in her posts because she must actively engage with them.

Importance of impression through engagement becomes central when engaging directly with their audience. As such, this interaction presents another level of expectations on Instagram. She strives to talk to as many of her followers as possible and meet more people, but this requires constant performing and wearing her Instagram persona mask, even if the mask is mostly her true self. This impacts her posts and the way she presents herself to her audience and potential followers.

Maddie, a LSE interviewee, recounted the story of a former Instagram account she had several years ago that boosted her self-esteem for all the wrong reasons precisely because of the way she portrayed herself to her followers. While working in the hospitality industry, her Instagram account was heavily focused on her physical appearance, and she enjoyed the attention it gained her. She confessed to engaging in risky and unhealthy behaviours for the sake of keeping up appearances. Her impression management skills were earning her likes on her posts and boosting her confidence. Over time, the negative effects of the attention from Instagram, mainly the toxic offline habits she held to maintain an online aesthetic, was affecting her mental health and self-esteem. The diets and risky behaviours became unhealthy in her life outside of

Instagram. Despite this, her posts became “more risqué,” and her confidence grew when she presented herself in this way. If a post did not have the engagement she expected, she deleted it. In her mind, an over-abundance of likes and a large follower number meant she was popular, and people liked her, thus, she continued her presentation style, which became a symptom of online self-representation misrepresentation.

Her new Instagram page is geared towards new mothers and her content is determined by her inventory of homemade baby items. She revealed struggles with what to post when her brand isn't about her physical appearance. This is an example of the notion that SNS users can forget the relationship between their real selves and their online personalities. She believes photos of herself makes her brand appear “more human” because they see the face of the company and not just its inventory but is hesitant to expose herself. Despite the fear of being found and recognized, she is becoming more comfortable with being true on her Instagram nano-influencer page. To her, rebranding her Instagram page means rebranding her future. This data provides insight into the strategies behind self-presentation that maximise the user's benefits while minimising the risks or misrepresentation or poor impression management.

Similarly, Shelly does not often post photos of herself on her motherhood and baby Instagram account. Like Maddie, she struggles with her self-esteem. Where Maddie lets her products be her brand, Shelly prefers that her baby be the star of her Instagram account. Babies offer a wholesome and innocent presentation and are a magnet for likes and comments, she stated in her interview. Her end goal is to generate enough attention to earn partnerships with brands. Not posting herself is an engagement strategy, saying, “if I don't post a picture of myself for a very long time, [when I do], I get a lot of interaction. But if I am continuously posting photos of myself, no one seems to care.” Such self-presentation strategies are connected to the

characteristics of online influence that enable the positive impression and credibility of the poster.

Impression Management: Editing, Hashtags, and Captions

Along with images and videos, Instagram allows users to edit and caption posts as well as add hashtags, which are methodically curated presentational cues that reveal information about users or the post in a concise manner and categorizes posts into niche groups. Examples of hashtags as tools can be seen in business posts that include inventory or information and add a hashtag such as #shoplocal or #smallbusiness to attract those wishing to support local businesses over large chains, or #handmade and #babyroomdecor to reflect their specific niches. While there were not any major differences among the different self-esteem groups when it came to captions and how they are used, it was evident that content creators are concerned with what captions reveal about them, the impression they give, how their personality shines through, or how it serves for their growth. Consequently, content creators by far surpassed the users who use hashtags and are the only people from the interview sample that use them strategically to grow an account.

Mary employs hashtags on her nano-influencer page very meticulously, saying, “the hashtags are there on my page based on the kind of audience that I’m trying to bring in, people that are interested in those topics, people that could use the support.” Mary demonstrated the consideration of how others might view, interpret, and assess her profile and the cues she provides that someone would benefit from following her. Hashtags used by nano-influencers are not determined by their feelings, emotions, personality, or self-presentation intentions. Rather, they are utilised based on algorithms that are more likely to gain the attention of other users that may not otherwise see posts.

The caption provides an opportunity to be creative. Nano-influencers thoughtfully draft their captions not only for engagement, but to aid in their professional self-presentation. To them, the captions communicate a message the image alone leaves behind. Maddie put no thought into captions and hashtags when her greatest priority was appearing physically attractive. Once she created a motherhood-focused account with intentions of growing it as her brand, she started taking captions and hashtags more seriously. She became aware of the impact the impression she makes through her images and captions has on her brand. She avoids any self-presentation cues that might indicate a former lifestyle she no longer lives to exclude any followers that do not reflect her new brand. This trend was also evident in the profile reviews of respondents' Instagram accounts.

Enhancing an image is part of impression management and presenting one's image in a way that may be perceived as more appealing to followers. Nano-influencers interviewed disclosed that the only editing they do is lighting to enhance the image. Editing beyond lighting was perceived by interviewed content creators as inauthentic and disingenuous but they understand that others do it for aesthetic reasons that result in increased brand growth. Additionally, they do not want a reputation for editing photos, a breach of online etiquette that has caused many influencers who engage in impression management techniques to fall from grace.

Social User Self-Presentation

It is worth noting that users across all self-esteem levels in this sample are in the age range that they have had an Instagram account since their young teenage years. As they grew into young adults, the presentation of their Instagram profile matured with them. According to participants, as teens, it was common to post all aspects of their lives. Posting their daily

minutiae was a part of the impression management when forming their online identities as the first generation to explore online personas.

As the novelty wore off, fewer posts were made, but they became more intentional. Now, in their early 20s, participants reported to post about significant events and adventures, or milestones. This maturing of their profiles demonstrates an understanding of how to manage contextual behavioural expectations online to maintain a desired impression for those who come across their pages.

Fake Instagram (Finsta)

As part of their impression management, some users, usually younger in age, create a “Fake Instagram,” or “Finsta” account. The importance of self-presentation leads to the creation of a whole separate account, which they keep private in order to have the freedom to post freely without the scrutiny and judgement of others.

When given the chance to provide general feedback on their overall Instagram experience, one questionnaire respondent said, “I’m slowly learning that people don’t really care that much about what you post unless it’s a fully edited photo where you look great.” Since the goal of positive impression management and self-presentation is the cultivation of relationships with their audience, users strive to highlight their best personal attributes and capitalise on the ability to control what and how they post. Still, Finsta accounts are the consequence of Instagram culture’s unspoken requirement for visual perfection.

What Accounts Are Users Following?

The types of accounts users follow can have an effect on their emotions and feelings towards themselves and how they present themselves online. When mindlessly scrolling, we absorb content which may affect how we feel and how we see ourselves. We may engage in

upward comparisons, where we strive to become the best possible version of ourselves by being inspired by others. Or we may engage in downward comparisons, the kind that make people feel bad about themselves because those they see online seem to be better in some way. Respondents experienced both reactions. The findings suggest this is another form of self-presentation as it displays the types of accounts users follow and can divulge their interests. Some interview respondents refuse to follow certain accounts—particularly celebrity gossip—not only because they had negative feelings towards such accounts, but they did not want to give the impression that they follow such “frivolous” topics.

Participants expressed that someone who follows celebrity gossip or fashion accounts may be presenting themselves differently than someone who follows financial, sports, or wellness accounts. Every interview participant was asked the types of accounts they follow and how that reflects who they are and how they want to be perceived. The HSE group tended to follow inspirational, comedy, or accounts similar to theirs, and refrain from following high-level influencers with millions of followers. Participants in the LSE group follow a wider range of accounts including celebrities, influencers, pop culture, comedy, and few motivational accounts. Family and friend accounts were by far the most followed accounts.

Bios and Profiles in Nano-Influencer and Social Accounts

Goffman (1959) stressed the importance of an audience to determine our behaviours based on contextual expectations. Instagram has become an archetypal stage on which to showcase who people are, what their interests are, and how they wish to be perceived. At the forefront of their profiles is the bio section. It provides users with a 150-character description to show the world who they are, coupled with a profile photo. The bio sections of participants included an array of brief descriptions including names, ages, emojis, song lyrics, job titles, city

of residence, jokes, or links to other relevant personal pages. This section is a central performance stage. It is the first section others can see and scrutinise.

Self-presentation is a crucial aspect of relational and impression management offline. The findings of this study demonstrated that users in this sample experience a dichotomy in which they must decide to use the bio section to present one's true self or strictly highlight their positive attributes in order to make a good initial impression. Responses from all the methods varied widely. This denotes that self-esteem is not a factor when selecting how to present themselves on their profile bios. Rather, it is other aspects of their personalities or important personal information they prefer to display and interwoven in that is their self-esteem.

Charlotte, a LSE interview participant, had a blank bio. "I don't really want to advertise myself too much on Instagram because normally, if I share my Instagram, it's only to my friends, so they already know who I am," she told me. She prefers to keep an empty bio due to her mild insecurities. Her public profile forces her to be mindful of what she posts and how she presents herself knowing that potential future employers might inspect her profile one day. Similar to others, she deleted content and tailored her profile to match her professionalism and maturity as she got older. Charlotte's blank bio on a public profile illustrates the balance many users have to maintain their privacy and internal struggles backstage in tandem with the desire to appear authentic and professional.

Self-presentation: Captions and Hashtags

Interview users in the LSE group that used motivational/inspirational captions said their reason for these captions is to inspire and motivate themselves just as much as others. Interview users in the HSE group that also used inspirational quotes as captions did so to inspire and motivate others, not themselves. These findings expose the intention participants had with their

captions and how they want to be perceived. The HSE users had intentions of giving off an impression of helpfulness, while the LSE users had the same outward intention, their captions were also an act of self-help.

Hashtags were seen by most social users as unnecessary and complicated to learn to use. Limen explained that he would use hashtags if he cared about growing his page, otherwise, “I feel like at that point, I’m really thirsting for attention, and I really don’t want people to see that and think I’m in need of attention because I’m not.” His self-presentation included avoiding the impression that he wants or needs the attention hashtags would likely bring him. Participants adopted such tactics to compensate for the fact that posts are subject to misrepresentation. Rather than displaying their personalities and intents through the use of hashtags, participants opted to show it with their content. According to participants, quality content is more likely to garner attention more effectively than hashtags, which are more complementary than utilitarian for social users.

While obtaining likes, comments, or shares is not a reflection of their self-esteem, participants reported feeling happy to receive them, especially when they are from people they know personally. The self-presentation tactics employed by users demonstrate a recognition that they'll be rewarded when they align their authentic selves with their best selves. A few interview respondents claimed if it was years ago, when their self-esteem was more fragile and Instagram was novel, they may have deleted posts for lack of engagement and appearing unpopular, but not anymore.

Favourite Self-Presentation Posts in Nano-Influencer and Social Accounts

During the interviews, participants were asked to point out a favourite post, one that made them feel good or better about themselves or reflected their self-esteem. The most

significant finding from this question was that all the participants looked fondly on certain posts with a smile. When asked why, the mood, feelings, or memories attached to the photo is what made it their favourite, not how they looked or how well-liked the post was. These results indicate that the posts that have an effect on users' self-esteem was correlated to the visceral reactions brought on by the posts rather than other details of the post.

Mary recounts the events of her favourite post. She and her mother have a yearly tradition of making Christmas chocolates and she says they “get stir crazy and a little bit funny.” She describes the post as a “snapshot of the moment . . . a favourite thing to look back on and it’s such a natural look for both of us laughing . . . really enjoying the moment.” Limen’s favourite post was among his most creative because he included anime in it, something he really enjoys but does not often share on his public account, which made it a display of vulnerability. The post that made Rebecca feel her best, ironically, was a photo taken on a day she was feeling her worst. Despite that, she “had a really good day hanging out with family . . . [and] was self-conscious but felt really good.” Charlotte expressed her favourite posts were the first selfies she took because she used fun, novel filters.

Maddie’s was a favourite because it was her first time incorporating her humour into a post. She claimed, “I can be myself when I have fun . . . and can be more who I really am, and people are going to find it funny and relatable.” These findings suggest that presenting themselves as being authentic and fun-loving outweighed the value their self-esteem contributes to the impression they give. This is consistent with the tenets of self-presentation theory, further implying that while Instagram’s culture is one of visual perfection, the desire to be accepted for being true to themselves is what drives their posting and self-presentation style.

It is evident that self-esteem online can be presented, and stem from, a variety of sources; not only from engagement or how they look in their photo. Instagram may be known for its focus on visually appealing content but most participants' favourite posts evoked feelings of happiness and nostalgia, even if the photos themselves were silly or funny rather than physically attractive or beautiful. Therefore, it can be argued that there is more to a user's self-esteem than their physical appearance online.

Self-esteem in self-presentation includes their self-worth and how happy they are at the time of taking and posting the photo. Feelings, emotions, and memories are a greater factor in their online self-presentation. The impression given to their audience was important to most users across all self-esteem levels, creating a greater stage on which to perform. This was not in a sense that they wanted to appear physically attractive, but rather, they want to appear “real” and “authentic.”

Faking Self-esteem in Online Self-presentation

One major takeaway from the findings is that self-esteem online can be faked, altering the essence of user self-presentation. Users have the control to curate content and choose to post images that make them feel best along with captions that may express false feelings of confidence. Kelly stated that once she stopped caring what impression she gave others on Instagram, she felt comfortable posting anything. The unintended effect was that people started to think her confidence and self-esteem had increased based on what she was posting. Charlotte expressed hiding behind filters to appear more playful inadvertently exuded a level of self-esteem she did not actually have. Whether directly or indirectly, the techniques adopted for impression management enabled users to portray a fake sense of self-esteem, which in turn helped increase their actual self-esteem.

When asked what kind of impression she wanted to give, Julie was one of the only respondents to say appearing smart is as important as appearing physically attractive, leading her to post achievements when she could. She claimed, even though she did not have high confidence, it appeared that she did. Years ago, she equated physical attraction and a large following to likeability. She no longer thinks this and is more concerned about appearing genuine. Now, she focuses on posting more nature and family photos; the things on which she places more importance now. In presenting herself as a confident person, her confidence actually began to grow and eventually she became naturally more confident. The way users present themselves on Instagram then influences the way they present themselves in real life, taking self-presentation theory from the stages of life to the stages of the virtual world, and then their virtual self-presentation comes back to influence their self-presentation in real life, and as the circle goes on, their virtual influences will inevitably continue to grow.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to find answers on whether Instagram users' self-esteem affects how they consume and present themselves on their Instagram profiles. The findings demonstrate that users across all self-esteem levels engage in self-presentation on their Instagram feeds, however their self-esteem is a miniscule, albeit present, factor in their consumption and posting habits, particularly those in the LSE group.

According to the data, Instagram's main uses for the majority of its users are social connections, passing the time, and brand promotion and growth. When it comes to self-presentation, Instagram users do not readily post anything that would obviously reveal their self-esteem. In fact, they use Instagram as a mask to fake confidence or enhance it. If their self-esteem is exposed, it is more often than not in subtle ways, such as with the types of posts they

make. A user's self-esteem is more likely divulged through their consumption of the application, which is usually hidden to other users. This was made evident by the fact that all participants' favourite posts revealed that users are more attached to the feelings evoked by the memory of the post, rather than how they look.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A limitation to this study was the scope that allowed for only one platform to be examined. Participants expressed they engage in self-presentation differently on every app they use. Expanding the selection of apps to study this topic would provide greater insight into how each platform becomes a different frame, acting as a stage where users perform with different sets of expectations for self-presentation.

Relying on the truthfulness of participants might also have served as a limitation, especially those that answered the questionnaire, due to a lack of many important non-verbal cues that are present during in-person interviews. Additionally, the low number of respondents in the LSE group may have affected the results for that group when compared to the other groups that had almost double the number of respondents.

Instagram is popular among youth of all ages for consumption, but it is an ineffective tool with which to study whether self-esteem influences self-presentation. However, it does provide insight into self-presentation outside of self-esteem. Recommendations for future research are to study the topic on a variety of social media networks. This would allow the examination of the different expectations for self-presentation on each platform. Further, researchers can seek to learn how this affects the way users portray themselves online and what it says about their self-esteem and how it varies from app to app—and from app to real life. Additionally, this can help

guide future research on self-esteem, mental health, social media use and how to support young adults in navigating their online and offline mental health matters.

Appendices

Appendix A: Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale

Description of Measure: A 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale is believed to be uni-dimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Scale: Instructions Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. Options are Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Scoring: Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are reverse scored. Give “Strongly Disagree” 1 point, “Disagree” 2 points, “Agree” 3 points, and “Strongly Agree” 4 points. Sum scores for all ten items. Keep scores on a continuous scale. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographic and consumption questions

1. How old are you?
2. Gender identity
3. How would you rate your self-esteem?
4. On a normal day, how often do you visit Instagram?
5. On average, how often do you post to your FEED/PROFILE per month?
6. On average, how often do you post to your FEED/PROFILE per month?
7. On average, how often do you post to your REELS per month?
8. What are your top 3-5 kinds of accounts to follow? Select 3-5
9. Why do you use Instagram? Select all the apply
10. What info is visible on your profile bio section? Select all that apply

Section 2: Yes or No

11. Is your profile public?
12. Do you accept follow requests from people you don't personally know?
13. Do you actively try to gain more followers?
14. Are you satisfied with your number of followers?
15. Do you feel envious of people with more followers than you?
Have you altered posts to seem more likeable or to give others a good impression of you?
16. Have you ever posted for general attention?
17. Have you ever deleted a post because it didn't get as many likes or comments as
you wanted?
18. Have you ever posted for the attention of someone specific?

19. Do you post personal/professional/academic achievements?
20. Do you feel better about yourself after browsing Instagram?
21. Do you feel better about yourself after making a post on Instagram?
22. Does other people's Instagram affect your self esteem? *
23. Do you have a "Finsta"?

Section 3: Likert Scales: 1= Strongly disagree/never. 5=Strongly agree/always

24. Who you are on Instagram is an accurate portrayal of who you are in real life.
25. How often do you post selfies?
26. How often do you post posed photos?
27. How often do you post group photos?
28. How often do you post animals or pets?
29. How often do you post memes or funny content?
30. How often do you post art/nature/landscapes?
31. How often do you post inspirational or witty quotes?
32. How often do you edit photos before posting?
33. How often do you use filters when posting?
34. How often do you partake in posting trends? (Throwback Thursdays,
Flashback
Fridays, Woman Crush Wednesdays, Man crush Mondays)
35. How often do you partake in posts to raise awareness for issues you care about? (ex.
Movember, Black Lives Matter)
36. How often do you post about your love life?
37. How often do you tag people in your posts?

38. How often do you get tagged in others' posts?
39. After posting, how often do you check back for feedback or activity on your post?
40. How often does people's Instagram affect your self-esteem?
41. How important is it to appear attractive?
42. How important is it to appear smart?
43. How important is it to appear likeable?
44. How important is it to have an attractive Instagram aesthetic? (symmetrical look, themes, colours)
45. How important is it to get likes on your posts?
46. How important is it to get comments on your posts?
47. How important is it to you to have a large following?
48. If you interested in participating in a 1-hour interview where we explore your posts and talk about your Instagram story, please enter you Instagram handle and I will follow and connect with you.
49. If you're not interested in an interview but would allow me to follow and check out your Instagram, please enter you Instagram handle here.
50. Is there anything you'd like to add that hasn't been asked regarding how your self-esteem affects how you post to Instagram?

Appendix C: Interviews

- Why do you use and post to Instagram?
- How would you rate your self-esteem?
- What do you post to Instagram?
- Show me your favourite post. Why is it your favourite.
- Show me your least favourite post. Why is it your least favourite.
- Does using or posting to Instagram affect your mood? How?
- Does your follower number matter to you? Why or why not?
- Do you do anything to enhance your photos? Why or why not?
- How important are the captions and hashtags you use?
- Have you lied about yourself or your appearance in posts?
- What are your top 3-5 kinds of accounts to follow?
- Have you altered posts to seem more likeable or to give others a good impression of you?
- Have you ever deleted a post because it didn't get as many likes or comments as you wanted?
- Do you feel better about yourself after browsing Instagram?
- Do you feel better about yourself after making a post on Instagram?
- Does other people's Instagram affect your self esteem?
- Do you have a "Finsta"?
- How often do you partake in posting trends? (Throwback Thursdays, Flashback Fridays, Woman Crush Wednesdays, Man crush Mondays)

- How often do you partake in posts to raise awareness for issues you care about? (ex. Movember, Black Lives Matter)
- How important is it to get likes on your posts?
- How important is it to get comments on your posts?
- How important is it to you to have a large following?
- How important is it to appear attractive?
- How important is it to appear smart?
- How important is it to appear likeable?

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