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Am I in a healthy relationship? Exploring emotional consequences of young women's relationships with social media influencers

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Betsy Byrne DeSimone entitled "Am I in a healthy relationship? Exploring emotional consequences of young women's relationships with social media influencers." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Communication and Information.

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Am I in a healthy relationship? Exploring emotional consequences of young
women's relationships with social media influencers**

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Betsy Byrne DeSimone

May 2020

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dave. Thank you for always cheering me on and making me believe that I can do anything. Your support continuously carries me through.

And...

To (wo)man's best friend, Charlie. Thank you for "doggedly" keeping me company during my many hours of writing. Also, thank you for reminding me to get some fresh air...and that dinner is ALWAYS at 5.

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ABSTRACT

Using the theoretical underpinnings of Social Comparison Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory, this study investigates the emotional implications of young women following social media influencers (SMIs). The long-interview method was used to address the lived reality of 18-24 year old females who are heavy users of Instagram and follow SMIs. Results indicated that strong parasocial relationships are formed resulting in social comparisons. However, emotional implications vary depending on the person and the type of content they expose themselves to. Theoretical, Consumer Welfare, and Industry implications are addressed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At just 14 years old, Molly Russell committed suicide. Her social media was littered with information about suicide and depression. Her parents maintained that social media was partly to blame (Savage, 2019, n.p.). British Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, has demanded social media companies ban harmful materials stating, “Suicide is now the leading cause of death for young people under 20. Levels of self-harm are rising among teenage girls in particular (Savage, 2019, n.p.)” Hancock further reiterates that the benefits of technology are lost when there is no concern over the potential risks.

The Center of Disease Control (CDC) has investigated suicide and depression among youth in recent years. Some researchers have suggested that social media is a major link (Walton, 2018). Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, and Martin (2018) found that young people who spend more time on social media are more likely to have depression, with young women being the most susceptible. According to Twenge et al. (2018), there has been an increase, especially in females, in depression symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates since 2010. Young people who spend more time on digital media are more likely to have health related issues than those who spend more time away from media (Twenge et al., 2018).

A creative project called “Visual Diet” by M&C Saatchi investigated the negative impacts of social media on mental health. The project allowed young women to digitally alter their pictures in order to make them ready for social media. The young women used apps downloaded from their smartphones to alter their pictures. The edited images were displayed next to the unaltered images in order to highlight the negative effects of social media on mental health (Jardine, 2019). According to Justin Tindall, group chief creative officer of M&C Saatchi,

“What we eat affects our bodies, so we’re mindful of what we eat. What we see affects our minds, but we’re rarely mindful of what we look at. It’s time we balanced our visual diets” (Jardine, 2019).

Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media platforms (de Vries, Moller, Wieringa, Eigenraam, & Hamelink, 2018). However, since the increased popularity of the platform is fairly recent, researchers have called for more studies focusing on the implications of Instagram use (de Vries et al., 2018). This is especially important for women since more women use Instagram than males (Statista, 2018). Instagram is different from other social media sites in terms of how individuals encounter social information. Specifically, Instagram is based on pictures rather than text. This visual component may lead to different implications than text-based social networking sites (de Vries et al., 2018).

The Royal Society of Public Health recently dubbed Instagram “The worst social media for mental health”, citing a recent survey of 1,500 teens and adults (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Further, research suggested that constantly looking at images of friends having fun could cause a “compare and despair” attitude. Looking at personal photos can also cause low self-esteem and lead the viewer to feel inadequate. It is no surprise that Instagram received the worst scores for body images, with the researchers quoting a respondent in the 20-24 age bracket as saying, “Instagram easily makes girls and women feel as if their bodies aren’t good enough as people add filters and edit their pictures in order for them to look perfect” (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017, p.10).

Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

“People endowed with higher levels of prestige connotating traits—for example, expertise, attractiveness, or fame—exert greater influence in a variety of ways” (Neuberg et al.,

2010, p. 771). Social media influencers (SMIs) have capitalized on these traits to earn income by influencing consumers to make purchases, like a brand, or follow trends. These posts are considered native advertisements. “Also called sponsored content, native advertising is a term used to describe any paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself” (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016, p.1).

When a SMI post is incentivized, it is considered native advertising and therefore the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has strong regulations for these types of posts. SMIs are defined as individuals who have a material connection with an advertiser and promote the connection on their social media sites (FTC, 2017). The FTC states, “A material connection could be a business or family relationship, monetary payment, or the gift of a free product” (FTC, 2017, n.p.).

Sharma (2016) compares a SMI to a popular kid in high school that everyone wants to be friends with. With the power of popularity, SMIs are able to decide what is in and what is out. In fact, the average rate of engagement for influencer-produced content is 5.7% while content generated by brands is only 3% (Gallagher, 2018). Further, 70% of viewers would rather learn about products through authentic content than traditional advertising (Libert, 2017). Instagram is among the most popular platforms for SMI marketing. “The most striking advantage of Instagram influencer marketing is that the platform’s users react more positively to branded content than those on almost any other social media site” (Fields, 2019, n.p.). Instagram is especially viable in SMI marketing because it is a leading way to target millennials who have disposable income (Fields, 2019).

A downside to SMIs is how they make young women feel. Following SMIs can lead to increased social media usage, which then can have detrimental effects on mental health (de Vries

et al., 2018; Twenge et. al, 2018). Additionally, carefully curated photos depict an “InstaPerfect” life, which makes followers feel the need to live up to an idealized standard (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Further, these “InstaPerfect” lives portrayed on social media can elicit negative emotions, such as envy (Chae, 2018; van de Ven, 2017).

Theoretical Considerations

This study uses Social Comparison Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory as its theoretical foundation. Parasocial Interaction Theory describes the illusionary relationship developed with a celebrity (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Chung & Cho, 2017). For many young women, interacting with celebrities online is a fundamental aspect of social media usage (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015). In a parasocial relationship, the friendship is one-way and is often exacerbated by consistent access to the celebrity such as one would have via social media (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015). Once a parasocial relationship is developed, the temptation to use SMI accounts for social comparison information may be even more powerful. Specifically, some women tend to idealize female characters based on their appearance and behaviors. "Women who crave and seek intimacy in everyday life also bring these motivations to their media consumptions habits" (Greenwood et al., 2008, p.403).

The theoretical framework of social comparison is used to investigate the negative emotional consequences of young women developing relationships with SMIs. In essence, Social Comparison Theory suggests individuals compare themselves with others when acquiring social information (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1996; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). With social media being integrated into the daily lives of most young women, the social information that is acquired online is boundless. This desire for evaluation stems from the need to validate our own opinions and assess our capabilities (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

Statement of Purpose

In order to understand the implications of SMIs from both a societal and advertising perspective, it is necessary to gain insight from the individuals who are being affected. This understanding will improve future research from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective because we will have a better comprehension of which questions to ask. The genre of fashion was chosen because it is the largest genre in the influencer industry (Mediakix, 2017). Additionally, young women are the most susceptible to negative implications of social media use (Walton, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate young women who follow fashion influencers. Specifically, to understand the relationships developed with SMIs and how the relationship may influence comparison behavior.

Research Approach & Method Overview

This study employed a qualitative perspective to understand the lived experiences of young women who follow social media influencers (Childers, Lemon, Hoy, 2019). The method followed an interpretivist paradigm using the long-interview method. Under an interpretivist paradigm, truth is viewed as individual, constructed through personal experiences, beliefs, and stock of knowledge (Creswell, 2007). 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, analyzed, and coded in order to gain insight on the following research questions:

Research Questions

- RQ1: How do young women's perceptions of a SMI impact how they view themselves?
- RQ 2: How do young women make meaning of their relationships with a SMI and their community?
- RQ3: How does a parasocial relationship with a SMI effect how young women see themselves in relation to how they see the SMI?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) are a huge part of today's culture. Search interest for SMIs has grown three times in a single year (Mediakix, 2017). SMIs do it all: advertise the latest products, give fashion advice, and show you a glimpse into their seemingly perfect everyday "lives". Social media influencers typically target women given that in 2017, female influencers produced 83.9% of sponsored posts on Instagram (Klear, 2019). Further, over half of sponsored posts shared by major influencers are for fashion brands (Mediakix, 2017.) The relationship between the consumer and the influencer has become an area of interest for researchers, as well as the factors that drive their influencer power.

The Relationship Between Individuals and Influencers

Current research attempts to understand the dynamic between individuals and whom they follow. Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) suggest that there are multiple sides to the relationship between the consumer and influencer. The authors point out that followers are involved in the value creation process by interacting with the influencer's page and recommending the influencer to their friends. Thus, the follower actually becomes a co-producer by engaging with the influencer. However, during this process of co-creation the influencer will impact the follower's intention to follow fashion advice and purchase products that the influencer suggests, especially if they are "on-brand" with the influencer (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018).

Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan, and Xu (2015) investigated social media influencers and consumers using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, Worchel, 1979) which focuses

on self-concept derived from membership within a social group. Liu et al. (2015) found that online members within the consumer's in-group have the most influence over that particular social group. An in-group is a social group in which members share a common purpose and strong ties with other members. Additionally, Liu and colleagues (2015) suggested that categorizing and identifying influencers are essential to understanding the effectiveness of individual influencers.

Influencer Power

How do influencers gain so much notoriety? Being one of a kind is the key to gaining followers on Instagram. Perceived uniqueness is far more important than quality or quantity of posts (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). In research on likeability of social media influencers, De Veirman (2017) found that the number of followers the social media influencer has affects the likeability of a social media influencer. De Veirman (2017) explains that this criterion is based on perceptions of popularity. However, a high number of followers does not always mean the social media influencer is an opinion leader. An opinion leader is considered someone whom consumers believe is a valuable source of information. Opinion leaders are determined by how often followers engage with their content (i.e. liking or retweeting information). Therefore, just because a person is considered likable, or has a lot of followers, does not always mean they will be perceived as an opinion leader.

The number of accounts the social media influencer follows affects likeability (De Veirman, 2017). Specifically, if the social media influencer follows few accounts, but has a lot of followers, the social media influencer is deemed as less likeable. De Veirman (2017) suggests this may be because an account with a high number of followers that follows few accounts themselves may cause consumers to be skeptical that it is fake account created for advertising.

SMI and Advertising

Sudha and Sheena (2017) define the relationship between the advertiser and social media influencer as “a process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium, in order to be part of a brand's campaign towards increased reach, sales, or engagement” (p.16). Social media influencers are not only selling a product, they are also selling a lifestyle. While most research investigates commercial endorsements, Russell and Rasolofoarison (2017) consider the effect of native advertisements. The researchers found that traditional and product placement endorsements are less effective than advertisements where a brand is placed in a more natural setting.

There were “generally superior effects of the more natural real-life associations on consumers’ responses to a previously unknown brand without eroding their perceptions of the celebrity associated with the brand: they like the brand more, feel more connected to it, are more willing to try it and even to pay more for it when they first encounter it with a celebrity in a natural, non-commercial setting” (Russell & Rasolofoarison, 2017, p. 771). In the natural setting celebrities are seen more credible which leads to higher brand responses.

Fashion Influencers

Influencers are a huge part of the fashion industry: they create trends and inspire their followers right from their social media accounts. Fashion influencers seem to have it all, sharing their picture perfect lives on their social media feeds. Research on fashion influencers highlights the content of posts and impact they have.

Duffy and Hund (2015) investigated content of fashion bloggers posts supplemented by in-depth interviews of full-time fashion bloggers. After looking at both textual and visual components of the top fashion bloggers’ posts, results indicated that bloggers presented the

“ideal of having it all through three interrelated tropes: the destiny of passionate work, staging the glam life, and carefully curated social sharing” (p.1). Duffy and Hund (2015) suggest that social media influencers leave out all the work that goes into creating these posts to present the theme of “having it all”. Bloggers put in substantial time and energy in creating the seemingly effortless posts. “Many bloggers described navigating uncertain economic environments and diversifying their work beyond that of maintaining a blog to having clothing/jewelry lines, doing media appearances, even teaching. ‘Having it all’ is thus part of the carefully constructed, deftly managed, and constantly renegotiated self-brand” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, n.p.).

How do fashion influencers create fashion movements? Weidmann, Hennings, and Langner (2012) suggest that identifying with SMIs is essential, especially in the world of fashion. Fashion influencers have power through word-of-mouth marketing in sharing products and trends (Weidmann, et al., 2012). Weidmann and colleagues suggest that influencers have specific attributes (individual capital) that set them apart from non-influencers, as well as specific referral behaviors (social capital) based on their social network, which together leads to social influence potential.

Consumers first see a celebrity promoted product on social media (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Style and type of pictures that influencers post is what draw the consumer in and keep them engaged. Overall, SMIs have a strong influence over consumers, suggesting they have the power to create fashion trends as consumers imitate their style. Consumers see SMIs as the experts in the fashion world.

Theoretical Considerations: Parasocial Interaction Theory

When consumers follow SMIs, they feel like they get to know the SMI as a person. They become interested in their daily lives and feel a sense of connection with them. Sometimes they

follow the SMIs' significant other or friends, further extending the connection and developing a pseudo relationship with the SMI. The relationship developed is called a parasocial relationship. "One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p.215).

Horton and Wohl's (1956) Parasocial Interaction Theory develops "when individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individuals develop a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity" (Chung & Cho, 2017, p.482). Horton and Wohl (1956) first understood parasocial interaction as the relationship between the spectator and the performer. It is the performer's job to present him or herself in a way that makes the spectator feel as if s/he is a part of the action. The performer engages the spectator and becomes a dependable part of the spectator's daily life. The more the spectator watches, the more predictable the performer becomes, and the more the spectator truly feels that they know the performer. The performer presents values related to the demands of everyday life. By living vicariously through the performance, the spectator is presented with an idealized version of reality (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Social attraction is a very important aspect of parasocial interaction theory. Rubin and McHugh (1987) suggest that parasocial relationships begin with social attraction. This leads to parasocial interaction and then ultimately relationship importance is developed. Further, Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) explained that there was a process of mindreading between the performer and spectator, which creates the immediate, personal, and reciprocal relationship. Media relationships can be seen as functional alternatives to interpersonal relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

Attachment style can mediate the intensity of a person's parasocial relationship. Specifically, individuals who are more insecure and have unstable relationships in real life are more likely to have more intense parasocial relationships (Cole & Leets, 1999). In a study on individuals who live in Kuwait, where dating goes against social norms, individuals are left with a longing for friendships and love that is difficult to find in their environment. Research found that these individuals have stronger parasocial relationships (Dinkha, Mitchell, Dakhli, 2018). "It is possible that the parasocial bonds these individuals form with media figures simply reflects another manifestation of their desire for intimacy and the fulfillment of missing needs" (Dinkha, Mitchell, Dakhli, 2018, p.116).

Parasocial Relationships and Advertising

In more recent parasocial interaction research, Rasmussen (2018) found that celebrities on YouTube who make product endorsements develop a relationship with their followers where they are similar to friends sharing opinions. Through the relationships that YouTubers cultivate, they are able to enact traditional word-of-mouth to a mass audience. In Rasmussen's (2018) study, participants reported familiarity and feeling like they knew the celebrity. This suggested a parasocial interaction, which allowed the celebrities to be viewed as credible and trustworthy. The parasocial interaction allows YouTube personalities to build personal relationships with a target audience in order to promote brands and products.

Kim, Ko, and Kim (2015) argue that parasocial interactions with celebrities are a critical aspect of social networking behavior. Because social media allows immediate access to otherwise unreachable celebrities, parasocial relationships are formed. Kim, Ko, and Kim (2015) examined parasocial interaction in the fashion world with designers and brands. Increase in the user's information search intention in turn increases the strength of the consumer/celebrity

parasocial relationship. Perceived reliability is important to consumers when forming parasocial relationships. Specifically, celebrity reputations affect purchase intention of the fashion product because people desire to wear what the celebrities are wearing. Parasocial relationships have power over purchase intention for celebrity promoted products (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015).

Theoretical Considerations: Social Comparison Theory

Festinger (1954) created Social Comparison Theory (SCT) to describe the psychological process where individuals compare themselves to others. SCT is the foundation of this study. Researchers have found that individuals use social comparison in order to pursue self-knowledge (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Social comparison also has a robust effect on group thought and action (Forsyth, 2000). Over the years, social comparison research has focused on two key issues: selection (choice of comparison target) and reaction (effects of social comparison) (Gerber & Wheeler, 2017). This study will focus primarily on the issue of reaction; specifically how social media affects the reactions to social comparison. Criticisms of the theory are addressed.

Overview

Festinger (1954) argues that humans need to evaluate themselves and they do so when they can compare themselves to others, creating several hypotheses described as social comparison theory. A key tenet of the theory is that there are two types of social comparison: comparison of abilities and comparison of opinions (Festinger, 1954). Comparison of abilities broadly involves comparison of achievement and performance, which is often competitive and judgmental (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018). Social comparison of opinions includes thoughts, attitudes, values, and beliefs, and often involves less judgment and competition than comparison of abilities (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018).

Individuals tend to compare themselves with people of similar opinions or abilities (Festinger, 1954). When individuals cannot compare themselves with someone who has similar opinions and abilities, they are likely to change their evaluation of the opinion or ability. More specifically, people are less attracted to situations where there are not similar opinions or abilities available for comparison.

In his original paper, Festinger (1954) did not offer a true definition of social comparison. Wood (1996) suggested that in order to properly measure social comparison, it needed to be properly defined. Thus, he defined social comparison as “the process of thinking about information about one or more people in relation to the self” (Wood 1996, p.520). Wood goes on to indicate that any social information can cause social comparison, and it does not require direct contact with a specific person.

Upward Versus Downward Comparison. Another key tenet is that one may participate in upward or downward comparison (Festinger, 1954). Downward comparison is comparison with someone believed to be lesser than you. However, upward comparison is comparison with someone believed to be better. Upward versus downward comparison may illicit different reactions (Thornton & Arrowood, 1966). For example, “When women compare themselves to an image presented in the media, this almost invariably represents an upward social comparison by which they find themselves lacking, thus leading to negative mood and body dissatisfaction” (Tiggemann and McGill, 2004, p.26). Tiggemann and Polivy (2010) suggest that the negative effects associated with social comparison are almost always a result of upward comparison. When women compare themselves to idealized images, they find themselves lacking which leads to the negative psychological consequences mentioned above (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Why Do People Participate in Social Comparison? (Self-Evaluation) Buunk and Gibbons (2007) describe social comparison as a pursuit for self-knowledge that fulfills fundamental functions “such as providing useful information about where one stands in one’s social world, feeling better about oneself, and learning how to adapt to challenging situations” (p.16). Festinger (1954) originally claimed that individuals prefer objective information in order to self-evaluate while the next option is to compare the self to others. However, Buunk and Gibbons (2007) argued “if anything, Festinger underestimated the importance of the social comparison process in the original paper, by suggesting that it took a back seat to a desire for more objective information” (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, p.5). Further, Buunk and Gibbons (2007) argued that the tendency to compare oneself to others differs from person to person, i.e. people participate in social comparison in varying degrees (Wheeler, 2000; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

Additionally, Forsyth (2000) found that social comparison has a substantial effect on groups. "Although people generally believe that their actions reflect only their personal desires and inclinations, the empirical evidence suggests otherwise" (Forsyth, 2000, p.81). Group influence is not intrusive, but very subtle through its foundation of social comparison. Individuals validate their opinions and attributes based on those around them. “Group members change, not because they are pressured directly by others, but because they implicitly formulate and revise their opinions and beliefs and identify their strengths, assets, weaknesses, and liabilities by comparing themselves to specific individuals in their group, to a generalized conception of the average group member, or to members of other groups” (p.82). Forsyth (2000) insists that social comparison is not only a theory for individuals to assess their opinions and abilities. In actuality it is also a theory of group dynamics.

Who Do Individuals Compare Themselves to and Why? (Selection) Thornton and Arrowood (1966) investigated the choice of subject for comparison evaluations. Specifically, the researchers were interested in comparison during negative and positive situations. The researchers described social comparison as having two functions: self-enhancement and self-evaluation. Self-enhancement is typically achieved through comparison of someone who is deemed to be better off, while self-evaluation is achieved through comparison of accurate or readily available information. Further, if individuals have a positive self-concept, they will likely compare themselves with someone whom they believe to be better off than them. However, if individuals feel threatened, they will compare themselves to someone who is worse off than them (Thornton & Arrowood, 1966).

Social Comparison and Mental Health. (Reaction) As social comparison research progressed, researchers began investigating the implications of social comparison. Comparison consequences may depend on the type of knowledge available regarding the source of comparison and how that knowledge is used for self-evaluation (Mussweiler and Strack, 2000). Mussweiler and Strack (2000) explain that comparison knowledge not only causes one to make judgments, but also leads to behavioral consequences.

According to Goethals and Klein (2000), "Peoples' satisfaction with themselves and their lot depend on a range of social comparisons with others whom they perceive to provide relevant comparison points" (p.23). Goethals and Klein (2000) suggest that social comparison is comprised of both rational and irrational thinking and thus, both should be investigated in respect to the conditions that produce them and how people use them. The researchers suggest that there are various ways people invent a social reality to make a social comparison (i.e. people make up

false realities in order to make consistent social comparisons). These processes can influence how individuals think about themselves and their peers.

Prior to 2000, researchers focused more on situational relationships with social comparison rather than individual differences. Wheeler (2000) was interested in how individual differences influenced reaction to social comparison. Wheeler (2000) found that individuals with depression had more positive experiences in downward comparison rather than upward comparison.

Social Comparison and Social Media. Researchers began by investigating social comparison via social groups (Festinger, 1954). Since Festinger's (1954) paper, social comparison research has expanded to be applied to individuals comparing themselves to those in advertisements (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) and to social media profiles with which they engage online (Chae, 2018). With many people readily available for comparison online, current researchers argue that social media users' mental health is being compromised (De Vries et. al, 2018; Chow and Wan, 2017; Chae, 2018). Social Comparison Theory helps us understand how following social media influencers (SMIs) on social media outlets impacts consumer overall wellbeing.

Criticisms of Social Comparison Theory. There are two main criticisms of the theory: how it is measured and the key tenets of the theory. Wheeler (2000) criticized how researchers measured social comparison, specifically retrospective measurements ("How often do you realize that you are better off than most other people?"), comparative measurements ("Is your proficiency...better or worse than average"), and role-playing measurements ("Whom would you want to compare with if you were in such-and-such a situation?"). Wheeler stated that these methods do not adequately measure the theory. Instead, Wheeler (2000) used the social

comparison record (SCR) technique to measure social comparison in which participants recorded every time they made a social comparison. The SCR technique is a process of event-contingent self-recording in which participants record their social comparisons for 10-14 days.

In their meta-analysis of the last 60 years, Gerber, Wheeler, Suls (2018) concluded that studies often failed to include no-comparison control groups. Specifically, most studies solely compared the reaction to upward comparison versus the reaction to downward comparison. Additionally, the researchers found that dependent variables were under represented. They also highlighted instances of publication bias. Publication bias refers the “range of plausible estimates for any true underlying effect” (Gerber, Wheeler, and Suls, 2017, p.8). Publication bias lends us to question the true effects of research findings in previous social comparison research.

The key tenets of the theory have also been called into question. Wheeler (2000) found that research on social comparison and individual difference variables to be inconsistent. Social comparison serves many functions but may also cause negative repercussions to certain individuals. This depends on their individual difference variables, such as whether or not they have depression (Wheeler, 2000). Thornton and Arrowood (1966) critiqued the aspect of social comparison theory that states individuals seek to compare themselves to someone similar. Their findings suggested that was not always the case and the researchers proposed that similarity does not mediate social comparison.

Psychological Effects of Social Comparison

From the literature we have deduced that there are many ways in which people use social comparison under various circumstances. Another approach to understanding social comparison is to delve into the psychological implications. Such as: What negative emotional consequences

are caused by social comparison? What is the aftermath of social comparison for young women? And what role does social media, and SMIs in particular, play?

In addition to a person's social media feed in general, the choice to follow SMIs can cause social comparison. Festinger (1954) suggests that to evaluate our abilities, we look toward others who are somewhat better than we are, but not too much better. Thus, SMIs may be more influential than celebrities because they are much more like us than the extremely rich and famous traditional celebrities. "Influencers occupy a unique place somewhere between our acquaintances and traditional celebrities" (Chae, 2018, p.13).

Beyond what research says about the impact of social media influencers on advertising sales, it is important to be aware of the implications of social media influencers on emotional consequences, behaviors, and perceived sense of self. The following literature describes the psychological effects of social comparison, as well as SMIs' role in comparison behaviors.

Individual Factors that Enhance Likelihood of Social Comparison

Any social information can cause social comparison (Wood, 1996). Thus, social comparison can be triggered in various ways, such as individual differences and gender. While in some instances, social comparison can be positive (de Vries et al., 2018), negative social comparison provokes stress, which subsequently results in negative emotional consequences (Lim & Yang, 2015). Instagram provides a platform where people are most often exposed to positive posts as others present their best selves. de Vries et al., (2018) found that viewing positive Instagram posts can affect the individual's mood in either a positive or negative way depending on the characteristics of the individual. Viewing positive posts of strangers led to negative emotional consequences for individuals who are more likely to compare themselves to others. However, for individuals who are not susceptible to social comparison, there was a

positive increase in mood when viewing a stranger's positive post. The authors suggest that processing information can be individual, and the implications for the information on social media sites depend on individual difference characteristics. These factors can also influence negative emotional consequences such as envy, shame and depression (de Vries et al., 2018).

Motivation to Follow. Individuals who are frequently exposed to social media and who follow SMIs with lifestyle posts were more susceptible to comparing their lives with the influencer's posts (Chae, 2018). One month later, the comparison behavior turned into to envy towards the influencer. The more a person was exposed to the influencer, the more information they had to compare with themselves. However, informative content did not produce comparison behaviors. This is because individuals have different goals with social media use. Those who were following influencers for further information about a given topic did not compare themselves to the influencer. However, those who focused on the lifestyle of the influencer were more likely to participate in social comparison.

Processing Styles. Processing is an important aspect of social comparison (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018). Yan and colleagues investigated different identity processing styles with ability social comparison versus opinion social comparison in the context of social media posts. The identity processing styles pertain to how individuals make sense of themselves and their environment. The study revealed that college freshmen adopt a diffusion-avoidant style when comparing their abilities with others via social media. A diffusion-avoidant style suggests that the students are "passive self-theorists" in which "they avoid actively processing identity-related information and allow situational demands (e.g., popularity, following the trend) to dictate their sense of self" (Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018, n.p.). However, social comparison of opinion did not lead to identity effects through identity processing styles.

Feedback-Seeking. Individuals with less popularity were especially susceptible in social comparison and feedback-seeking. Individuals with low popularity received less positive feedback from others and are less able to engage in downward comparison (comparison of people who are seen as beneath them). These individuals are less likely to post positive content and therefore more likely to receive negative feedback. When posting online content, the smaller audience size for less popular individuals is perceived as decreased peer support, which in turn leads to less life satisfaction (Nesi and Prinstein 2015).

The Causes and Consequences of Envy

Following social media influencers can lead to envy, but it is a process that happens over time. Chae (2018) investigated the role of SMIs and implications for women who follow them. Social influencers post aspirational lifestyles that are unattainable to the typical woman. Therefore, certain personality traits combined with social media use variables are likely to cause social comparison orientation, which then turns to envy. The social media use variables are exposure and content of social media and lifestyle, while the personality traits are public self-consciousness and self-esteem. “Due to their lack of confidence about the self (self-esteem) or their consciousness about others’ perception (public self-consciousness), they constantly evaluate themselves and, in this case, upward comparison with influencers led to negative psychological outcomes such as envy” (p.13).

In terms of content, practical information was less likely to induce envy, while “exposure to the luxurious life of influencers can provide more opportunity for individuals to engage in comparison between the self and influencers” (Chae, 2018, p.5). Lim and Yang (2015) found that when a person posts narcissistic content and the viewer is passive with cognitive miser behavior (putting less effort into thought), the viewer often participated in upward comparison,

which then turned to envy. Additionally, the viewer felt shame and helplessness when they felt a distance between their own self-concept and the concept of the social group.

(Consequences) What happens when a person feels envy? van de Ven (2017) focused on the emotion and motivation of envy and admiration in upward social comparison. Benign envy (those with envy that are motivated to better themselves) and admiration can cause individuals to want to better themselves. However, malicious envy can cause individuals to want to bring the person above them down to their level. Therefore, we can conclude that different types of envy can lead to different effects in social comparison.

Depression. Neuroticism, an onset of depression, causes individuals to make posts that present their ideal and false self on social media. Chow and Wan (2017) found individuals with a high level of neuroticism spent more time on Facebook and had higher depressive symptoms. Facebook use and overall well-being varied depending on levels of narcissism. Interestingly, social comparison did not have an effect on time spent on Facebook and envy. The authors suggest that some platforms are more likely to prompt social comparison and envy more in some platforms than others.

In effort to understand how to predict depressive symptoms, Nesi and Prinstein (2015) investigated the interaction of social comparison and interpersonal feedback seeking and how they interplay with individual characteristics. Social comparison and feedback-seeking were found to be associated with depressive symptoms. The online process in which individuals present their idealized self leads to passively viewing profiles in which they form negative comparisons with other users. Adolescents are especially at risk because they are in the identity development stage in their lives.

Gender Differences

Research suggests that social media implications are worse for girls than boys (Walton 2018). Specifically, using social media can cause poorer psychological well-being for young women (aged 14+). Young women use social media more than young men and are more likely to have comparison behaviors “which seems to be a root cause of social media’s negative effects” (Walton, 2018, n.p). Further, females had a stronger association between social comparison and feedback seeking than males and subsequently depressive symptoms (Nesi and Prinstein 2015). Young females are especially susceptible to social media influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In fact, non-traditional celebrities (bloggers, YouTube personalities, and infamous profiles) are more powerful than traditional celebrities. They are viewed as more credible and more relatable. Djafarova and Rushworth (2007) also noted that females tend to follow posts that contain positive images and encouraging reviews. Specifically, young women use social media for social comparison regarding the ideal body and life.

Ideal Body. The majority of studies examined did not focus on gender differences. Those that did looked at the impact of media exposure on young women. Tiggeman and McGill (2004) were interested in social comparison that develops from magazine advertisements. They focused in particular on body dissatisfaction, mood, and weight anxiety. In magazine advertisements, the idealized beauty is depicted as extremely thin. Women tend to use social comparison in comparing themselves to the idealized models. After viewing thin-ideal magazine advertisements, women had higher body dissatisfaction and weight anxiety. This finding was especially disturbing because these harmful effects occurred after only brief exposure (i.e. fewer images than would be seen in a typical fashion magazine). When looking at a type of picture, images that only showed body parts caused similar social comparison effects as full body

images. Body dissatisfaction was highest when the viewers were shown only body-part images. However, there was less brand recall for the advertisements that only show body parts.

Edited pictures are particularly harmful to a women's self-esteem (Bury 2017). In an effort to minimize negative effects of edited photos, researchers investigated disclaimers' impact on the psychological well-being of women. Specifically, Bury et al. (2017) compared disclaimer ads attached to images that were edited with participants' perception of the images. Results indicated that a disclaimer label indicating that the images were edited had no effect on perceived realism, social comparison, or body dissatisfaction. In all, exposure to an idealistic body type led to body dissatisfaction regardless of attempts to reduce negative effects with disclaimer label. This research suggests that current attempts to reduce negative effects of viewing edited images are not successful.

Some research has suggested that social comparison is automatic and happens without the person's knowledge or control (Chatard, Bocaage-Barthelemy, Selimbegovic, Guimond, 2017). Chatard et al. (2017) used media images of extremely thin women as high-level subliminal social comparison measures and asked participants to evaluate their body image anxiety. The study suggests social comparison can be activated without the individual's knowledge or understanding of the potential harmful implications.

Ideal Life. While media in general is known for depicting the perfect body, social media influencers showcase the ideal life as well. Research suggests that self-branding and the rise to "Instafame" (being famous on Instagram) can be unhealthy for social media users (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). The rise from ordinary social media user to that of a social media influencer has been described as a process of "self-branding," in which individuals "develop a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital" (Khamis et al. 2017, p.191).

Self-branding allows people to become famous through having a unique selling point that applies to specific target audiences. Through self-branding, an ordinary person can become a celebrity simply by cultivating a large target audience. However, Khamis et al. (2017) suggested that a problem with self-branding is that everyone is expected to self-brand in order to reach their true potential. Social media encourages not only participation of self-branding, but also the practice of self-branding. The consistency required to maintain a brand is impossible for an individual to live up to and likely enhances negative emotional consequences.

Self-branding also doesn't require a connection with those who are already powerful. Instead, an individual can begin their quest for “Instafame” through gaining visibility and attention, commonly done by posting carefully curated selfies. Khamis et al. (2017) posits, “Young people in particular appear convinced that good looks, good living and conspicuous consumption (through artfully composed images of outfits, make-up, meals, holiday resorts, etc.) warrant adoration and emulation” (p.199).

The Research Gap

Research on social comparison and parasocial relationships are primarily understood through their developed scales. Therefore, there is a gap in understanding these theories from the perspective of the individuals whom these theories involve. Specifically, for this study, it is necessary to gain insight from females who follow fashion SMIs.

Research states that the negative effects associated social comparison are almost always a result of upward comparison (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Research has presented many negative effects of social comparison, but there is a gap in understanding what the negative effects are in relation to young women who follow SMIs. This is specifically important in understanding how young women perceive social media influencers as they present new fashion

trends and products. Does the inspiration offer a positive or negative experience for females as they look up to and try to emulate the SMI?

If social comparison is the process of gathering information to make judgments about oneself (Wheeler, 2000), how does the constant influx of information from SMIs impact females? Research indicates that people make up false realities in order to make consistent social comparisons (Goethals & Klein, 2000). There is a gap in understanding the false realities that females are curating after interacting with SMI.

Overall, the most prevalent gap in the literature presented is the connection between parasocial relationships and social comparisons made after the relationship is developed. From a societal perspective, what are the emotional consequences of developing a relationship with a SMI? Does the relationship developed with the SMI play a role in how young women compare themselves with what they see on Instagram? The present research aspires to speak to this void.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

According to Belk (2017), there is more need than ever for qualitative advertising research. “While quantitative methods are good at answering factual questions like who, what, where, when, and how many, they are not good at answering questions about why consumers behave the way that they do and what brand and ad meaning they are constructing with marketers and among themselves” (Belk, 2017, p. 37). Qualitative research does not provide conclusive evidence on a given topic; however, it will give researchers insight and familiarity of the phenomenon they seek to understand to apply to future research (Sudha & Shenna, 2017).

This study employed a qualitative method to investigate the underlying social and psychological motives and implications of following SMIs on Instagram. With the emerging state of social media influencers, qualitative research becomes useful in understanding lived realities (Childers, Lemon, Hoy, 2019). For this study, the research focused on the lived realities of young women who follow fashion influencers. Fashion influencers were chosen because they make up a major portion of the influencer industry (Mediakix, 2017). Advertising, in this case SMI advertising, is a part of consumer’s daily lives. Therefore, it is important to study it in terms of how consumers lives are connected to it instead of using questions or scales to determine brand impact (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003).

Paradigm

A paradigm, or world view, is a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.170). This approach applies an interpretivist paradigm, in which truth is constructed by the individual’s personal experiences, beliefs, and stock of knowledge. “Interpretive research works

to record communicative events with responsiveness, public disclosure, and public evidence that textures human science with human faces” (Arnett, 2007, p.34).

The interpretivist paradigm, affiliated with post-modern thought, combines relativist ontology with subjectivist epistemology (Levers, 2013). The researcher’s intent in this paradigm is to make meaning of the world around them (Creswell, 2007, p.21). Thus, the researchers interpret their findings based on their own experiences and background. Further, “researchers who are using interpretivist paradigm and qualitative methods often seek experiences, understandings and perceptions of individuals for their data to uncover reality rather than rely on numbers or statistics” (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p.24). With interpretivism, we are able to explore the world we live in by seeing how individuals understand that world (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

Participants

Participants were recruited by purposive sampling and then snowball sampling. Purposive sampling, or judgment sampling, selects individuals based on certain criteria (Etikan, Musa, Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling used to select only 18-24-year old’s and make sure a diverse population was selected. Snowball sampling was used by asking participants to recommend friends. Purposive sampling is non-random sampling with no set number of participants required (Etikan et al., 2016). Snowball sampling is a sampling method in which the participants are recruited through contact information offered by other participants (Noy, 2008).

The study sample was women aged 18-24 who follow fashion SMIs. These women were heavy users of Instagram who have consistently followed a SMI. Heavy users of Instagram are defined as individuals who spend two or more hours a day on Instagram (Young, 2018). For this study, consistently following is defined as following a fashion influencer the social media influencer for longer than one month.

The sample was found by recruiting through fliers and social media posts, reaching out to personal contacts, and having participants recommend others. This was done in order to have as diverse of a participant pool as possible. The sample was drawn from a mixture of university students and young professionals. This population represents the target market for social media influencers (Statista, 2018), allowing the findings of meaning making and cultural dialogue to be more suggestive. As following SMIs is a very common activity for most young women, there was no issue in recruiting relevant informants. The following table provides a summary of participant information.

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Age	Location	Education	Occupation
21	Lafayette, LA	Master's Degree	Operations Manager
22	Knoxville, TN	Associate Degree	Student
23	Dana Point, CA	Bachelor's Degree	Digital Marketing Assistant
19	Knoxville, TN	High School	Student
18	Knoxville, TN	High School	Student
23	Tampa, FL	High School	Account Manager
21	Knoxville, TN	High School	Student
21	Washington D.C.	High School	Student Athlete
20	Washington D.C.	High School	Student
19	Knoxville	High School	Student
20	Washington D.C.	High School	Student
21	Knoxville	High School	Work Study Student

Research Design

This study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do young women's perceptions of a SMI impact how they view themselves?
- RQ 2: How do young women make meaning of their relationships with a SMI and their community?
- RQ3: How does a parasocial relationship with a SMI effect how young women see themselves in relation to how they see the SMI?

Data Collection

In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument in collecting data (Creswell, 2014). To understand the implications of following an SMI, this study conducted 12 in-depth interviews and developed themes through an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). Through in-depth interviews, the researcher guided the interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Interviews were chosen for this study because they are the best tool to explore individual processes of meaning making without it being swayed by the researcher's knowledge from the literature (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods differ from quantitative methods because the sample size cannot be predetermined through power analysis (Childers, Haley, McMillan, 2018). Instead, interviews were conducted until information redundancy is reached. Redundancy occurs when no new information is being uncovered from the interviewees (Haley, 1996). Therefore, the data predicts the number of participants that are necessary for the study.

Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participant was given an informed consent to sign. They were also able to ask any questions of the interviewer. In the interviews, women were

asked to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and relationships with fashion social media influencers that they follow. The interviews themselves were conducted via Zoom Professional in the researcher's home.

The interviews varied in length, lasting on average 28 minutes. In total, the interviews were 337 minutes, or 5 and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in a semi-scripted format with a series of 10 questions used to guide the conversation. Appropriate follow up and probing questions were used to allow the conversation to develop organically. The interview started with a grand tour question that asks how the individuals would define SMIs. After the interviewee was more comfortable about opening up, the researcher asked them more in-depth questions on their feelings about and relationships with SMIs. Upon completion of the interview, participants were given a \$10 Amazon gift card. In order to protect the interviewee's privacy, the Zoom Professional recording of the interview was transcribed as soon as possible and a non-disclosure agreement was obtained from the transcription service Rev.com.

Data Analysis

Coding. For the analysis of the interview transcript, the constant comparative method was used. Constant Comparison refers to a method in which the data at hand is compared to each new set of data. According to Boeije (2002), "The units should be chosen with great care and in a way that enables questions, new or otherwise, to be answered efficiently and effectively, thereby allowing the process of analysis and in particular the comparative process to progress" (p.23). Internal validity is increased when comparisons are thoroughly observed. The interviews were analyzed for descriptions of the relationship between the participant and SMIs and the implications of that relationship.

The initial stage of analysis begun when the researcher immersed themselves in the data in order to understand the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher read through the interview texts and made margin notes. Themes were created by systematically going through the data. Significant statements were pulled from the interview transcripts. The data was organized into meaningful groups and the initial stage resulted in 25 themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After the initial stage, data were analyzed to generate broader themes. The data were analyzed manually in order to identify segments. Then the themes were reviewed, named, and defined. The specifics of each theme were refined in order to create clear definitions and names, resulting in four final categories with subthemes for each. Finally, the data were reported by collecting specific examples of each theme and relating them back to the research questions and literature presented. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants identity.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through the analysis of 12 interviews, results revealed rich and descriptive findings. The women interviewed averaged to be 21 years old with an age range of 18-24. All the women indicated that they spend about two hours online and they follow fashion influencers on Instagram. Each interview was evaluated upon completion and compared to the next interview. The analysis revealed an initial 25 themes, leading to broader categories. Final themes were reviewed, named, and defined. The data are reported throughout the chapter using quotes to support each theme. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identity.

As an introduction to the interview, each participant was asked for their definition of an SMI. This question allowed for assessment that all participants showed an equitable understanding of what an SMI was before proceeding with the interview.

Jamie (24) referred to advertising when defining social media influencers.

I would say a social media influencer is someone who represents different products, brands all over their social media.

Stephanie (19) defines a SMI in terms of exposure.

I think the social media influencer is someone who has a platform and has a lot of followers. I don't necessarily think that they have to do something good or bad with it, but it's just someone who is in the eye of the media.

Claire (18) echoed a similar sentiment:

Someone who has a lot of followers on their account. Someone who people find impressionable.

Based on the women's general knowledge and experience with SMIs, the conversation

was broadened beyond the original context of fashion influencers. Outlined in the following chapter are the personal experiences of these young women stemming from interview questions relating to the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do young women’s perceptions of a SMI impact how they view themselves?
- RQ 2: How do young women make meaning of their relationships with a SMI and their community?
- RQ3: How does a parasocial relationship with a SMI effect how young women see themselves in relation to how they see the SMI?

Throughout this chapter, quotes describe the personal thoughts of the young women interviewed. These quotes highlight 4 major themes. The constant comparison method (Boeije, 2002) was used to narrow down to four final themes. The final themes are: (1) Friends IRL, (2) Inspirational, Aspirational, Motivational, (3) Compare and Despair, and (4) Using Without Abusing.

Friends IRL

The theme of friends in real life was a powerful theme throughout the interviews. The interviewees made statements like “we are bffs” or “I love her.” These women have a close connection with an SMI that is very comparable to any other of the friendships they have. The women expressed the perception of being real-life friends with an SMI in a variety of ways. The following section provides an overview of how the friendships with SMIs are formed as well as how the women view their friendships.

Getting to Know You

The relationship with the SMI begins with relatability. These women want to feel like they have things in common with the social media influencer as they would with their real-life

friends. Having things in common draws the women closer to the SMI and increases the strength of the perceived relationship.

Jenny (21) indicates that relatability is particularly important to her, especially when she feels as if the SMI has a genuine personality.

I try to find the ones who seem pretty genuine, not ones who always do ads or sponsored posts. And I feel like we have that relatability type of thing where you find someone who has the same interests and styles as you do. And I feel like I'm kind of trendy when it comes to like fashion and stuff. So, I feel like we kind of have the same types of likes and same stores that we like and stuff like that. So, there's some of them that I'm like, oh they seem really cool, let me follow them. Oh, I'm born to be their friends. Then there are some and they're just edited to have a lot of drama on the show and I'm like, no, I'm not going to follow you because you annoy me.

Hanna (22) discusses the importance of being able to relate to the SMI that she follows, especially in terms of work environment.

I like to see people that I can relate with. Like if you're running around with big muscles and you post your selfies at two o'clock in the afternoon, clearly you don't have like a nine to five job. I'm not saying you don't work hard; I'm just saying I don't relate with that. So, it's hard, you know.

Claire (18) commented on the perceived personality of her favorite SMI. She looks for personality traits similar to her own.

She just has a very funny sense of humor and that's kind of like my friends. I have a sense of humor and that's just something I value in my friends.

Stephanie (19) looks for similarity between herself and influencers as well. She wants to follow someone who she can draw inspiration from through their likenesses.

I tend to follow a lot of people my age just because they're in my stage of life. It's going to be people that have similar fashion. Cause like definitely Emma Chamberlain [the SMI] and all of them are like my age. And then there are the fitness people. It's just people who I have like something in common with. I love to go to the gym every day. Like, that's something I love. It's a stress relief for me. And it's like finding things that we have in common, I guess. But most of the fitness people are going to obviously not be my age, but I guess someone I can look towards

Claire (18) also commented on following SMIs that are similar in terms of working out.

She does a lot of weight training and I also do that, and I just seem to like the lifestyle kind of aspect of Instagram. Like as opposed to beauty or comedy. She's more of a lifestyle influencer and that's kind of the influencers I follow.

Emily (21) feels in touch with an SMI that shares her hobbies and lifestyle as well.

Like Carly [the SMI, for example, she loves to read, and I love to read. Like she has her own separate Instagram all about books. And she posts once she starts a new book or finishes one. I love that and she loves to bake, and I love to bake. I think the people I like the most are the people who have similar interest as me and I see have the same priorities as me. So, I'm not really like going out person, and I'm not a super socialite kind of person. Like I would never go out on a Saturday night. I like staying in and going to the movies, reading books, like those kinds of things. I tend to follow people who are calmer, and I can tell they post their private life on a Saturday night, they'll be like reading a book. And I kind of like seeing that more.

Several of the women mentioned YouTube as a way to feel a deeper connection with the SMI. YouTube allows the women to see the mannerisms of the SMI and hear them talk. This goes beyond the curated photos on Instagram.

Claire (18) explains:

I think just being able to see them is very different than to seeing picture cause seeing the video, it's like start to finish. And I guess that just kind of helps me in terms of like working out. Like if I was watching a Whitney [the SMI] video it'd be working out like posture and stuff and how she does it versus a picture you can't get as much from a picture, I don't think.

Jenny (21) prefers YouTube over Instagram because she feels as if she can connect to them better on the YouTube platform.

I feel like it's better on YouTube because I feel like you can actually see their real personality and kind of like behind the scenes and it's not just like an edited photo with like a pre-written caption, you know?

I Learned Something From You

The women used their SMI relationships to learn about new products. Hanna (22) discussed how her friendship with the social media influencer enticed her to purchase a product that she wouldn't ordinarily be interested in.

I would never pick that up. I would never ask anybody; do you know about using this? I would never even give that kind of product the time of day, but because it came up on my [Instagram] feed and somebody was showing me, you know, somebody with great skin and a great smile and just like she's, she's my friend. And that sort of mentality like was showing me how to use it. I sat there and I watched it. And so now I'd have product

knowledge of something that I don't think I would have normally had. So, I definitely learn stuff I think from social media influencers. I'll see where they're going or where they have been. You know, trips or things like that. I'm like, wow, I would have never thought about traveling there or, you know, that kind of thing.

Claire (18) echoed a similar sentiment referring to how a SMI inspired her to purchase a product.

So, I bought the James Charles palette the second it came out because I love him. So, I was just wanting to support him and so I bought it. And if I didn't follow him or have a close connection with him, I don't think I would have bought it.

Good Things for You Bring Me Joy

Stephanie (19) feels genuine excitement from the successes that the SMIs post about.

Seeing good things happen to the SMI brings her joy as it would if it was happening to one of her real-life friends.

I think I feed off other people's happiness and stuff, so I see a post about like this is happening in their life. And it's something personal to them. I don't know why that makes me excited too. It's almost like a friend. I get excited for them. I'm like, oh I'm so glad. Or like that's a huge thing that's so exciting for them that that's happening. I don't know I'm emotionally attached to them and I'm like, yay. Like that's awesome.

Emily (21) reiterates this point:

I think like when an influencer announces that they're engaged or they're having a baby, they bought a house or something like that. Like usually I'm like, Oh, that's so good for them. And like talk to people I know who follow them. Like people I know in real life. I'll ask, 'did you see so and so's having a baby?' And then we're always like, yay, that's so good.

Being Friends with You Means Being Friends with Your Friends

Katie (23) strengthens her bond with the SMI by following the SMI's friends and significant others. Additionally, she was eager to meet the SMI to confirm that friendship. After the interview, Katie followed up to ecstatically tell me that she finally got to meet her favorite influencer.

I think she posted about her boyfriend and I was like, Oh, who's this guy? And wanted to look at him. It's kind of like an ongoing joke within our friend group. Like, Oh my gosh, she's here, we have got to go meet her. I know that she would want to hang out, that kind of thing. It's definitely a joke and everybody within our friend group knows of her and can reference her in the conversation like, Oh, that's something Salty [the SMI] you would wear or something like that.

I'm So Happy When You Respond Back

Relationships are different between SMI and their followers from previous parasocial relationships because of the ability to have two-way communication. Some of the interviewees highlighted their joy of reaching out to the SMI and getting a response back. The reply strengthened their bond even further.

Claire (18) explained:

There's this one girl, she's kind of like a mental health influencer and she's responded to me. Oh my gosh, I felt so good. Like I'm so happy. I felt like a lot more connected to her because a lot of these influencers, they have like millions and millions of followers and they don't reply because they just have so many like comments. But the fact that she took time out of her day to acknowledge me made me feel so good.

Samantha (23) had a similar experience being able to relate to where the SMI lives.

She somewhat lives near where my school was and she commented back onto her story of things that we could relate about, like what she would do in the community when she lived there and all that stuff. Like we were becoming BFFs.

Jill (19) felt particularly close to social media influencers when they do giveaways to fans. She likes to feel that the SMI care about their fans.

It was a post where they were giving away some of their stuff to their fans. They were giving away clothes and jewelry and stuff. They were like just giving out stuff to fans, sending the stuff to their fans. And I guess that made me feel good because it made me feel like they cared about their fans.

Inspirational, Aspirational, Motivational

I Came. I Saw. I Contoured: Inspiration and Motivation to be Like SMIs

Exposure to SMIs can be aspirational. SMIs can give you ideas of what to look like, what to wear, and what your life could be like. The women interviewed shared their experiences with using SMIs as motivation, as well as how the SMIs inspire them to emulate their success.

Fashion. Hanna (22) shared that she uses the SMIs as a source of fashion inspiration. The SMIs help her stay on top of trends and current styles.

I mean that's kind of how I stay on top of like what the girls my age are wearing is because, you'll see, oh, we're doing this style right now, which is something that I would have not considered in style had I not seen 30 to 40 plus social media influencers wearing. Oh, okay, I guess we're doing, you know, the big sweaters and leggings and boots this year. It does help me stay on trend and kind of understand where trends are coming from because I mean I'm not out of the loop, but just like, I'll see stuff that girls are wearing and I'm like, is that what we're doing now? Is that what's in? Is that what's

cool? And then also social media influencers do the same thing. And I'm like, okay, yeah, it's just staying on brand or staying on trend of what is going on in fashion.

Holly (21) also echoes that statement:

I will say if I'm looking at like social media or like their whole body thing or if I'm looking at like what they wear, like shoes and things like that. Like I definitely try to model things after people I see on social media

Jill (19) also uses SMI for clothing and beauty information.

Usually it's just like clothing inspiration because I like the way some of them dress. So usually I would go to their page for clothing motivation. Sometimes they seem like they kind of have perfect hair, perfect skin. Sometimes it motivates me to work harder and try harder to not look like them per se, but to try harder to get clear skin and have long hair and things like that.

Jenny (21) uses SMIs for inspiration as well.

Most of the time I use Instagram to like kind of get inspiration photos. So, if I am looking for like a cute outfit or something, I'll kind of see like, Oh, what's like trendy right now? What are like other people wearing. With makeup, I'll see, Oh, what technique is this girl doing? Or, like what new product is she using? Like reviews and stuff is it any good? That type of thing.

Jenny further stated:

Sometimes I'll, you know, purposely put on a cute outfit just because I know I'm going to go take a picture that day. Not going to lie.

Business/Career. Jamie (24) found herself being inspired from a business perspective, or more specifically, learning how to be a “boss babe.”

I feel like you kind of just learn how to be a boss babe. Honestly. I mean like just keep on making money and this is their job to post. Like the one that I follow, she does all kind of Amazon hauls and I mean you learn kind of how to make a business on your own type thing with just your social media, which I think is pretty cool. And putting yourself out there and just doing things that other girls and women out there want to see type thing. And loving yourself, because sometimes they go online with is no makeup, which I appreciate here and there.

Samantha (23) has a similar response:

So, since I started following them [SMIs], I kind of talk more to the camera. I don't know if my voice fluctuates as much as they do when I'm filming an Instagram story. But sometimes influencers have a certain tone they use kind of like up and down like a news anchor just to keep the interest.

Motivation. Stephanie (19) uses SMI to dream. The SMIs inspire her goals and aspirations.

I think they give you a good goal of what you want to do, what you want to be like, how you want to be one day. And fashion like the way you aspire to look and be put together. I think it's a lot of great ideas and creatively helps you visualize stuff. But I also think it's important to be realistic on where you're at, which I think is where a lot of people have a hard time. Just being realistic with everything but also like being able to dream, I guess.

Holly (21) uses the SMI for motivation.

100% if I see my favorite like athlete or like, Kylie Jenner or something that they post, like inspirational quotes or stories, like success stories. I think it helps me like stay

grounded and be like, well they went through it too so I can go through it or things like that.

Jill (19) uses SMI to motivate her to achieve her goals. She uses their roadmap in effort to have what they have.

I think I learned how to start from nothing and then end up like really successful because a lot of them, you know, they kind of really started I guess how all of us start and then they ended up being really famous just by like maybe starting a YouTube channel for example. So, I guess I learned that it is possible to do it if you just have the motivation for it and really want it.

Jill (19) went on to explain:

I think I've used them as a way for like, I guess goals I have for the future. I can use them as inspiration for that.

Compare and Despair

R U OK? Friends with Unhealthy Social Media Relationships

In every interview, the women shared stories about their friends' unhealthy experiences with social media and SMIs. Being able to share information about someone else allows the interviewee to feel like they don't have to critique their own experiences as much. It is sometimes easier to see the consequences when looking at someone around you rather than yourself.

Addiction and Obsession. Samantha (23) referred to the constant desire to be exposed to SMIs. She shared that it impacts what her friends buy and how they feel about their appearance. She also related it back to herself and suggested she might have an addiction with social media as well.

I don't watch too much reality TV, but the ones like the Kardashians and that kind of side of celebrity influencer, it's too much and they [her friends] aim to be like that. So, they constantly buy all of their stuff, like Kylie's lip kits or just like all this other stuff. They put so much money into it and they try to post all these things, get the perfect lighting and delete it if nobody likes it within five minutes. So, it's just like kind of unhealthy. And well, luckily one of my friends who had it super unhealthy, she has not been on Instagram in like a year and a half and she's doing a lot better, which is cool. I wish I could do that sometimes, but then it's like an addiction. I go back and forth. I'll delete it for like six months and then I'll be like obsessed with it and then delete it again. And it's terrible. It's like an addiction.

Holly (21) has an unhealthy friend who never stops thinking about the SMIs she sees on the internet.

Unhealthy, because it's just like every single day, every single minute, they're like, did you see what Beyoncé had on? Or like did you see what Beyoncé tweeted? Or do you see this picture of her? And things like that. So, it's just always on the front of her mind.

Psychological, Physical and Financial Harm. Stephanie (19) discussed her roommate's unhealthy relationship with SMI by talking about negative relationship with fitness posts.

I don't know if I can reference my roommate in this, but my roommate, we're having to work through that because she follows a lot of fitness people. We are both really into fitness and stuff. And so, I think it's different in the way we look at it. And like for her it's very negative and like I've had to talk to her about that because she looks at these people in their appearance. Saying, oh I wish I looked like that. And I've had to sit her down and be like, okay, but the difference is that's not your body type. And that's not my body type.

So, neither of us are ever going to look like that. So just like realizing that. And I think that's really hard for a lot of people to do. I think that that's where the negativity with media and all this has come from. That has changed a lot of people, that perception of their physical appearance because I think it has different standards. And I think that people aren't realistic about looking at themselves and being like, okay, but I'm not like that. I need to find what is best for me. I guess.

Claire (18) talked about a friend's unhealthy thoughts about her appearance after exposure to SMIs.

She just is always on social media and constantly is trying to alter her appearance, sometimes even in an unhealthy way so that she can look like these people. I think that she's lacking a lot of self-confidence and she's trying to gain this all confidence, making herself look like these people. But in the end, she's finding that it's not helping her. I think that if she just embraced who she was and took a break from social media, she would realize how unimportant that is in the grand scheme of life.

Jenny (21) shares that her friend has financial issues because of keeping up with SMIs, to the extent of changing her appearance, lifestyle, and personality.

I know one of my really good friends will spend money that she doesn't have just so that she can buy freaking clothes that the newest influencer has. And she just models her whole personality and stuff like that off of them and sometimes she comes across as really fake because she doesn't really have her own style or personality or anything. She just tries to look how everyone else looks. She got lip fillers and now her lips look crazy. I don't think that's a very positive relationship. It's pretty damaging to her mental health because she just wants to look like them so bad. But she doesn't, you know.

The Blurring of Fantasy and Reality: Negative Comparison with SMI

Similar to examples of friends with a negative relationship with SMI, most of the women interviewed recalled a time when they had negative experiences when they were younger. However, they indicated that they had learned from their experiences and changed their habits. They noted that social media and SMIs are especially dangerous for high school aged women. Nevertheless, the women did admit that they still compare themselves to the social media at their current age in some way or another.

Samantha (23) shared her thoughts about the implications of younger women looking at SMIs and how it still plays into insecurities.

If I were younger, like in high school, it would impact me more. But in recent years, I've just started to like, I wouldn't say not care, because I still am insecure in some parts of it. But I'm learning to not care as much since I've played a lot in Photoshop and I've seen the backends of things as far as how some of it's not real and the lighting has to be perfect. I'm learning to not be so hard on myself. But, if I were a few years younger, like I said, it would impact me severely, I think.

Hanna (22) shared a sentiment of addiction and obsession:

Probably about two years ago I was an Instagram fiend and was all about likes and filters and just stories and just everything that Instagram could offer. I was obsessed with the analytical part of it too. I downloaded an app to see who was following me and who unfollowed me, it was just like crazy. It was kind of nutty. And then this semester, I'm kind of feeling a little old and I was thinking, you know, I spent so much of my time on here. My iPhone will tell me how much time I spend on social media and Instagram, and I am

like what am I gaining from it? So, I honestly have kind of taken a break from Instagram and deleted my app for a little bit.

Hanna (22) continued to explain that her obsession with social media turned to envy:

I think that's something that even today, at 22, I still kind of struggle with and that was one of the reasons I did kind of want to limit myself on Instagram because I was starting to kind of get obsessed with it. Obviously social media is huge and apps to filter and edit and just like put yourself out there in a totally different light. And I mean that's totally, it's an art form in my opinion. Like, you know, Photoshop and that sort of thing. That's awesome that you have the ability to do that. But I started getting like, Oh that girl is so much prettier than me and she's so much skinnier. She's actually got way better clothes, or her boyfriend is so cute. Like I just started getting a rapid cycle of looking at it. A lot of these girls were my age or girls I went to school with or had classes with and I was starting to become a little bit of a mean girl online. I would look at this stuff and be like, she's so fake. Or that's not really what she looks like in real life. I guess I got kind of caught up in whatever story other people were trying to tell and I was thinking, you know, that's just not a healthy place to be because that's not what social media is intended for in my opinion. Like it's not supposed to be.

Also discussing envy, Samantha (22) shares her experience with following SMI.

It seems like they get to travel and do all these fun things when I am not a super huge fan of my job right now. So, it's kind of envious.

Recalling a post that impacted her negatively, Jill (19) shared how she felt envy of the SMI's travels and friendships.

There was this one post where one of influencer, posted a trip with her friends to France and France is always somewhere I wanted to go. So, it kind of made me feel sad because I wish I could go to France with friends because I don't really have any friends either. So that's one of the posts that made me sad.

Hanna (22) wishes to emulate the content that SMI post. Specifically, she wants the social media presence.

I'm not super into taking 400 pictures and a part of me wishes that I did. It's just that I wish that I had the ability to put on a social media presence or brand because I think it's such a cool thing and such a cool tool, but I just haven't been able to do it. Like I just really haven't had the time or the interest in doing it. But it does make me feel a little bad cause I'm just like, ah, you know, they're so pretty, they're so perfect and I am not doing so hot on social media. I've even asked people like, could you help me? Like get my social media looking cool. Cause I mean I literally just get the bare minimum of likes and that kind of thing.

The constant comparison lead to the women feeling negative about their appearances and lifestyle after being exposed to SMIs. Referring to her favorite SMI, Claire (18) stated:

She's gorgeous and she's super in shape. I definitely find myself comparing myself to her a lot. Cause she's literally so perfect. So, but then other times I'm like, well, she's her and I'm me. I feel like a lot of times they're just setting unrealistic expectations for women in specific. I guess I kind of just find myself being more judgmental about myself or about other people.

Hilary (20) discussed how the constant comparison makes her feel and how it is affecting her life overall and giving her a fear of missing out on a better life.

This actually kind of gets into the reason why I actually stopped using Instagram for a while when I came into college. It was because I definitely did not feel like I had anything in common with those people. And if anything for a long time I really felt like influencers and social media in general made me constantly feel like there was something I was missing out on, if that makes sense. They were living some life that was completely unattainable to me and that was just a somewhat of an unsettling feeling. And after a while it became something that I was just focused too much on as opposed to like focusing on my own life and enjoying what I was doing. It became something where I just felt like if I was going onto the app and I didn't necessarily leave Instagram. Going about my day. I was thinking, wow, I wish I could be doing that, or I wish I could be like her. Why am I not like this? It felt like I was nitpicking at myself as opposed to just looking at content and then leaving.

Jenny (21) mentioned times where she has felt insecure as well.

Sometimes I see them like going on all these trips and they have these big houses and I'm like, wow. Like sometimes I kind of feel like the loser, you know, I don't, I don't like have like a huge house and like all these extravagant trips and designer handbags and stuff. So sometimes I feel kind of like, wow, I wish I had more money.

Body Dysmorphia. Body issues were also a topic of conversation in the interviews. The women felt like they needed to have bodies similar to what they see online. They shared the unrealistic expectations following SMIs gave them and how they aspired to be like them. Hanna (22) had the desire to look like a SMI on her own Instagram account, to the point where she photoshopped her body to look more idealistic.

“I am by no means a professional photographer, editor or anything like that. I mean, I'll slap a filter on there, especially if you're not looking very tan. Once, I made a mistake. Well, not really, I guess I'll just go ahead and share it. But I was obsessed with this idea of my butt wasn't big enough. So, I went in and edited my butt on one of my Instagram photos and I felt so self-conscious that somebody was going to find me out. Like I clearly, I'm not a good editor. Like that's clearly Photoshop. And so, I immediately took it down, but that kind of got me to think too, like, Oh why are you like this? You know? But yes, I have edited my photos and manipulated them to make myself kind of into something that I definitely am not.

Samantha (23) reflects on her favorite SMI's body compared to her own:

I'd like to copy and paste her body onto me. So just like super comparing them, which kind of sucks. But then like once that feeling kind of starts to sink in, I leave their page immediately just because it is a mental thing. Before I would just like keep scrolling and scrolling through their page and it was like deeper and deeper into insecurities. I was like, I need to leave.

Samantha (23) continues:

Some of the ones I follow if they post a swimsuit picture or like every now and then there's a lingerie pic, I'm like, Whoa, I see a bunch of guys are commenting on this. And then I go into insecure girlfriend mode. Like what if he [her boyfriend] looks at that? So, then I just kind of begin to rip myself apart. I kind of bring myself together and just remember that he's the one I'm going to be coming home to and he'll be coming home to me. So just kind of having to take a mental step back.

Jenny (21) explained how SMIs make her feel about her appearance.

Oh, I feel awful. I'm trying to be fit, but like they are just like in crazy shape and doing these super difficult workouts. They have like great bodies and I'm like, wow. Like I don't look like that. So, I guess I'm ugly.

Also referring to her body, Hilary (20) discussed the posts that made her feel the worst.

I think the worst ones are probably vacation pictures in the middle of wintertime. I feel bad about my arms especially. I have a lot of like scars and things like that. And it's gotten worse. I've gone through different struggles with my skin. But I think a lot of times like super basic pictures. Especially when it's summertime it can be difficult for me oftentimes when I don't look like that. And I think, oh wow, I wish that that could be how I look. I was probably worse when I was for coming into school just because there was a lot of changes that I was going through. So, yeah, I think vacation pictures, like bikini photos, where you're like, Oh, that's so cute. And after thinking about it I'm like, Oh well you can't wear that, or you can't wear this kind of mentality. Yeah, I think that that definitely comes up when you see very idealistic photos.

Jenny (21) recalls a specific celebrity that gives her a bad perception of her body.

Like every time Kylie Jenner posts a picture, I see her and her body's just insane. I'm like, wow, I'm never going to look like that. And she like had a child. So, I'm like, wow, I feel bad about my body now. Her body is insane and I'm just like, you have all this money, you have a great body, and you're living in this giant house. I'm never going to be a billionaire. And it sucks cause she's like my age too.

Using Without Abusing

There was a strong theme of women being particular about who they choose to follow.

They opted to follow women who made them feel positive about themselves and were more open

and honest about their daily struggles. Having this transparency allowed the women to be more comfortable with themselves and the things that they are going through. The interviewees prefer SMIs who break down the perception of perfection and allow the women to relate to them on a more venerable and personal level.

Emily resonates with SMI that are realistic and just one step above. She doesn't want to compare herself to a lifestyle that is unattainable.

She lives a lifestyle, but she also, it's just realistic. And just like one step above. So, she gives you like ideas that are actually attainable but just so that you can elevate your life a little bit. I found the ones that I don't love that I follow are the ones who just have this extremely glamorous lifestyle that I will never be able to achieve. I am not in that time of my life right now. So, I liked her because she is like pretty much attainable.

Samantha (23) shared that it depends on what you look at. SMIs can make her feel insecure but can also inspire her to feel good about herself.

It's like a win, lose situation. You feel super positive sometimes, but every now and then you are looking at a screen that's obviously not real. So, then it is kind of a setback and then the insecurities kind of kick in. So, it's like you kind of have to pick your battles on what you're looking at on social media as far as the influencers. The positive things are definitely just like finding ways to make yourself feel better about yourself. And that could be as simple as throwing a cute dress on that you normally wouldn't have worn because you wouldn't have picked that style out.

Katie (23) appreciates a SMI that goes through similar tribulations as her.

She's very transparent about like, she finally got her hair done and it takes extensions. It takes all of this because she is finally getting hair regrowth. So just her being very

transparent about the things that she does with her body. I think that that's really body positive. I see how she will be super skinny and losing weight because she's stressed. And I get the same way, like losing hair, losing all of that. And so, it just kind of validates my own feelings of like, Hey, you can be stressed out and you know, these kinds of things happen. It's kind of like confirming comfortability in your body.

Claire (18) also explained how an SMI has motivated her through mental health and stress related problems.

When she started her health and fitness journey, she was in a really bad place like depression. I can feel that. I kind of relate to her that working out is a way to relieve stress. She's super encouraging to her followers. So, every once in a while, she'll post and be like a motivational post and I'll kind of take that to heart.

Hilary (21) has a similar point of view, recalling being able to relate to some of the struggles the SMIs go through in their real lives:

When you find people that are like authentic about their experiences. And I think it is kind of a better part of social media is people can come out and say, I've gone through this, this and this. And there are times where I remember reading that and being like, Oh wow. Like I always thought it was just me experiencing that. But when you read that kind of stuff, you're like, Oh, okay. Like it's good to know that other people experience things and I think it's even better to know that someone who seems like they have a perfect life; I can relate to you in that sense.

Claire (18) uses her favorite SMI to pick her up on days that she is feeling down.

I'm watching some of her videos and then she's funny. So, they make me laugh. I'll watch some of her YouTube videos or she also has like really motivating posts. So, I'll go look at those. I have some of them saved to my profile so I can go look at them.

Jenny (21) shares her techniques to avoid body dysmorphia, specifically filtering who she follows.

I look for pretty genuine ones and I know for me personally, it's caused like a lot of body, like dysmorphia and stuff. Because you see them on Instagram and they're like perfect and you're like, Whoa, like I don't look like that. So that kind of gets me heated. But I just try to follow like accounts that are like body positivity and like nice, nice people, you know.

Resonating a similar feeling, Samantha (23) prefers when SMIs open up about their insecurities and things that they are going through.

There are some that will get into the insecurities of themselves. For example, one, she has psoriasis, which is totally hidden, but she shows her daily routine that she has to do to make her skin like look normal-ish to her. So, I like when they are vulnerable because that makes the audience more intrigued. Like, yes, she'll have those like crappy comments from some people that are totally mean. There is one that I just started following. She had breast cancer, so she had her breast removed, but she like posts all these pictures. It sounds weird and kind of selfish but makes me feel more secure within myself.

The same sentiment rings true for Jenny (21) as well.

I like a lot of like body positivity ones and like normally they'll have a motivational quote or something. And it's like I love like my stretchmarks or something. I can assess like

myself off of that and be like, Hey, like I love this about me. Cause, you know, they're being positive about it.

Hilary (21) is motivated by SMIs that exude positivity and confidence. She uses the SMIs as a source of inspiration.

I've tried to start focusing on accounts that influence in a more positive way. So as opposed to looking at them and being like, wow, I'll never look like that. I'd never be like that. It's like, Oh, it's cool. I like how comfortable she is being herself. Or, you know, like, that's great. I want to be like that in that sense. In a way where it's not necessarily something I want to copy, but the way that person carries themselves is something that I hope to emulate.

Holly (21) also likes to see positivity from SMIs, particularly when making a positive impact on the world.

Just seeing people be involved. Like the fires and things that are going on or like the natural disasters that are going on around the world. I like seeing those influencers, how they feel about it and like what they actually promote.

Resonating the same feelings of positivity, Hilary (21) learned to appreciate her individuality and appreciate herself for who she is.

I think the biggest thing that I've learned, especially from the women that I follow, is really kind of what I mentioned earlier. Just about appreciating yourself and like owning that identity and recognizing that that's unique and good in its own right and that you're not meant to be specifically like anyone else. So, I think that's probably the biggest lesson that I've learned. Kind of taking my experience from negative to positive and seeing like, Oh, it's great that person is like that, but it's also good that I'm like me.

Samantha (23) also shared how SMIs positively influence how she relates to herself. She uses social media to self-evaluate and has found that using social media has brought about an optimistic perspective.

I think I've learned a lot about myself ever since social media kind of exploded, which sounds weird, but just comparing myself to others makes me kind of narrowed down who I am as a person. So, I think it is kind of beneficial. Like some people like totally hate on social media, which sometimes gets super unhealthy. But I also think it's good to sometimes compare yourself.

Jenny (21) clarifies that the feelings of positivity depend on the account that you choose to follow.

Like some of them are really good and then some of them make me like feel self-conscious and like a loser. But then some of them inspire me and make me feel better about who I am as a person. Because there's very different people that you can follow and, and I do still follow some of the more toxic kind of accounts. And so, I think it just depends on all who you follow. Like what you like to look at as a person and how you want to feel.

Jenny (21) shared positive aspects of social media as well, stating that it has given her confidence with who she is.

I've honestly have learned a lot about just being confident with who you are through a lot of the social media influencers. Like a lot of body positivity stuff because like, you know, like I didn't really have that growing up.

Hilary (21) gives insight on how to stay positive and change the way you perceive the Internet.

I think one of the biggest changes for me was recognizing that it was having that effect. Kind of realizing that I wasn't the only person that was struggling with that, especially

the age that I was and am now. So, I think it has a lot to do with my relationship with myself too. I'm a bit older, so the way that I view myself is changing and I'm more competent in some senses. So, I think that definitely helps. Because it's not all social media. I can use it now and feel a bit more comfortable. Like there was a degree of blame to put on the way that I was treating myself and thinking of myself as well. I think that's probably the biggest change. Not that it's perfect now, but I have a better understanding of who I am and my relationship with myself.

Thrifting

Many of the women mentioned that they don't always buy the products that the SMIs are selling. Often the women look to the SMI for style advice and then purchase a more affordable style elsewhere. Therefore, they can be inspired by what they see in a way that doesn't lead to negative consequences. A common topic of conversation for these women was thrifting. Katie (23) explained how she buys similar items but enjoys thrifting versus buying exactly what the SMI is wearing.

I've wanted it and like bought stuff like maybe like, oh this is similar. Like thinking about clothes wise, like this is like kind of that style. Just because I shop thrift so much or like make my stuff. I kind of like can use it as like a guiding thing, you know. I kind of always use it as kind of like a guide. Like, Oh, I like what they're doing. I like how they're doing this. I can do something to emulate that.

Samantha (23) shares the same feelings:

I just use them as my look book because they probably, you know, get their stuff for free or they shop at like high-end places. So, I kind of mix and match those ideas and then I'll go to Target or TJ Maxx or those kinds of stores and put it together for like hundreds of

dollars less that way. Got to be cute on a budget. Yeah, it's what everyone's all about, we all do it. I do it too. It's like, yeah, that looks good, but I'm going to try to find it affordable for sure.

Emily (21) appreciates a SMI that will post affordable options that are similar to the expensive things that they post.

Carly [SMI] just bought a new house. And she posts like things that are super expensive that I love and then she'll also post the more affordable options. Like picking out the best thing that Walmart that has come out with in the last few weeks. And then I'll send them to my mom with the Instagram messaging feature where you can share someone's post or story and she lives near a really good Walmart. And so, I'll always send it to her and be like, Hey, pick this up the next time you are at Walmart and I'll pay you back. So, I end up like getting the exact same thing they posted a lot of times.

Hilary (20) also wants to purchase more affordable options.

I'm sure there was a time that I saw clothes or an outfit and I'm like, Oh, that's really, that's really cute. Like I probably can't afford that version of it, but I can afford something similar to that shirt, those pants or something like that.

Stephanie (19) also uses SMIs to inspire fashion choices, as well as to inspire her own creativity.

But she still wants to stay within budget.

I feel like when I look at their fashion, it kind of creates creativity and I look at my collection board and I'll see jeans and a top that would look cute together. I love to thrift, so I'll try to go to a store and find that specific stuff at a thrift store. It helps me target what I'm going to go look for, I guess. And it kind of like helps me put my outfits together.

Emily (21) had a similar response:

I think they make me feel like I can take the things that they're doing on their Instagram and apply them to my life and what works best for me in my price range. And I can make my life better or more fulfilled or better decorated I guess in my case. And I can kind of just take these high reaching things that they are doing and apply them to my life in a way that makes my life better.

Summary of Findings

In all, the findings suggested that the women develop strong relationships with SMI. Relatability is a strong driving force in developing that relationship. The SMI becomes a person the women look up to in order to guide their fashion and lifestyle inspirations. However, constant exposure to the SMI can lead to unhealthy comparisons, which have negative emotional, physical, and financial implications. Yet there is still hope for the women as they are becoming aware of their unhealthy habits and making changes of what they expose themselves to.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The following chapter draws upon the research questions to discuss the findings. These findings are then discussed via theoretical, consumer welfare, and industry implications.

How Do Young Women's Perceptions of an SMI Impact How They View Themselves?

When comparing SMIs to themselves, the women focused more on the physical appearance of the SMI than anything else. Many of the young women believed that the SMI looked perfect in an unattainable way. Body comparison was a frequent topic of conversation. Women described comparing their bodies to the SMI as “feeling awful” and wanting to “copy and paste” the SMI’s body on to them, even to the point that they edited their own pictures to make their bodies look more idealistic. One woman mentioned that she would get jealous because she was afraid her boyfriend would see the pictures of SMIs’ bodies. In line with previous research, Chae (2018) suggests that envy is something that happens over time. Thus, consistent exposure to the SMI may be evoking the sense of jealousy.

Several of the women mentioned the celebrity Kylie Jenner who became a self-made billionaire in her early 20’s. These women indicated that they check her account daily to “check in on her”. She posts very idealistic photos and has a very strong following. All the women who brought her up felt bad about themselves one way or another. Women particularly brought up her body and income. They felt like a “loser” for not having a life similar to hers and not being able to look like her, “even though she just had a kid”.

In all, physical appearance appeared to be the most prevalent comparison in social media in which women felt pressure to emulate what they saw. The way we study social comparison

should be built around the understanding that physical appearance can be the most triggering for young women on social media. This supports previous findings that women find themselves lacking when comparing themselves to idealized images which leads to the negative psychological consequences (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Travel and lifestyle comparison were brought up as well. Women described feeling bad that they could not go on fancy trips or live in a giant mansion. Interestingly, they were okay with their current lifestyles in which they didn't have those things but aspired to have them in the future. They used the SMIs to motivate themselves to work hard, so they can emulate the lifestyles of the SMIs as they grow older.

A strong majority of the women highlighted a time in their past in which they were very unhappy with themselves due to social comparisons on social media. Many of them discussed an addiction to Instagram and constant need to edit their own photos. They felt “ugly” and like they needed to alter their appearance in some way or another.

For many of the women who described negative SMI effects, they often mentioned it was coupled with looking at Instagram obsessively. One of the women mentioned that the act of incessantly scrolling through Instagram lead her “deeper and deeper” into her insecurities. This insinuates that constant exposure to SMI (daily and hourly updates), may exacerbate the negative effects of comparison. Specifically, the more the women see idealistic photos, the more the photos become “normal” to them. Chae (2018) highlights this in the finding that individuals who are frequently exposed to social media are more likely to compare their lives with SMI’s posts. The women may be becoming desensitized to the fact that the images they see are not always a realistic interpretation of what life looks like.

The women explained that as they got older, they felt more confident in who they were. They were better at understanding what affects them negatively on social media and learned to stay away from it. They also began to understand how editing and Photoshop work, which made them realize that the SMI may be altering their appearance in an unrealistic way. Based on the definitions the women gave of SMIs, they all were aware that the SMIs used their platforms to advertise products and create exposure. This understanding may have allowed the women to understand that the content they see is not truly realistic content.

How Do Young Women Make Meaning of Their Relationships with an SMI and Their Community?

Many of the women interviewed shared that they have a strong connection with a SMI they follow. This relationship is exacerbated by being able to purchase products sold by the SMI, following them for inspiration, and being able to have a conversation with them over social media. The women were drawn to the SMIs because the SMIs were able to show their personalities and lifestyles via social media, and some of the women were even able to meet the SMI in person.

As Kim, Ko, and Kim (2015) found, parasocial relationships have power over purchase intention. Some of the SMIs come out with their own line of products. When this happens, the women mentioned wanting to show their support by buying the product. One of the women even went as far to say that she would not have purchased the product if it had not been a product sold by the SMI. Therefore, women show their support by not only cheering for the SMI's successes, but also do their part in financially supporting through purchases.

Following SMIs leads to exciting updates on the SMIs' personal life, such as having a baby or buying a new house. Although these women do not personally know the SMIs they

follow, they feel genuine excitement for their successes as if they were friends. One woman commented that she feels “emotionally attached” and that gives her happiness when exciting things happen to the SMI.

Emotional investment appeared to be a strong theme for the women when discussing their relationships with the SMIs. The women desired to know as much about the SMIs’ personal life as possible. This could mean following the SMIs’ friends or significant others for potential insight into the everyday lives of SMIs. Some of the women also went to great lengths to try to meet the SMIs’ in person because of their connection through their online presence.

An important part of developing a relationship with SMIs is being able to communicate with them. While in some cases mentioned above, the women got to meet the SMI in real life, a more common interaction occurs online. With social media, the women are able to comment and message their favorite social media influencer. If they are lucky, they may actually hear back from the SMI. The women interviewed who had heard back shared that being able to communicate with the SMI intensified their relationship even more. Thus, the two-way communication that social media allows makes relationships with SMI seem even more real.

Additionally, the women seek fashion and lifestyle advice from the SMI. Supporting Sudha and Sheena’s (2017) findings, consumers see SMIs as fashion experts. They go to SMIs for guidance just like one would go to their friend for a recommendation. The women all commented how they look toward SMIs for inspiration on what to wear, how they should do their makeup, hairstyle trends, places to visit, etc. The SMIs inspire the women to try products, buy clothing items, and present themselves in a way that emulates what they see on the internet. The women have proven their devotion through imitating the SMI.

SMI and Communities

In reference to the women and their community, the participants were all aware of women who they perceive as having a negative relationship with SMI. This third-person perception also provides indirect insights into the participant's own relationships with SMIs and subsequent behavior. Several women mentioned that they have a friend who tries so hard to emulate the lives of the SMI, that they become unhappy with their own lives. These friends have gone as far as using cosmetic surgery to alter their appearance, as well as gone into financial debt. One woman also said the obsession with SMI has not only cost her friend money, but also relationships with others due to the friend's "fake" personality that was derived from imitating what she sees online.

Following SMI is an action that is very common for the women as well as others within their community. If the women are all aware of these extreme cases in their immediate friend groups, this could mean that the mental health problems with following SMI are more significant for themselves than they realize. The extreme cases of others may also minimize less severe unhealthy behaviors that the women interviewed may have.

How Does a Parasocial Relationship with an SMI Affect How Young Women See Themselves in Relation to How They See the SMI?

While the women had instances of social comparison with SMIs that lead to negative effects, it seems that those with a stronger connection or relationships with the SMI were able to have a more positive experience. An especially interesting finding is that in some ways parasocial relationships can actually illicit positive mental health. The women shared how having a strong bond with an SMI made the women feel more inspired when the SMI posted supportive and uplifting messages. Relatability was a convincing reason for this strong connection. The

women felt connected to SMI that they viewed as similar to them and chose to follow women who posted images that were more attainable. When the SMI posted their daily struggles over more idealistic messages, the women felt validated in their own struggles instead of feeling bad about themselves. As the women are able to relate to the SMI, they are able to receive support and encouragement within their own insecurities and issues.

The women noted that it “depends on who you follow”. One woman described the SMI who only post carefully curated photos as “toxic” influencers but shared that there were influencers out there that made her feel good as well. This finding offers a sense of hope for women who suffer from negative emotional consequences from SMIs. As the women grew more aware of the harmful effects of SMIs and became more confident in their own selves, they were able to filter who they follow. When the women choose to expose themselves to more positive individuals, they felt more comfortable celebrating and appreciating themselves for who they are.

Theoretical Implications

Social Comparison Theory

The findings support previous research that suggests that upward comparison can be used for motivation and evaluation, which can sometimes lead to insecurities and low self-esteem (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Also contributing to previous literature of Social Comparison Theory, upward comparison does not always have the effects of compare and despair. On some occasions, the women also used upward comparison for motivation, such as to inspire their fashion choices and the things they buy.

New contributions to the theory specifically focused on social comparison and social media are addressed below. The results suggest that women may not know that their comparison behaviors have potential negative implications. Therefore, having women self-report when

studying social comparison may not be especially effective because the individuals might not be fully aware that social comparisons are happening.

Although at times throughout the interviews, the women indicated that they did not suffer from negative implications from social comparison, they all had a story to tell about a friend with an unhealthy relationship with social media. The women commented particularly about their friends comparing their bodies to SMI in an unrealistic way. Also, they said their friends were spending all their time and money trying to be like the SMIs. By acknowledging that social comparison was an issue with their close friend group, it can be assumed that the women interviewed are likely to have similar issues; however, they may not realize the effects the SMI are having on them personally.

According to Third Person Effect Theory, “individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves (Davison, 1983, p.3).” This means that the women assume that the communication they see online is affecting their friends more than them.

Instagram is a picture-based platform in which opinions and abilities are not highlighted, but the way you look is. Previous research suggests that comparison of opinions and abilities are the most prevalent social comparisons (Festinger, 1954; Yang, Holden, & Carter, 2018). However, appearance is the most frequent source of social information used for comparison online. This is especially true for body comparison. While much of the social comparison research focuses on opinions and abilities, the social comparison that is happening online is greatly appearance related. Thus, Social Comparison Theory needs to further elaborate on comparison of appearance when considering social media, Instagram specifically. Using filters

and Photoshop cannot change the way you think or the skills you possess, but they are deemed as very important when displaying social information on social media.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

The study of Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) and new media needs to be updated to include the benefits of new technology. That is, two-way communication, frequency of communication, and type of content being produced. Unlike parasocial relationships prior to social media, the women interviewed have frequent updates on what the SMIs are doing throughout the day. Most importantly, women are able to actually communicate with SMIs by using the commenting and messaging features of Instagram. Parasocial relationships become critical in social networking because social media allows immediate access to celebrities (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015). When hearing back from the SMI, the women explained that it made them feel like they were “BFFs” and that it “made their day.” This two-way communication has potential to make the parasocial interactions more intense than the current theory describes.

Unlike typical viewer-celebrity relationships, relatability was a strong topic in understanding parasocial relationships. This is likely because social media has allowed us access to SMI’s personal lives through the content they post. The women commented on being able to relate to what the SMI was doing on the weekends, and their day to day struggles. Traditional parasocial relationships have not allowed for that kind of access to the celebrity’s private life.

On social media, the women did not feel as strong of a connection with SMIs that they couldn't relate to. The women described the SMI to be like them, but one step above. SMIs give them inspiration and hope of what they could look like/be like since the SMIs are believed to be similar to the women. This finding ultimately supports the combined theories of Social

Comparison and Parasocial Interaction. As the friendship with a SMI is intensified and feels more like an interpersonal relationship, the more the women use the social information for comparison purposes. However, the outcome of the social comparison depends on the social information encountered. When the SMI share their own struggles and insecurities the women are able to have more positive views of themselves as opposed to when the SMI share idealistic comparison information and they feel negatively.

Consumer Welfare Implications

Based on the responses of the women interviewed, it appears they were most vulnerable and negatively influenced when they were younger (roughly high school aged). This implies that young women are most at risk when following SMIs and using Instagram. The women suggested that when they were younger, they felt poorly about themselves due to their lack of confidence and understanding of the tools used to manipulate the pictures posted (i.e. Photoshop). This is particularly dangerous because younger people do not always have the cognitive ability to assess and address their feelings and emotions (Aacap, 2016).

From an interpersonal perspective, the women mentioned that they use social media when they feel lonely and being on social media gives them the feeling that they are spending time with people. According to (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), media relationships can be seen as functional alternatives to interpersonal relationships. Thus, when women go on social media when feeling the need to socialize, what they see on social media may truly be becoming their virtual reality.

The replacement for actual interactions may be dangerous for interpersonal development. As the women begin to see the relationship with SMIs as an interpersonal relationship, they may become more likely to want to imitate their social group and ascribe to the lifestyle presented

online. As Forsyth (2000) stated, individuals choose to change because they implicitly formulate and revise themselves by comparing themselves to group members. Thus, having an interpersonal relationship with an SMI can cause women to feel the need to imitate exactly what they see online without even realizing the root cause of their desires.

SMIs enforce certain values through aspirations. Social media shows women the life they should aspire to, what they should look like, where they should be going on vacation, how to achieve their goals, etc. While the motivation definitely can help them better themselves, it may also help them set unrealistic goals. We must ask ourselves, are the values social media portray good for society? If young women go to social media for motivation of what they want their lives to look like, will they all be dissatisfied when they are not billionaires with mansions? Motivation to live a lifestyle that is basically unattainable for most people may have negative outcomes in the future.

Education on the negative effects of social media should start at a young age so that the consumers can be made more aware of potential dangers of social media use. Given the finding that some SMIs can have a positive impact, the difference between “toxic” and “non-toxic” accounts should be communicated. Parents should be educated as well so they can be aware of what their children are encountering on the internet psychologically.

Industry Implications

Consumer Relationship Considerations

SMIs should be authentic when promoting products. The women all described liking SMIs that were upfront about their insecurities and daily struggles. This gave the women the feeling of relatability and connection with the SMI as a person. Additionally, the women

indicated that they were more likely to unfollow an SMI that constantly posted unrealistic and picturesque photos that made them feel bad about themselves.

Advertiser Considerations

This study had several implications for advertisers. An interesting and unexpected finding was that many of the women do not buy the products they see on SMIs' Instagram accounts. They actually just use the SMI as a source of inspiration and then buy the product cheaper somewhere else, find something that resembles what they see online, or simply make the product themselves. While many advertisers pay a significant amount of money for the SMIs to sell their products, they may be losing out to less expensive brands and styles. Therefore, advertisers should make sure that any of the products that the SMI promotes should be within budget for the majority of the SMI's followers.

The women suggested that they are more eager to buy a product when a company partners with SMI to create a branded product. This is especially true when strong parasocial relationships are formed. Therefore, having the SMI be the face of product versus simply endorse it on the social media account may appeal to the SMI's followers more when purchasing and trying new products.

Several women also used YouTube to follow SMIs. Celebrities on YouTube are often perceived as friends sharing opinions rather than someone endorsing a product (Rasmussen, 2018). Advertisers should be aware that this platform may be a good supplemental tool to Instagram to reach more followers of the SMI. Seeing the product on both Instagram and YouTube may increase brand favorability and awareness due to the connection the women have with the SMIs they follow.

In all, the women interviewed suffered from negative emotional consequences from following SMIs at some point in their lives. Obsession and addiction with Instagram seemed to exacerbate the inclination to compare themselves, particularly their appearances, with the SMIs. Additionally, the women form strong bonds with SMIs which leads to a seemingly convincing interpersonal relationship. Interestingly, the relationship can have positive effects on the women when the SMIs are relatable and post positive content. In light of the findings, the suggested theoretical, consumer welfare, and industry implications above need to be addressed.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Contributions

This study offers new insights on young women's relationships with SMIs and resulting comparison behaviors. The biggest contribution this study offers is theoretical. Gaining deeper insight on how to study new media relationships through a theoretical context will allow for more meaningful research to progress. Important consumer welfare, and industry contributions are addressed as well.

Social Comparison

A contribution to Social Comparison Theory that this study offers is that social comparisons motivate young women to live a SMI inspired lifestyle in the future. Most prior research has used quantitative means to try to tap into social comparison. Because women are not always able to self-diagnose their social comparisons, it took a qualitative approach to reveal the potential harmful implications. The women all viewed their comparisons as a positive aspect because it motivated them to be better and did not give them negative feelings about their current lifestyles. However, this motivation may cause serious issues in the future if aspirational lifestyles are not met.

This study uncovered that a Third Person Effect often occurs with social comparison. Third Person Effect is a theory that suggests that individuals believe that media effects are not as strong for them as they are for others (Davison, 1983). When this happens, it is difficult to make positive strides to avoid negative social comparison repercussions. This finding offers researchers insight on how to explore social comparison in their studies and make future consumer welfare related recommendations.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Another major contribution of this study relates to Parasocial Interaction Theory; Specifically, in terms of content the SMIs share. This study found that content shared by SMIs is very personal, allowing followers to connect on an intimate level. Previously, parasocial relationships have been studied defining constant exposure as daily or weekly exposures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). More specifically the constant exposure referred to the content created for entertainment, not exposure to the celebrity's personal life. With social media, the celebrities, or SMIs, share updates hourly and sometimes even more frequently. These updates showcase very personal events, such as announcing a pregnancy or sharing pictures of their homes.

Consumer Welfare

This study highlighted the importance of studying women who are in high school. A common theme throughout the conversations was the vulnerability the women felt when they were about high school aged. This finding suggests that women are more likely to compare themselves to SMIs at a younger age or when they are in a more vulnerable place in life. Confidence in oneself seemed to help the women overcome some of the negative effects of social comparison.

Additionally, this study uncovers the implications of interpersonal relationships with SMIs. Frequent updates allow for the SMI's followers to truly feel that they are with them throughout the entire day. This experience has given the women the feeling that they are in an interpersonal relationship with the SMI. Having an interpersonal relationship can be good, when the SMI offers positive and relatable posts. However, when the SMI continues to expose the women to their extravagant lifestyle, they begin to feel that they need to emulate that life since

someone in their friend group has it. Thus, the virtual reality that the women are exposed to becomes their real-life reality.

Advertising Industry

This study had two major contributions for the advertising industry. This first contribution is the insight that many women use the SMIs for inspiration, but then end up thrifting when it comes to making the purchase. Advertisers must consider the income of the SMI's followers when choosing a SMI to endorse their product. If the women can't afford what they see on a SMIs' account, they will just go find a more unaffordable option somewhere else, making the advertising efforts obsolete.

The second contribution this study offers is that women prefer SMIs that are transparent, specifically about their insecurities. Based on the definitions the women gave, they were all aware that the content they are being exposed to is often a form of advertising or way to gain exposure. The women expressed that it is important that the SMIs are transparent about the fact that they have normal struggles outside of their perfectly curated photos. The SMI content that offers a lifestyle that is a step above, but attainable is preferred. The women want to be able to relate to the SMI and feel like they share similar everyday problems. The participants shared that they would unfollow a "toxic" influencer that made them feel bad about themselves. Advertisers should consider this when choosing an influencer or suggesting the type of content for the influencer to post.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the researcher went to great lengths to find a diverse group of participants, not all backgrounds were equally represented. Thus, a limitation of this study was the results lacked richness in terms of diversity. Furthermore, more vulnerable populations may have been

underrepresented. Future research should use participants with more diverse populations. Additionally, researchers should explore literature of vulnerable populations beyond women and investigate the social comparison and parasocial implications.

Further, the 18-24 age group did not properly investigate the most vulnerable population of women in terms of age. Based on previous research and the findings of this study, minors about high school aged more accurately investigate the population most at risk. Thus, investigating the consequences for high schoolers following SMIs may lead to more insight on the negative implications.

Future Research Based on Findings

Future research should use a longitudinal method to investigate the effects of being exposed to ideal lifestyles over time. Specifically, do the motivations to live the lifestyle that is portrayed online carry through to adulthood? Do the values that are consistently represented on social media become of the most salient values for future adults? This study is particularly important because the up and coming generation is the only population that will have been exposed to SMIs throughout their entire lives.

The way social comparison and parasocial relationships are studied should be addressed in future research. Researchers should continue to investigate these theories through qualitative methodologies in order to expand on current quantitative measures. Doing so will provide more accurate and generalizable results when using scales to measure Social Comparison Theory and Parasocial Interaction theory in relation to new media, particularly social media.

Finally, future research should continue to study how parasocial relationships effect social comparison. Because of social media, parasocial relationships are exceedingly strong and implications on social comparisons should be further investigated. When parasocial relationships

lead to perceived interpersonal relationships, additional psychological implications may occur. These repercussions should be addressed in future research.

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APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Project title: How young women engage with fashion and lifestyle influencers on Instagram

Interview questions:

What is your age?

What City/State do you currently reside?

What is your occupation?

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

How would you define a social media influencer?

Tell me about how you use Instagram on a typical day.

How does Instagram facilitate your connection with SMIs?

Probe: How often do you check the account of the SMI?

Probe: Do you wait until the SMI comes up in your newsfeed or do you go directly to their account?

RQ1: How do young women's perceptions of a SMI impact how they view themselves?

Now I would like to talk about how you compare with SMI

What do you have in common with the SMIs you follow?

Probe: How would you consider your lifestyles alike or different? Do you ever try to emulate their lifestyle?

Probe: Can you tell me about the SMI's friends/significant others?

Probe: Do you think you and your friends would be friends of the SMI if you knew them in real life?

Probe: What about reality tv stars?

What are your feelings when the SMI posts their opinion about a topic? (Fashion, political opinion, news event).

Probe: How does that compare to your own?

What are your thoughts and feelings about the physical appearance of SMIs?

Probe: How does this influence your perceptions of your own physical appearance?

RQ 2: How do young women make meaning of their relationships with SMI and their community?

Now I would like to talk about your relationship with the SMI

Everyone has days that they feel down. How do you interact with SMIs on those days?

Think about times when you felt lonely

Probe: Tell me about how use Instagram when you are lonely?

Do you have any friends that has a negative relationship with SMI?

Probe: Can you tell me about their experience?

What kind of things do you learn from SMIs?

Probe: What kind of fashion or lifestyle advice to you get from SMIs?

Probe: Has an SMI ever influenced you to purchase a product?

Has an SMI ever responded to a post or message?

Probe: How did that make you feel?

Probe: Did it change your relationship/feelings about the SMI in general?

RQ3: How does a parasocial relationship with a SMI effect how young women see themselves in relation to how they see the SMI?

Finally, I would like to talk about how your relationship with SMI might affect how you compare yourself to them

Do you feel like you can better assess yourself after looking at a SMI's profile that you trust?

Probe: Does this influencer make you want to make changes in your life?

Probe In what ways is this influencer a source of inspiration?

Probe: How does the SMI make you feel about your accomplishments in life?

Are you more likely to feel negative or positive about yourself when you look at a SMI's posts that you feel a strong connection to?

Are there any posts that have made you feel particularly bad?

Probe: Tell me about that post.

Are there any posts that have made you feel good?

Probe: Can you tell me about that post?

Probe: How is that post different from the one that made you feel bad?

So even though these influencers post about fashion, they also post about a lot of other lifestyle aspects. Can you tell me about other types of posts that stand out to you?

Probe: How do you feel about fitness posts?

Overall, how do SMI make you feel?

Are there any final thoughts you want to share with me?

Do you have any questions for me?

VITA

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