

INSTAGRAM IDEALS: COLLEGE WOMEN'S BODY IMAGE AND SOCIAL  
COMPARISON

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## ABSTRACT

The present study unveils several themes that detail female college students' experience, usage, and social comparison trends on Instagram, with a particular emphasis on body image.

Compared to a study conducted by Meta Inc., which found that social comparison disproportionately affected young females (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020), this study highlights insights directly expressed by young females in college concerning their past and current experiences on the platform. With over 90% of women in colleges across the United States reporting body and image dissatisfaction (Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014), this study aims to contribute to existing literature, showcasing whether female students have experienced negative and/or harmful outcomes while using Instagram and how usage, perception and effects have changed over time. The research consisted of participants (n=13) consenting to 30-to-40-minute interviews, where data was collected in multiple categories, including past versus present perceptions, Instagram use, body image, and social comparison theory. Emerged themes concluded that many female participants compared themselves to others on the platform, resulting in mixed positive and negative outcomes. Throughout the analysis, it was showcased that several expressed they believed the platform algorithm directly contributed to their negative experiences, specifically in relation to advertisements and the lack of representation and diversity throughout the platform. However, the algorithm was not measured. In addition, the evidence presented in the present study showed that many users shared that they felt maturity and development played a key and significant role in countering unhealthy Instagram habits.

Keywords: social media, body image, social comparison, Instagram, Facebook, qualitative

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH AIM

With the digital ecosystem rapidly growing, and research consistently documenting a positive relationship between the use of social media and negative body image due to appearance comparisons (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), research into specific social media platforms and their effects is needed. Young females are said to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction and utilize social media more than men (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Before social media, research showed that sociocultural influences led females to want a thin body, resulting in overall body dissatisfaction in most cases studied (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). In addition, females and males were frequently reported to be dissatisfied with their bodies based on their inability to achieve the cultural ideal, which has changed over time. Hundreds of years ago, people with larger bodies were seen as rich and wealthy and represented a sign of prosperity; however, it is said to have changed in the age of advertising in the 1900s, resulting in women desiring to be thin, as those depicted in media, such as Playboy centerfolds and Miss America Pageant contestants over 20 years in the mid-1900s (Garner et al., 1980). Garner (1980) stated that the desire to be smaller led to eating disorders and anorexia among women. In addition, early 2000s research proved that women's body image was negatively affected when watching television, such as music videos featuring thin women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004). Women who watched videos encouraging social comparison exhibited increased social comparison, which is comparing oneself to others, and overall body dissatisfaction.

After print and television media, which remain prevalent, social media was introduced and became heavily used over the years, resulting in billions of people utilizing platforms in 2022 (Statista, 2022). As a result, researchers began studying the platform's effects on users,

specifically on women's body image and dissatisfaction. Overall, research has suggested that social comparison has been consistently shown to increase body dissatisfaction (Cohen & Blaszczynsk, 2015). Social comparison, which is the comparison of oneself to others, can be found in human biological drives (Festinger, 1954); therefore, it could be suggested that social media, which rewards users for likes and comments, could encourage users to compare themselves to one another, furthering enhancing the risks of adverse effects. Authors have hypothesized that since Social Comparison Theory suggests that people are more than likely to compare themselves to others that are similar to them. Since Facebook consists typically of users' peers, research hypothesized there would be a relationship between the social media platform and appearance comparison resulting in higher levels of body dissatisfaction. In 2015, results showed that Facebook use predicted higher body image dissatisfaction. Moreover, Cohen & Blaszczynsk (2015) stated that the relationship was also associated with other harmful risks, such as a higher eating disorder chance.

While research has proven a relationship between Facebook and female body dissatisfaction (Cohen & Blaszczynsk, 2015), other literature said Instagram, an image-based platform, could enhance appearance comparison, leading to additional risks (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). In addition, researchers have said that college students spend the most time on Instagram out of all other social media platforms (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Specifically, the platform is the most popular among young women, a demographic already showing high body dissatisfaction levels (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Due to potential risks, Facebook (Meta) conducted its internal research into Instagram, which spanned over three years (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). It examined teenage girls' experiences on Instagram, which Meta owns, concerning appearance comparisons on social media and how it affected their overall mental

health (Wells, Horwitz, Seetharaman, 2021). The research, posted on an internal company site in 2020, was found, analyzed, and published by *The Wall Street Journal*. It suggested that the company was aware of the harmful effects and reportedly downplayed it within the young demographic studied (Wells et al., 2021). In the results, over 30% of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse, and over 50% of teen girls who experienced negative social comparison on Instagram said it was caused by images related to beauty (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020).

As a result of 90% of women in colleges across the United States reporting body and image dissatisfaction, researchers concluding that Instagram could pose enhanced social comparison risks and females being proven to use the platform the most out of any demographic, this study aims to add to existing literature, showcasing whether females at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, experienced adverse and harmful effects while using Instagram and how usage, perception and effects have changed over time. This study hypothesizes that females who experienced adverse effects on their body image, resulting in higher levels of body dissatisfaction from a social comparison during their time as a user, have changed their Instagram perception and/or habits to counter the effects. In addition, the study aims to understand whether female college students experience social comparison as a result of Instagram use and if users feel there should be additional resources provided for users.

## **CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Comparison Theory**

The act of comparing oneself to another is called social comparison, which is a key characteristic of human life (Dijkstra, Gibbons, & Buunk, 2010). The theory, officially named in 1954, consists of people's biological drive for self-evaluation, skill, and overall identity compared to others based on what they know about others (Festinger, 1954). The researcher stated that people have the desire to evaluate their opinions and abilities, and they strive for accurate appraisals of themselves. Festinger's paper stated:

“If the foregoing theoretical development is correct, then social influence processes and some kinds of competitive behavior are both manifestations of the same socio-psychological process and can be viewed identically on a conceptual level. Both stem directly from the drive for self-evaluation, and the necessity for such evaluation is based on comparison with other persons. The differences between the processes concerning opinions and abilities lie in the unidirectional push upward in the case of abilities, which is absent when considering opinions, and in the relative ease of changing one's opinion compared to changing one's performance. (Festinger, 1954, p. 158)”

Social comparison is relevant because its tendencies have been linked to overall media usage and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; van den Berg et al., 2002).

### **Women and Body Dissatisfaction**

Defined as a negative evaluation of one's weight and shape, body image dissatisfaction can be

influenced by biological, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors, with a particular emphasis on media exposure (Satghare et al., 2019). Researchers investigated possible mental health results, with literature showing that anywhere from 19.5% to 77% of the general adolescent population reported a prevailing rate of body image dissatisfaction. In Satghare, Mahesh, Abdin, Chong, Subramaniam (2019), self-esteem issues, depression, anxiety, disordered eating behaviors, suicidal ideation, and social anxiety were noted to be risk factors for those with poor body image. In addition, the research found that females reported a significant association with body image dissatisfaction over men, showing they were at risk of obesity, depression, and eating disorders.

“Females are more worried and dissatisfied with their body image than males due to the social pressure for a slim body and hence being overweight or even imagining oneself being overweight leads to a higher BID [body image dissatisfaction] (Satghare et al., 2019, p. 7).”

Before social media, research documented that sociocultural influences precisely led females to want a thin body, resulting in overall body dissatisfaction in most cases studied (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007). Analysis showed that when the media consistently depicted thin and largely unattainable beauty ideals, women had a higher risk of developing body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal, and eating disorders (Grabe et al., 2008), which could be linked to increased depression (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Florin et al., 2011) and low self-esteem among adolescent boys and girls (Fardouly et al., 2018; Paxton et al., 2006). Females and males have been shown to be dissatisfied with their bodies based on their inability to achieve the cultural ideal, which has changed over time. Hundreds of years ago, people with larger bodies were seen as rich and wealthy and represented a sign of prosperity; however, it is said to have changed in the age of advertising in the 1900s, resulting in women desiring to be thin, as those depicted in media, such as Playboy centerfolds and Miss America Pageant contestants over 20

years in the mid-1900s (Garner et al., 1980). Garner (1980) stated that the desire to be smaller led to eating disorders and anorexia among women then, while another research has stated it is the same today (Satghare et al., 2019). In addition, early 2000s research proved that women's body image was negatively affected when watching television, such as music videos featuring thin women (Tiggemann & Slater, 2004). Women who watched videos encouraging social comparison exhibited increased social comparison, which is comparing oneself to others, and overall body dissatisfaction.

RQ1: Do female college students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, experience negative social comparison as a result of Instagram use?

### **Social Media and Body Image**

In 2006, a social platform called Facebook was launched. It became the world's most prominent social networking platform, with research concluding that 845 million users were on the app by the end of 2011 (Hall, 2022). Facebook Inc., now known as Meta, owns the most used social platform in 2022, Facebook, as well as the third and fourth most used platforms, WhatsApp and Instagram (Statista, 2022). The social media giant yields over 1.8 billion users across its Instagram (Statista, 2022), and more than 70% of people between the ages of 12 and 24 use the platform (Huang & Su, 2018). Being the most popular platform in the world, Facebook has maintained a spot in research regarding social media usage, mental health, and body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Literature focused on Facebook's effects on users has shown a positive correlation between Facebook usage and concerns with body image. Fardouly & Vartanian (2015) stated that women who wanted to lose weight and spent more time on

Facebook had a higher risk of disordered eating symptoms. It was noted that the relationship was mediated by appearance comparison between users and close friends, peers, and celebrities, concluding that females within the demographic that spent more time on social media were more concerned about their body and appearance than others (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). In addition, Eckler (2017, p. 15) concluded that “more time on Facebook related to the more frequent body and weight comparisons, more attention to the physical appearance of others, and more negative feelings about their bodies for all women.” In addition, research states that specifically, pre-teen females, high school females, and female undergraduate students are more at risk of developing higher levels of body dissatisfaction, a drive for thinness, internalization of the thin ideal, self-objectification, and dieting as a result of social media usage. While many studies are primarily focused on Facebook itself, an internal study concerning additional potential effects of the platform (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). Researchers surveyed 20,000 users in the United States to pair their answers with data about “normal person” behavior on Facebook (Cheng et al., 2019). Regarding body image concerns, researchers found that approximately 3% of the users said they experienced “serious problems” in their sleep, work, or relationships related to their time on Facebook that they found difficult to change (Cheng et al., 2019).

Research has shown that while there is a relationship between general social media use and negative body image, Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) conclude that users experience elevated appearance exposure, defined as posting, viewing, and reacting to images, which is specifically problematic for users. With almost ten million images uploaded an hour to Facebook, users have continual opportunities to compare themselves to others. However, other apps, such as Instagram, which is completely image-based, could enhance appearance comparison outcomes

and risks (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). With Facebook not being the only popular platform among young users, research showed that college students spend the most time on Instagram, followed by Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). In addition, social media platforms, such as Instagram, are the most popular among young women, a demographic already showing high body dissatisfaction levels (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Studies have shown that over 90% of women in college women in the United States are reportedly dissatisfied with their bodies and weight (Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014). Research exploring the socio-psychological impact of Instagram on younger populations is lacking, although several studies have been published in the field (Knowles et al., 2022). Based on research, it has been revealed that platforms such as Instagram have been overlooked, resulting in being under-researched compared to Facebook, noting that the years between the founding of the platforms could be a factor, with Facebook launching in 2004 and Instagram in 2010 (Fardouly et al., 2015). Instagram allows users to be in close contact with peers, similar to Facebook but is also an exclusive image-sharing app, which has been proven to substantially affect women's appearance concerns (Fardouly et al., 2015). While it has been concluded that users feel additional pressure to lose weight, look more attractive, and change their appearance when using social media in general, Pepin & Endresz (2015) also found a correlation between Instagram and research participants' concerns with body surveillance and image. In Baker, Ferszt, and Breines (2019), a qualitative study of females' women's body image and Instagram showed several themes among focus groups as to how and why females use the photo-based app. Results showed that young women who spent long amounts of time on Instagram were continually exposed to unrealistic and highly edited images, enhancing appearance comparison with other users. As a result, the study said participants spent much time editing images before posting them to the platform. Afterward, they reportedly began seeking validation in the form of likes and responses from

other users on the app. Therefore, Baker, Ferszt, and Breines (2019) stated that if high amounts of feedback were given, the participants reported feeling better about themselves; however, when given a less-than-normal response through their following, participants reported not feeling good. Sometimes, this would cause participants to delete and/or repost later due to the lack of desired responses (Baker et al., 2019). Another study suggested that a main central concern of Instagram was users' ability to retouch photos that could potentially influence “perfect pictures,” which in turn cause adverse effects on the body image of other platform users as they view them (Kleemans et al., 2018). Baker, Ferszt, and Breines (2019) gave insight into how this could be spread among users. The researchers note that participants reported idealizing certain users that would gain a high number of likes, making themselves desirable. In turn, other users reported screenshotting the images, posing like the person, and ultimately mimicking the image altogether in the hope of receiving more likes. Interestingly, the qualitative study showed that many participants understood that certain images were likely to be edited and heavily altered; however, they still felt societal pressure to conform and adjust to certain standards to be accepted on the platform (Baker et al., 2019). To break these trends, another social media campaign recently dubbed “Instagram vs. reality” was created, which features side-by-side images of the same women, one with an ideal standard and another with a realistic depiction (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). According to a study that presented the images to over 300 women aged 18-30 years old, ideal images, which many were highly enhanced or edited, correlated with decreased body dissatisfaction relative to the ideal pictures (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Fardouly & Holland, 2018). The photos also affected mood and perceptions (Fardouly & Holland, 2018). In addition, research has shown that adolescents who edit their photos and upload them online have more beauty stereotypes. In addition, Verrastro and colleagues (2020) suggested that the individuals, both female and male, felt more anxious and uncomfortable with

their appearance and pressured to hold standards presented on social media. Over time, as a result, researchers have coined the term “digitized dysmorphia,” highlighting a discrepancy between digitalized beauty standards on social media platforms, such as Instagram, and the body image of females (Verrastro et al., 2020). It is believed that these social media platforms, including the image-based platform, directly contribute to dysmorphic disorders in women. Questions in regard to the same exposure to enhanced social media photos of other users on young girls’ body image are still being studied to learn the potential effects (Kleemans et al., 2018).

Recently, Instagram has been in national media outlets, including *The Wall Street Journal*, after it was revealed that Facebook (Meta) conducted its research for three years to examine teenage girls’ experiences on the popular photo-sharing app, Instagram, concerning appearance comparisons on social media in general and how it affected their overall mental health (Wells et al., 2021). The research, which was [posted on an internal company site in 2020](#), was found, analyzed, and published by *The Wall Street Journal*, reportedly “exposing” how the company downplays its harmful effects on the demographic studied (Wells et al., 2021). The research, whose authors have been redacted, looked at how the platform affected its younger user base, noting that teenage girls were the most notably harmed (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). While other research Facebook published noted that financial and family stress were higher among adults, body image and social comparison were higher for teens aged 13-17 (Cheng et al., 2019). Specifically, the internal research wrote that Instagram had a harmful effect on one in three girls relating body image and stated that “more teen girls thought that IG made body image issues worse than better” (Wells et al., 2021). The study found the social comparison was worse on Instagram than other social media as the app’s users were perceived to reflect an

average, real life through their photos; however, many standards are actually based on the accessibility of celebrities, which can seem unattainable to some (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). However, while celebrity content was pushed to users' pages more frequently, family and friend content was reported to be more impactful in terms of social comparison to users on the image-based app. With 52% of teen girls who experienced negative social comparison on Instagram reporting that it was caused by images related to beauty, the internal study found that body image comparison was based on several factors, including: body standards, flawless skin and fashion, finances, travel, experiences, and talents (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). When experienced, researchers concluded that social comparison resulted in a mimicked "grief cycle," which included bargaining, self-described dysmorphia, paralysis, insecurity, anger, and withdrawal, meaning that users who experienced the phenomena would often go into a downward emotional spiral, undergoing a wide range of emotions from jealousy, motivation, and dysmorphia as a result. Due to enhanced social comparison, Instagram researchers noted that the "explore" page and "profile stalking" could also enable users to go down "never-ending rabbit holes" (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). Since users were comparing their lives to photos or influencers that seemed unattainable, the study noted that users could lack confidence-building and inspiration based on a combination of reality, accessibility, and attainability. In conclusion, the published documents concluded that the prevalence of reported problematic use was highest among teens and young adults, explicitly noting that 32% of girls and young women said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse (Cheng et al., 2019).

As previously stated, mental health concerns, such as disordered eating and anorexia in relation to social comparison, have been documented in research (Garner et al., 1980); however, Meta's

internal team also added that, in addition, it could cause body dysmorphia, body dissatisfaction, depression and loneliness (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). Instagram has unveiled specific resources, but this study, in addition to other research objectives, aims to learn if female students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, believe it is enough. The internal study concluded that the app developers could break the “cycle of social comparison” by celebrating accomplishments, showing progress toward a goal, customizing Instagram to result in highly personalized experiences, enabling “mindfulness breaks,” making algorithm surface body inclusive influences in the hope of changing jealousy to motivation in users comparing themselves to others (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). In addition, the researchers reported that communication from other users could play a critical factor in breaking the social comparison spiral, highlighting that these sources need to be perceived as being “imperfect but accepting their flaws” instead of someone with a “perfect image.”

Although social comparison is in all facets of life, as it is a drive in human behavior, with or without social media (Festinger, 1954), the internal study showed that Instagram had the highest impact on social comparison concerning female users’ body image in comparison to other platforms (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). Redacted researchers (2020) showed that Instagram was leading the way due to users overlooking that posts were the highlights of other people’s lives and not reality, product mechanics, explore pages and the amount of time it takes for users to edit, post, and evaluate themselves because of engagement validation. Shortly behind was TikTok, which was said to make users feel like others were just like them, and social comparison was shielded by joking, dancing, and talent. However, popular influencers seemed thin and attractive, and the addictive culture of the app resulted in users spending upwards of four hours on the app. Lastly, the researchers analyzed reports about

Instagram and VSCO. Snapchat was said to be close friends but offered fun filters and mainly focused on the face rather than the body, concluding that appearance comparison was not as prevalent. Users on VSCO reported that social media was more like a “dream,” seemingly unachievable and completely removed from reality (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020).

RQ2: Have female college students, who experienced negative social comparison on Instagram, deliberately changed their social media habits?

### **Research Gap**

Literature suggests that young women are disproportionately affected by social comparison on social media, specifically on Instagram, which has been proven to provide users with continual opportunities to compare themselves; however, this study aims to showcase whether female students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, report similar results and learn more about how users combat the phenomena. While part of Facebook’s internal study highlights girls aged 13-21, this study moves into a broader demographic, seeking to highlight additional findings to conclude whether these potential effects were experienced by participating research subjects, all of whom are females attending a university and are over the age of 18 (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). The study uncovers participants’ usage trends, specifically highlighting whether negative social comparison results in users deliberately changing their social media habits. Moreover, this study uses qualitative interviews to call attention to current resources and potential additional assistance that users believe could counter the adverse effects of negative social comparison on Instagram. The research aimed to highlight trends among college women’s

Instagram use concerning overall experiences, perceptions, body image, and social comparison.

Due to the ever-growing digital realm, lack of research on social comparison, and the harmful effects that studies have shown concerning female body image, specifically on the social media platform Instagram, this research intends to build critical future research directions. In conclusion, it intended to answer whether female college students experience negative body image concerning social comparison, whether the participants deliberately changed their social media habits during or after negative experiences and if additional resources are needed on the platform based on the opinions of the respondents.

RQ3: Should there be additional resources on Instagram to combat negative social comparison in relation to females' body image? If so, what do users envision?

## **CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY**

The study analyzes social comparison theory and builds upon existing research that shows that young girls and women are disproportionately and negatively affected by comparing appearance and lifestyles to peers, influencers, and celebrities on Instagram. The present research formed themes and patterns using the grounding theory approach, which involves the application of inductive reasoning to construct theories to understand and explain phenomena (Haig, 1995). In the method, researchers aim to construct a theory that is essentially “grounded” in collected and analyzed data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Noble and Mitchell (2016) explained that researchers using the strategy through analysis would code each line of transcriptions and group codes to create subcategories leading to the creation of overarching categories, resulting in theories. Moreover, grounded theory is the discovery of emerging patterns and reoccurring themes within collected and analyzed data, resulting in theories' generation (Walsh et al., 2015).

After full review and approval from the institutional review board, this research was based on a qualitative analysis derived from interview questions (i.e., Table 1.1 in Appendix C) of 13 residential female college students (i.e., in Appendix A) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Out of 208 students being contacted, 13 consented to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in either a quiet in-person setting within the university's campus and/or over a video conference platform, Zoom, in the comfort they desire. This method was chosen due to the sensitive nature of mental health, which is often related to negative body image; however, no specific questions aimed to unveil mental health diagnoses. The participants

were recruited through an email script approved by the IRB, which explained the study, and invited them to participate (i.e., in Appendix B).

To participate in the study, the college students needed to be female, currently taking classes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and use Instagram. There were no stipulations on how long or often they use the platform. Questions asked were majority open-ended and were broken down into three overarching categories: experiences and Instagram use, past versus present perceptions of Instagram, and social comparison and body image, in hopes of better understanding the participant's relationship with Instagram. Demographic questions were also asked to identify the subset of the population the female students reside in and to ensure that they are taking courses at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and using Instagram. Conclusion questions were presented to participants to learn more about future research directions, with the intent to highlight key indicators of what areas are understudied or propose solutions to concerns in the interviews, if any. All identifiable information was stored confidentially; therefore, the anonymity of participants would be maintained. The research was voluntary, and all participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The study maintained and preserved the participant's confidentiality and anonymity. The discussions were recorded and transcribed using AI software and then reviewed by the researcher to ensure reliability. Afterward, the researcher reviewed and coded 106 pages of interview transcriptions, using grounded theory to create codes throughout the analysis (i.e., see Appendix D for transcription information). The codes were reviewed a second time to ensure the researcher was familiar with the data and that all areas had been saturated. During and after the coding process, themes emerged from respondent answers to create conclusions based on the data (i.e., see Appendix C for codebook information). Themes

are defined as recurring ideas and patterns that occur across all the transcriptions and are then organized around a concept (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

## **Rationale**

This research highlights themes across young women's Instagram usage and how social comparison can affect them. It aims to uncover positive, negative, or no effects, in hopes of building upon existing research to better social platforms and resources for future generations. The study, including college-aged females, could also compare results and/or themes to existing research on younger populations, such as teenagers. Although previously mentioned, research has revealed that platforms such as Instagram have been overlooked, resulting in being under-researched compared to Facebook (Fardouly et al., 2015). The proposal aimed to learn more about females' past and present perceptions of Instagram and its influence on users and experiences thus far. The research will contribute to existing literature to provide future guidance to support resources that could assist the mental health well-being of users, especially young women, on Instagram and other social networking sites. It also aimed to learn more about the age demographics of potentially affected users, revealing whether social media's effects are lasting or be mainly attributed to a younger subset, as other research has shown (Teen Mental Health Deep Dive, 2019).

## **CHAPTER FOUR RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The thirteen respondents were female residential students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and ranged in age from 22 to 29 years old (i.e., see Appendix A). They reported they first created their Instagram account while 12 to 19 years old, which placed them from sixth grade to an undergraduate in college, due to influence from their friends, family, or celebrities. Now, on average, participants spend nearly two hours a day on Instagram, interacting as they wish, including seeking content, exploring suggested content, staying connected through engagement or direct messages, or promoting themselves through posts and stories. The average usage time is almost an hour and a half over the national adult average of 30 minutes per day found by Insider Intelligence in 2022. In addition, participants posted at a maximum of twice a month to at a minimum once a year, although all respondents said they used the platform daily in various ways. However, not all, but most participants frequently reported posting on the story feature consistently, which allows photos to be uploaded for 24 hours, unless added to a highlight on the user's individual profile, instead of on their main profile, with participants saying it was due to it being "more acceptable."

### **Social Comparison and Instagram Usage**

Three themes emerged while reviewing data collected regarding the first research question, which asked if female college students experience negative social comparison due to Instagram. Themes included comparing self to others, negative body image, and maturity matters. (i.e., Review Table 2 for participant comments and examples).

### ***Comparing Self to Others***

Most participants reported comparing themselves to others that they would see on Instagram. They expressed comparisons within many facets of life, the most common concerning their body or image, but also regarding financial means, lifestyles, and relationships. The comparisons were related to peers, fitness accounts, influencers, or celebrities, with some intentionally sought out and others believed to be promoted by an algorithm. In addition, participants shared that they would often compare themselves to those posting “perfect” images based on the evaluation of current cultural ideals. However, participants were split in half on if social comparison motivated them, with some expressing that it made them feel sad or completely unmotivated and others saying that it was helpful on their fitness journey or motivated them to show the unedited photos to combat unfavorable appearance comparisons.

### ***Negative Body Image***

Participants reported that unhealthy habits of social comparison on Instagram often resulted in negative thoughts or feelings about their own bodies. Respondents reported that society’s ideal female perception or conventionally attractive users included those who were thin, unrealistically curvy, or those who had desirable assets, such as, long hair or long legs or abs. When comparing themselves to often “unattainable” expectations, participants reported multiple negative impacts, including disordered eating, increased anxiety, and lower self-confidence. In addition, some respondents described the social comparison and negative body image process as a continuous cycle regardless of the impacts endured.

### ***Maturity Matters***

As participants aged throughout their social media cycle, they reported that they shifted their

unhealthy thoughts about social comparison, which sometimes led to decreased negative body image effects. Multiple respondents expressed that as they matured, the less impressionable they were, sharing that seeing certain content at an older age would not affect them as often as it would when they were younger. Many participants said there was a higher level of pressure on users at a younger age, when the brain was not as developed, resulting in adverse effects and unhealthy habits.

### **Changed Social Media Habits to Counter Negativity**

Three themes pertaining to the second research question emerged during the data analysis. The participants were asked if they deliberately changed their social media habits to counter the negative effects of social comparison. Those included conscious posting standards, past versus present usage, and shifted perceptions. (i.e., Review Table 3-1 for participant comments and examples).

#### ***High Standards For Posting***

Participants reported holding themselves to high standards when it came to posting on Instagram, often resulting in users exhibiting a grueling effort to choose and edit photos before they were acceptable in their own opinion to be published. As a result, participants reported taking various photos before getting “the one.” The number of photos ranged from just one to more than 315 per participant, with the mean being 35. In addition, many respondents expressed that the process behind posting photos seemed like a task most of the time, which in some cases, directly affected their posting habits over time. The change, in many cases, resulted in less posting overall due to the effort needed. Although holding themselves to high standards, the overarching consensus

across the data was that users would place filters or make minor edits to photos, with only one participant reporting they reshaped their body. It is important to note that some participants reported that less effortful posting increased in recent months.

### ***Past Versus Present Usage***

Participants expressed that their current usage of Instagram was much different than when they first began using the platform. Many of them shared that when younger, they relied heavily on Instagram throughout the day, spending much more time on it. However, over time, respondents reported spending much less time on the platform, with some explaining it was deliberate changes to counter adverse effects and others saying it was due to outside influence, such as work schedules, lack of time, or low prioritization. When explaining why the shift occurred, participants spoke about perceived algorithm shifts and how social comparison resulted in unhealthy, toxic habits and reported that their level of concern toward the platform was more significant in the past. It is important to note that a few participants talked about spending more time on the platform in the current age; however, it was attributed to careers surrounded by social media as a way to pass the time.

### ***Shifted Perceptions***

Due to the overall adverse effects of social media usage, including social comparison, many participants reported changing their perceptions of the platform. While perceptions varied from perceiving the app as more negative to positive, it was uniform across the data that no perceptions remained the same throughout each respondent's time as a user of Instagram.

Interestingly, many participants reported that Instagram was more positive now, expressing it

was because of their deliberate change to usage habits, often not spending as much time on the platform. However, others said it was positive due to growth and lack of holding themselves to care as much as they did at a previous time. In addition, some participants called Instagram toxic and said it was more negative now, explicitly saying it remains anxiety-provoking and directly contributed to unhealthy habits. It is important to note that many participants said that their perception concerning the platform would change according to age range, as they believed it could be either positive or negative depending on who was using it.

### **Instagram Resources and Desired Change**

Four themes emerged amid the data analysis concerning the third research question. Participants were asked if they sought resources on Instagram and changes within the platform. They included algorithms and ads, hidden metrics, body positivity trends, and representation sought. (i.e., Review Table 4-1 for participant comments and examples.

#### ***Algorithm and Ads***

A reoccurring subject across the data surrounded perceived algorithm shifts on Instagram, with many about advertisements across the app. Participants reported a negative connotation towards advertisements on Instagram, saying that they felt Instagram placed more value on influencers and ads rather than overall user experience. Many brought up how they felt that the algorithm was at one time in chronological order but has since changed, resulting in them not seeing their friends' content as often. Within the discussion surrounding the algorithm, participants expressed they felt Instagram promoted curated content, often showing unrealistic and/or unattainable

content, which could, in turn, promote social comparison that could cause negativity. However, users reported understanding how artificial intelligence algorithm works, sharing that it would change depending on engagement toward certain subjects, products, and trends. This was reported to be positive, as users felt they could overcome the algorithm to show them what they wanted or explore their passions further. However, some found it negative, expressing that they felt that it was unpredictable and triggering at times. Overall, most participants reported wanting the “old Instagram” back in reference to content on their timelines. It is essential to note that the findings reported in relation to the algorithm were based on the perceptions of users and not measurement. While users perceive algorithms to directly contribute to negative body image; therefore, results could not be concluded.

### ***Hidden Metrics***

Recently, Instagram began giving users the option to hide specific metrics within their posts, making it so that the account owner could see the engagements but not others interacting with it. The hidden metrics are likes, plays, and views on posts. Many participants reported using and enjoying hidden like count, specifically on their posts. While participants shared that they cared about like counts to varying degrees, it was uniform across the data that all respondents said they overall cared about the likes gained on a published post. However, some users expressed relief in relation to the new feature of hidden metrics.

### ***Body Positivity***

Participants reported that “body positivity” trends circulating on social media were positively changing narrow beauty standards to an extent; however, nearly all respondents expressed how many lacked authenticities, making campaigns “shallow,” furthering hurting beauty standards. In

addition, participants reported receiving messaging better from “real” individual influencers than companies, expressing that body campaigns were sometimes perceived as fake or ingenuine to receive attention by not following through with their messaging. However, all participants could agree that body positivity campaigns brought the issues to the forefront of potential change, which they were satisfied with. In addition, companies such as American Eagle were mentioned numerous times because users said they felt as if the company showcased diversity through employees, campaigns, and ads and not through just social media.

### ***Representation Sought***

When asked about the diversity represented on the platform, all participants reported a lack of body shapes and sizes. While many said there was an overarching lack of representation, the most common body type represented was said to be thin women, generally below a size six or eight. Respondents also said many promoted posts or influencers had bodies that were “culturally” accepted, noting similarities to Kim Kardashian and highlighting certain cosmetic surgeries, such as a Brazilian Butt Lift, both of which were reported as unrealistic and unattainable. Moreover, users expressed that in instances where body diversity was shown, it was often on very extreme sides of the scale, which often left mid-sized women underrepresented on the platform. In addition, users expressed a significant racial diversity gap on the platform, saying that when seeing posts on their timelines, the influencers, users, or actors were mainly white. It is important to note that some participants said they had noted a slight change, citing recent pressure from female.

Table 2 1. Examples from participants are included in relation to three themes, comparing self to others, negative body image, and maturity matters emerged concerning the first research question.

Themes	Examples
Comparing Self To Others	<p>“I would always compare myself to like, you know, like, the really pretty like cheerleaders and everything because, you know, I was never like that.”</p> <p>“I just see these like skinny model looking girls going out and living their best life in the tropics and I'm just like, I'm still stuck at home on Friday night watching YouTube.”</p> <p>“I was feeling an increase in anxiety while comparing for me, I did a lot of comparing not necessarily of bodies, that I mean, that's a piece of it, but a big piece of it for me was comparing relationships.”</p>
Negative Body Image	<p>“Especially with body image, I remember, my freshman year, when I would get on Instagram, I would see a really skinny girl, and I would decide not to eat lunch that day, just so I could look like her. So, it kind of it really did affect me.”</p> <p>“I put on some weight, and I always see these weight loss ads, how to get the perfect body, how to tone everything, how to turn all your muscles and it's just like, you should look like this perfect person. And part of me is like, I don't need to look like that. But there's this other part of me that's like, but wouldn't it be better if you did?”</p> <p>“I think what I saw is kind of what I believed, and I struggled with body issues my freshman, sophomore, junior, even senior year of undergrad. I think that because I saw so many curated Instagram photos and reels and it and just you know, it just made me sad honestly, but I was kind of addicted to where I had to get on it just to see more even though I knew it was hurting myself.”</p>
Maturity Matters	<p>“I think when I was younger, especially when I was a freshman in college, I was very impressionable.”</p> <p>“I just realized that I think just over time, and especially with age, I think the older I got, the more I realized it's so silly to be worried so much about what you look like, and instead of, you know who you are as a person. I just think the older I got, the more I realized, it just didn't matter what you looked like, specifically, I mean, you want to take care of yourself, you want good hygiene, but I don't care if I see a super skinny girl on Instagram now. I'm just like, oh, she's pretty and then I keep scrolling. It doesn't necessarily affect me to that degree that it did.”</p> <p>“Yeah, I think then [when a child], obviously, my brain was fully developed.”</p>

Table 3 1. Examples from participants are included in relation to three themes, high standards for posting, past versus present usage and shifted perception.

Themes	Examples
High Standards For Posting	<p>“My parents follow him he and for bosses, former friends, parents, just people that I don't even seeing every aspect of my life. So yeah, I think I'm pretty particular about what I post.”</p> <p>“I am very much aware that Instagram is like one of those you're showing your happiest moments in your life, not necessarily what's happening real at the same time. And so, I obviously am picking the pictures that I think I look the best.”</p> <p>“I feel like there's it's not always like an Insta worthy moment, you know. So, like, I feel like I try it. Like, if I'm out doing something I tried to. If I want to post, like, try and find like, a good moments or photo that kind of captures what I'm doing. And then moments to kind of capture that moment in time on my timeline.”</p> <p>“I don't post that often. I used to post way more. Now, when I post it's obviously like the best photo or one that's like, visually appealing and fits like you know, of the ocean or something. But it takes a long time to figure out which one I want to post when I do commit to the idea that I'm going to post and then sometimes I'm like, I don't want to do it anymore. So, then I don't post but yeah, it's definitely like a process and it feels like a process.”</p>
Past Versus Present Usage	<p>“I've been like, pretty intentional about like, unfollowing a lot of those accounts, like I don't need to follow them. I can like, look them up if I want to, like see what they're doing. But I yeah, it's been a journey. But I think I am at like a healthier place consuming and interacting with Instagram than I was.”</p> <p>“I feel like in the past, I felt like, compelled to interact and post and comment and those sorts of things. And so yeah, so I feel now like my perceptions change, it's healthier, but because I don't care as much about it.”</p> <p>“I think that's probably come down over time. I've been pretty intentional about it. I've spent probably six to seven hours on the platform a day in undergrad. And so, I have been pretty intentional about cutting back on that.”</p>
Shifted Perceptions	<p>“I think my perception of just the platform has become more negative because when I go on, I see this, you know, beautifully edited swimsuit photo. And I'm thinking, you know, it's just unattainable and so I think that's why I used to really like Instagram, and I thought it was a great idea and then the more I've used it, the more negative I thought it was.”</p> <p>“General it's probably more of a toxic place, than it is a healthier place, because you are only seeing the best of the best of people's lives normally, on Instagram.”</p> <p>“I think it is kind of a toxic space honestly. Because you have all of these influencers. You can't go to feed on Instagram without running into an influencer.”</p> <p>“I feel like it depends on the person's age, and gender.”</p>

Table 4 1. Examples from participants (n=13) are included in relation to three themes, high standards for posting, past versus present usage and shifted perception.

Themes	Examples
Algorithm and Ads	<p>“There used to not be ads on Instagram. I remember when there were ads on Instagram. Now, that's like the influencers, you can't go two feet without running into an ad. And they're just trying to sell you stuff. It is just entirely on what is marketable.”</p> <p>“Instagram is trying to sell you a lifestyle these days. And it's using these female influencers to try and like sell you a lifestyle.”</p> <p>“There is content that is like, promoted on Instagram that can sometimes be a little bit harmful towards like, body image of like, diet, culture, and things like that.”</p>
Hidden Metrics	<p>“I actually like have my like counter turned off. It's a feature that Instagram rolled out recently. So, I really don't care as much anymore just because I also like to know that the algorithm is all funky, so I really don't care.”</p> <p>“It's gotten to the point where I don't want to care. So, I like to turn off the like, count.”</p> <p>“I've very much liked the new option of like, not showing the likes on Instagram. I mean, I think that I don't care as much as other people. But I would be lying if I said I didn't care at all.”</p>
Body Positivity	<p>“I'm seeing a lot more movement with like, obviously, like plus sizes, you know, all bodies are beautiful.”</p> <p>“I think when they're done by people who are actually trying to change things, they do have a positive impact but there's also a lot of it that feels shallow. Like you'll still have these perfect Instagram models talking about body positive to you, and I feel like you're just kind of jumping on this trend and are just trying to paint a positive outlook on things and trying to act like your body positive, but I feel like you would throw a fit if you ever started to look, the way you're saying it's good to look. A lot of it feels false.”</p> <p>“I guess that I feel like they are mostly trends are just doing it just because a lot of people are looking for that right now but also feel like it's not something they're, they're wanting to sustain.”</p>
Representation Sought	<p>“I would still say these smaller sizes are more represented. Probably anywhere between a double zero and a four are typically what I see on Instagram when I'm scrolling. However, I do see more plus sized models, which is great, but it's just not. You know, there's not that many in between.”</p> <p>“I don't think that everybody is being fully represented. Even an advertisement and specifically when I go on Instagram, I see these perfectly muscular men are toned women and I think you know, typical, your, your average human doesn't look like this.”</p> <p>“It just like really isn't, it's like that kind of information coming from skinny white women, and not like, real, like, body diversity, racial diversity, like all of those things, because I do strongly believe that the algorithm favors the thinness and whiteness and conventional attractive.”</p>

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

# **CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As social comparison theory states that humans have a biological drive to compare their skills, image, and overall identity to others, the present research found the phenomena thoroughly exists on social media platforms, backing up previous research (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016) that states Instagram gives users continual opportunities to analyze their self to other users, potentially enhancing adverse outcomes and risks. In addition, it appears a perfect storm is created when college females, a demographic already showing high levels of body dissatisfaction and who spend the most time on Instagram, begin to compare themselves to friends, colleagues, and influencers on the platform (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Moreover, with 90% of women in college women in the United States dissatisfied with their bodies and weight (Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014), research concludes that the demographic may feel additional pressure to conform to societal pressure and standards to remain relevant. The present study reinforced that females compare themselves to others and often feel pressure in relation to their bodies, resulting in unhealthy comparison habits that can lead to mental health and physical ailments, such as disordered eating or anxiety. Therefore, the analysis concluded that social comparison trends on Instagram have negatively affected females at the University of Tennessee. While describing the social comparison and negative body image process as a continuous cycle, participants (n=13) reported that being exposed to unattainable images from not only their close peers and connections but from influencers and celebrities had significant effects on their lives. Respondents reported detailed comparisons to lifestyles and relationships, as well. In addition,

participants shared that they would often compare themselves to those posting “perfect” images based on the evaluation of current cultural ideals. However, participants were split in half on if social comparison motivated them, with some expressing that it made them feel sad or completely unmotivated and others saying that it was helpful on their fitness journey or inspired them to show their unedited photos to combat negative appearance comparisons, which also reinforces the conclusions in Meta’s leaked study (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020). Overall, results showed that many users expressed that they were in a healthier place in their lives now than when they used Instagram at a younger age. Participants reported that the reason was due to underdevelopment, immaturity, and inability to filter incoming messages from the platform while younger, which contrasted with the present day, as a sample size of adults actively furthering their education. Results would reinforce Meta’s study that females aged 13-17 were at a higher risk of being disproportionately affected by social comparison, specifically on Instagram (Social Comparison Exploratory Research, 2020).

As a result of unfavorable social comparison and unhealthy habits, many participants reported deliberately changing their usage to either spending less time on the platform, unfollowing triggering accounts and/or placing their account on private to ensure a more personable experience. Several respondents explained that the process ranged from a significant shift in a short time to a gradual alteration over a long period. In addition to social comparison, the analysis concluded that algorithm shifts contributed to the transition in many cases, with users expressing they liked the “old” Instagram when posts could be viewed in chronological order. Moreover, due to algorithm and social comparison, participants reported posting less overtime as some expressed the photo process being too time-consuming or a task. In contrast, others said they had less desire to do so due to the overall effort. It is important to note that although the

participants reported holding themselves to a high standard when posting, which is in harmony with other research (Baker et al., 2019), they expressed recently that it seemed more acceptable to post spontaneous photos without much thought behind them. Moreover, because of harmful habits related to social comparison and overall usage, participants reported that their perceptions of Instagram changed since they first created their profile to positive and negative opinions. However, the results may be skewed in sentiment because many of those who reported that Instagram was more positive now attribute it to their deliberate change in usage habits, which often included not spending as much time on the platform or caring about their usage. However, others said it was positive due to growth and lack of holding themselves to care as much as they did at a previous time, which reinforces the need for maturity on the app. In addition, some participants called Instagram toxic and said it was more negative now, explicitly saying it remains anxiety-provoking and directly contributed to unhealthy habits. The results are parallel to other studies that concluded social comparison and negative body image could result in anxiety and other mental health outcomes (Satghare et al., 2019). It is important to note that many participants said that their perception in regard to the platform would change according to age range, as they believed it could be either positive or negative depending on who was using it. The analysis concluded that participants changed their habits after experiencing adverse outcomes in relation to usage and social comparison on Instagram over time, most of which were less screen time and content exposure.

In contrast, participants reported responding well to current resources unveiled on Instagram, such as having the ability to hide specific metrics, including plays, likes, and views on posts. All respondents expressed that they cared about how many likes their posts received. The finding

coincides with other research that showed that female users idealize those that get many likes and receive validation when their posts are popular. In comparison, the researchers concluded that users also had lower self-confidence when not receiving many likes (Baker et al., 2019); therefore, it is comprehensible why respondents conveyed relief in not having to specifically consider like counts on their published posts due to the new feature.

Although some research suggests that body positivity on social media may have the ability to enhance positive body image at a population level (Cohen et al., 2021), participants reported that many of the trends from brands seemed “shallow” and unreal. However, all participants agreed that the trend and hashtags began the conversation, but agreed they were not enough to solve the issue overall. In contrast, evidence in the present study showed that some users felt more comfortable receiving positive messaging with “real” individual influencers they perceived to trust. Within feeling more comfortable with their life and body on Instagram, participants reported seeking more representation and diversity on the platform, as many shared that the most common person represented seemed to be white, thin, and conventionally attractive. Users expressed that they would feel more positive about themselves if women were accurately represented on the platform. It is important to note that studies have shown that positive body image is associated with greater psychological, social, and emotional well-being, which could, in turn, promote overall physical and mental health (Cohen et al., 2021).

Overall, females at the University of Tennessee Knoxville do compare themselves to others on social media, causing many adverse effects, which occur in mental and physical unhealthiness.

As a result, participants deliberately changed their habits over time to combat the negative effects of social comparison. However, many reported they did not do the same while using Instagram at a younger age, resulting in harmful effects due to a lack of maturity and development. To move forward, participants expressed they wanted additional representation and diversity on the platform, specifically seeking a wider range of shapes, sizes and ethnicities, to combat cultural ideals and body standards. Users also expressed that they wanted more resources on Instagram in hopes they would reach those affected by harmful social comparison, emphasizing the need for additional positive messages for younger demographics. In addition, evidence in the present study showed that users believed algorithms and advertisements directly contributed to unfavorable social comparison and expressed a critical desire for the platform to adjust.

### **Limitations**

The fundamental limitation of the present study was recruitment, as time, scheduling, and availability restricted the number of participants available for the interviews, which were 30 to 45 minutes long. Although over 200 female college students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, many were either not comfortable with the study or did not have the scheduling capacity. As a result, there was a small sample size of females, many graduate students, who were interviewed to gain data; therefore, a larger sample size would unveil additional themes and further solidify evidence found in the present study. As a result, the data could not be generalized but several conclusions were drawn. In addition, while this study breaks down qualitative data on female body image and social comparison on Instagram, it did not explore additional social media platforms, many of which expressed concern in discussions. Due to the methodology of this study, time did not allow for the algorithm in relation to social comparison to be measured.

So, while users' perception was reported, results were inconclusive on whether the algorithm directly contributed to negative body image.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

Future research should strive to gain a significant number of participants in either an interview or survey methodology to gain additional insights into the ever-evolving effects of social media on their users. In addition, studies would benefit from focusing on females and males, as both are affected by social comparison. While this study focuses solely on Instagram with little explanation of other platforms it would be critical to study additional social media platforms further. Specifically, Tik Tok was a reoccurring theme across the data collected for the present study. Many participants reported feeling concerned about its effects on the younger demographic, resulting in many either never downloading the app or deleting it. However, Snapchat and Pinterest were also mentioned. Influencers alone could also be studied in connection to social comparison, as many users express having strong feelings towards them by either looking up to the creators or avoiding them together for varying reasons. Lastly, while this study reported how users perceive algorithm and how it contributes to social comparison, it did not measure the algorithm, therefore, findings could not be concluded.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX A

*Table 1.* Participant Demographics. (Female residential students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville)

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Level</b>
1	18	Nursing	Freshman Undergrad
2	22	JREM	First Year Grad
3	23	JREM	First Year Grad
4	23	ADVT	First Year Grad
5	22	Education	First Year PhD
6	29	PR	Second Year Grad
7	23	ADVT	Second Year Grad
8	24	Children/Family Services	Junior
9	24	Psychology	Third Year PhD
10	24	Psychology	Third Year PhD
11	26	Business	Second Year Grad
12	23	School Psychology	Second Year Grad
13	26	School Psychology	Third Year PhD

**APPENDIX B**  
Recruitment Script

Hi, there!

My name is Paige Hill. I am a graduate student at the University of Tennessee in the Journalism and Electronic Media Department and am researching Social Comparison Theory and Instagram. I would like to invite you to participate because you use social media and are a female student at the University of Tennessee.

Participation in this research includes completing an in-person or online interview about your Instagram use regarding body image and social comparison, which will take approximately 30 minutes. There are no known risks involved in this research.

Please let me or Dr. Mustafa Oz know if you have any questions. You can reach me at [phill16@vols.utk.edu](mailto:phill16@vols.utk.edu) or Dr. Mustafa Oz at [moz@utk.edu](mailto:moz@utk.edu).

Thank you in advance for considering my request,

Paige Hill

Graduate Student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

[phill16@vols.utk.edu](mailto:phill16@vols.utk.edu)

## **APPENDIX C**

### Demographics

Basic information and demographics will be collected before research questions. Names and identities will be kept confidential, and anonymity will be protected throughout the interview and results.

1. Do you use Instagram?
2. Are you a University of Tennessee student?
3. What are you studying, and how far along in the program are you?
4. How old are you?

### Experiences and Instagram Use

This section aims to uncover overall positive and negative experiences, social media use, and habits among Instagram users.

1. When did you first create an account on Instagram?
2. What motivated you to do so?
3. On average, how many hours a day do you spend on the platform? Has this changed over time?
4. Why do you use Instagram?
5. When do you use the platform the most?
6. What content do you follow on the platform?
7. Do you believe there are standards or ideals when personally posting on Instagram?
8. How often do you post on the platform? When doing so, do you treat it like a task?
9. Do you care about like counts on Instagram?
10. Do you think Instagram provides a healthy or toxic space for users? Why or why not?

### Past versus Present Perceptions

This section aims to uncover if the perception of the image-sharing platform has changed over time among female college users at UTK. If so, why?

1. Has your perception of Instagram changed since you created your profile? If so, how?
2. Do you think the platform has altered its goals since you first became a user? If so, in what ways?
3. How do you think the algorithm of Instagram has changed if you believe it has?
4. As you get older, do you feel like your perception of Instagram has gotten more positive or negative?
5. If using the platform as a teenager, how did it make you feel versus now? [omit if participants did not have the platform under age 20]

### Social Comparison and Body Image

This section aims to reveal if female users at UTK compare themselves to those on Instagram, how social comparison makes them feel, how they use the platform themselves and how the Instagram algorithm plays a role on the platform.

1. Has the use of Instagram made your thoughts about body image as a whole or your own body change? If so, how?
2. Do you compare your body and/or lifestyle to others on social media? If so, how does that make you feel?
3. Do you feel jealous of other people's lives and/or bodies you see on the platform?

4. When seeing others' lives and bodies on Instagram that seem "perfect," do you feel motivated?
5. How often do you see posts that make you feel negative about yourself? How often do you see posts that make you feel positive about yourself?
6. Has a celebrity or influencer ever made you feel positive or negative about your life or body image? Can you recount an example?
7. Do you think there are pressures for females to come across as "sexy" or "attractive" on social media?
8. Which body types do you think are represented the most and least on Instagram?
9. How much pressure do you feel to be "perfect" on Instagram?
10. When posting on Instagram, how many photos do you take to get "the one"?
11. Do you edit or reshape images of yourself before posting them to Instagram?
12. Do you think "body-positive" trends on Instagram are positively changing beauty standards? Why or why not?
13. Do you feel like Instagram assists with setting unattainable goals in relation to lifestyles and body images for females? If so, why?

## Conclusion

This section aims to better understand future usage among users, how to combat harmful effects and if other social platforms carry the same characteristics. The presented research questions can be critical indicators for future research direction.

1. Do you think Instagram could create resources to combat the harmful effects of social comparison and body image on the platform?

2. Would you support a policy that requires images to be flagged when edited?
3. Concerning body image and social comparison, do you feel like other social platforms pose similar effects on users? If so, which ones?
4. Do you believe that your use of Instagram will change in the future? Whether that be the content that you seek or overall usage?

## **APPENDIX D**

Interview transcriptions totaled 106 pages of data. All can be requested, if desired.

The code book created spanned over a four-page table. It can be requested, if desired.

## VITA

Paige Hill was born June 30, 1999, in a small Appalachian town called Galax, Virginia. After graduating high school in 2016, she attended East Tennessee State University, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in Media and Communication, with a concentration in Journalism, in May 2020. Paige decided to further her studies and began her graduate program, studying Journalism and Electronic Media at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 2021. Her research interests include social media effects and resources to create better user experiences.