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Social Media and Well-Being: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Exploring Interpretations of Social Media, Perception of Self, and Well-Being
Amongst University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the association between personal interpretations of social media, self-perception, and well-being. Previous literature indicated increased social media use resulting in lower self-esteem (see Vogel, Rose, Roberts and Eckles, 2014; Murphy, 2013) while also highlighting the benefits that connection-promoting (see Clark, Algoe and Green, 2017) and the power of 'likes' (see Burrow and Rainone, 2017) have on self-esteem and overall well-being. Quantitative methods dominate this research area without providing richly detailed subjective accounts from participants. As such, this study employed semi-structured interviews in order to gain an understanding of user experiences and how these impact upon self-perception and well-being. The participants in this study were six undergraduate students, aged 18-25, with 2 males and 4 females. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses, two superordinate themes emerged from the transcripts. The first centred around self-perception and self-presentation, whereas the second focussed on the uses of social media. There was an overall consensus that social media is useful in the modern world for staying connected with peers and the wider world, but negatively affected well-being and self-esteem when engaging in activities such as social comparison as it causes users to evaluate the perceived deficiencies in their own lives against idealised others. This study presents an opportunity for further research to explore why people continue to use social media given its detrimental effects on well-being.

KEY WORDS:	WELL-BEING	THE SELF	SOCIAL MEDIA	CONNECTIVITY	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
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Introduction

Context of the Research

Social media is still a relatively new way for humans to interact and communicate. Despite this, it is extremely popular in the modern world with 3.484 billion active users as of January 2019, 45% of the global population (Chaffey, 2019). Studies have shown that internet use, such as social media engagement, has a negative impact on user's offline social networks and integration. An increase in internet use was associated with an increase in depression and loneliness as a result of shrinking social circles (Kraut et al., 1998), supported by Nie (2001) whose results suggest that internet use damaged users' relationships and well-being by replacing face-to-face interactions. However, upon re-examination Kraut et al. (2002) found that the negative association detected in the original sample had disappeared, suggesting that differences concerning the effect of internet use could be caused by alterations in the nature of internet use itself (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). Furthermore, previous research labels face-to-face communication, or self-disclosure, as equivocal in meaning to technology-mediated self-disclosure (Nguyen, Bin and Campbell, 2012), with a correlation between positive attitudes towards self-disclosure and intimacy via increased social media usage (Ledbetter et al., 2011).

Despite its popularity, few qualitative studies exist concerning the participant's experience and perspective of social media in relation to well-being, and therefore this study will explore this paradigm in relation to previous research and theory with an expectation that participants will report an overall negative affect of social media experience on well-being. Previous research has proposed a number of factors that may facilitate the relationship between social media and well-being, which appear to correlate with one another. These are presented and discussed here.

Social Media and The Self

The self and identity are recognised as related but distinct concepts. While people have only one self, it comprises many discrete identities (Brinthaupt and Lipka, 2002). Generally, researchers agree that the internet provides its users with ample opportunities to experiment with their identity (Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999; Katz and Rice, 2002), which are stimulated through a unique set of internet communication characteristics such as: limited auditory and visual cues encouraging the enhancement and suppression of physical features (Valkenburg, Schouten and Peter, 2006); anonymity reducing a sense of real life repercussions, leading to greater disclosure of aspects of the self (Spears et al., 2000); and isolation from real life social communities encouraging identity experimentation through a limited commitment to online communities (Turkle, 1995).

The significance of social media is ever increasing as they represent platforms on which one can "advertise" their living experiences (Gunduz, 2017). Interpersonal relationships and the social contexts in which they develop are essential in the identity formation process (Youniss and Smollar, 1985; Adams and Marshall, 1996; Côté, 2009), but social media in the modern world has completely transformed the social landscape from what it was even 20 years ago (Davis, 2013). As such, questions are raised about how individuals, and particularly young people, create, perceive and experience their identities within this new climate (Buckingham, 2007). Arnett (2004)

in his study on emerging adulthood identified pursuing constant approval from peers as a feature of self-identity exploration in young adults, as the need to be seen and valued are recognized as fundamental to self-fulfilment and well-being (Greenwood, 2013).

One key motivation for social media users 18 to 34 years old is a need for interaction with others (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Users in this age range are more likely than their elders to prefer social media for interacting with friends and family, and also are more likely to reverse the views of others on the platform. Face-to-face communication limits the ability to self-represent due to factors such as social context but offers adaptable presentation alternatives e.g. body language. On social media, however, self-presentation of identity is limited due to its pre-structured and rigid nature forcing users to present themselves in a way that is constructed in part by the app (Marwick, 2005). It is easier to portray an ideal lifestyle on image-based platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat as people generally trust these visual modalities more than text-based ones such as Twitter or Facebook (Sundar, 2008), as presenting the self visually portrays a sense of realism. The text-based nature of Twitter, with its 280-character limit, challenges the extent to which one can illustrate their life. Twitter use was found to be more for political, sport, and international events communication rather than presenting the self (Tumasjan et al., 2011; Watson, 2016). LinkedIn as a text-based medium, on the other hand, provides professionals with the opportunity to profile their backgrounds in education and professional experience (Van Dijck, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that different platforms serve different purposes (Van Dijck, 2013). LinkedIn, which includes just one formal profile photo and incorporates fact-based text, is for self-promotion, whereas Facebook is utilised more for self-presentation. Despite this, comparisons do exist on LinkedIn in the form of emphasizing one's skills and attributes, perhaps more so than other platforms (Chae, 2018).

Social Media and Social Comparison

Social comparison, as an intrinsic mental process regulating thoughts about the self and others (Corcoran, Crusius and Mussweiler, 2011), has been linked to social media and well-being with repeated self-comparison resulting in a negative affect (White et al., 2006). Social Comparison Theory posits that people possess a fundamental drive to learn about their own attitudes, beliefs and abilities (Suls and Wheeler, 2013) which serve many functions including evaluating the self (Festinger, 1954), regulating emotions and well-being (Tesser and Campbell, 1982; Taylor and Brown, 1988), and making decisions (Camerer and Lovallo, 1999). The two types of comparisons that exist are upwards and downwards. Upwards social comparisons occur when comparing oneself to someone with superior positive characteristics, whereas downwards social comparisons occur when comparing oneself to someone with inferior negative characteristics (Suls and Wheeler, 2013). Upwards and downwards comparisons are made on social media via posts such as photos, which allow users to convey their personal characteristics against others, or for others to compare against themselves (Vogel et al., 2014). Upwards comparisons likely garner feelings of inadequacy, poor self-evaluation, and negative affect experiences (Marsh and Parker, 1984; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle, 1985), however its benefits lie in inspiring users to become more like the comparison target (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). Alternatively, downwards comparisons often lead to positive affect and self-

evaluation (Wills, 1981), but can also garner negative feelings through revealing how one's own situation could be worse (Aspinwall, 1997).

Many social networking sites provide a unique opportunity for social comparison, from Facebook and Twitter to Instagram and Snapchat (Chae, 2018). However, a two-way effect of social comparison is seen. Image-based social media comparison can have a negative effect on loneliness and a positive effect on happiness after seeing happy posts (Pittman and Reich, 2016). Conversely, sites such as Instagram can negatively impact emotions by decreasing positive affect through high social comparison (De Vries et al., 2018). Similarly, Instagram can decrease loneliness exclusively among people with lower social comparison orientations (Yang, 2016). Passive social media users, such as those who view profiles but do not interact with others, may be at the greatest risk of negative affect for social comparison, such that they lack the necessary information about their connections' real lives to identify the constructed self that is displayed on social media (Clark, Algoe and Green, 2017).

Social Media and Subjective Well-being research

Subjective well-being is a global evaluation of an individual's life (Diener et al., 2009) and can be thought of more easily as happiness, referring to beliefs and opinions towards one's own quality of life (Veenhoven, 1991).

Social media is unique from other forms of internet use as it creates a social pressure to immediately reply to multiple simultaneous messages (Thomé et al., 2010), thereby forming perceived associations between instant messaging and stress and depression (Thomé et al., 2007; Van den Eijnden et al., 2008). In depressed adolescents, social media may be used for mood regulation. As well as this, anxiousness was found to correlate with more social media use (Woods and Scott, 2016), following on from research linking high neuroticism with a preference for the social uses of the internet (Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2000). It should be noted that the direction of this association is ambiguous.

Self-esteem is one aspect of well-being that is well researched, with a number of conflicting results concerning the nature of its relationship with social media. Vogel et al. (2014) found lower levels of self-esteem in association with increased Facebook use. Furthermore, increased Facebook use and network size was found to be linked with lower self-esteem also (Murphy, 2013). Contrastingly, self-esteem can be increased by observing one's own Facebook profile (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011) suggesting that notions of the self are improved by the user's selective self-presentation. Additionally, social media can help users meet needs for acceptance and belonging through connection-promoting (Clark, Algoe and Green, 2017) as high-quality intimate relationships are key to well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001). Furthermore, Burrow and Rainone (2017) suggest that 'likes' have a powerful influence on self-esteem after finding a positive association with the number of likes on Facebook photos. Explanations for this impact suggest a need for belonging among users after perceiving likes as a form of validation (Gangadharbatla, 2008; Zell and Moeller, 2018).

These findings could be crucial to understanding why people use social media sites despite its detrimental effects on well-being, though more research is needed to confirm whether this is an overall positive or negative effect.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) is a paradigm that focuses on an individual's choice of media (Katz, 1959). The main purpose of this theory is to explain the specific choices of media that people make over others, revealing the psychological needs leading users to utilize a particular medium. A user's behaviour is assumed to be goal-oriented whilst also being aware of their needs, thereby actively engaging in the interpretation and integration process of media into their lives. The approach suggests that users choose certain media to meet their needs and use that medium to fulfil specific gratifications (Katz and Blumler, 1974). Elliott and Rosenberg (1987) argue that the Uses and Gratifications paradigm will inevitably be employed for new technologies of mass communication in order to explain the users underlying motivations and decisions leading to the use of emerging modes of communication, and thus the paradigm can be applied to motivations of social media use. Social media is a 'virtual community', which can be described as a "voluntary group of individuals with shared interests who interact with one another through computer-supported networks for a relative long period of time, exchanging sociability, social support, and resources" (Mesch, 2015: 332). Virtual community usage is determined by a set of key values or needs, and considering that these values encompass purposive value, self-discovery, entertainment value, social enhancement, and maintaining interpersonal connectivity (Cheung and Lee, 2009) we can understand how they directly link to social media usage.

Methodology

Design

The present study adopted a phenomenological epistemological approach in order to gain an appreciation of the individual participant's perspective on social media and their own subjective well-being, and as such a qualitative research method was chosen as it accounts for a person's emotions, thoughts and feelings (Quinlan, 2011), which is appropriate for sensitive research of this nature. People are inextricably entwined with the social world, acting dynamically and actively within immediate and wider social contexts, and as such this study will use qualitative research to explore the intricacies of multidimensional participant experiences in a way that assumption-based quantitative research cannot (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Effective qualitative research follows parameters that are "closed enough to guide evaluation and open enough to enable transformation of assumptions" (Parker, 2004: 96) in so far that the rigid criteria typical of quantitative research threatens to authenticate particular variations of qualitative methods to the detriment of others, thus quelling any new methodological improvements (Elliott et al., 1999). Therefore, six one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used as its flexibility allows participants to respond in a manner that produces rich, in-depth data that grants the researcher the opportunity to probe further during analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2015).

Participants

The participants for the current study were male and female undergraduate university students aged 18-25 from Manchester Metropolitan University and were recruited using the snowball sampling method. This method was employed as it takes advantage of the established social networks of university students in order to expand the set of potential participants (Thomson, 1997). Of the age demographic chosen, 83% are social media users (Chaffey, 2019) and this age range also corresponds with the critical period for identity formation and social skills (Arnett, 2000). Each participant has engaged with social media to some extent through-out their lives and therefore have first-hand experience with the phenomena, which Creswell et al. (2007) identify as critical to participant selection. Considering the high percentage of young adult users on social media and the effect it has on well-being, this sample was deemed most appropriate.

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
Amy	Female	22	Student	White
Ben	Male	21	Student	White
Chris	Male	21	Student	White
Donna	Female	24	Student	Black
Emily	Female	20	Student	White
Fiona	Female	23	Student	Asian

Table 1: *Presentation of Relevant Participation Information*

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as its flexibility allows participants to respond in a manner that produces rich, in-depth data for analysis. It was crucial that an open-ended question format was adopted to allow fluid narratives to be formed around social media and well-being. A major advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that the researcher is in a position to ask follow-up questions in real-time based on any interesting or important points being made by the interviewee. An interview schedule was developed, comprising questions focusing on the influence of social media on perceptions of self, self-esteem, and well-being, which were inspired by prior literature. Participants were briefed beforehand using a Participation Information sheet and subsequently given a Consent Form. To consent, participants were required to fully read the nature of the research and their rights as detailed on the Participation Information sheet, such as their right to withdraw their information

from the study and their right to refuse to answer any questions. Interviews were conducted in each of the participants' student homes, as to ensure their comfort during the process (Smith and Osborn, 2003, in Howitt, 2013: 345). Interviews were conducted one-to-one over a six-day period, with each day consisting of one interview each. Interviews were transcribed at the end of each day in order to identify any areas of interest based on responses which could be elaborated on in future interviews. The interviews were recorded using audio recording equipment and stored as an encrypted file on the researcher's computer. Completion of the interviews was immediately followed by a debrief in which participants were notified of the university counselling service details and other support services.

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the collected data. This method was regarded as most appropriate for this research due to its phenomenological nature befitting the exploration of topics within health and social psychology for understanding how people perceive and understand significant objects within their lives (Smith and Eatough, 2015, in Lyons and Coyle, 2016: 50). With theoretical origins in hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), IPA looks for the meanings embedded in common life practices rather than simply describing concepts (Lopez and Willis, 2004), allowing the researcher to extract meanings from the narratives produced by participants, although the participant may not be aware of them. Analysis of the data required reading and re-reading the transcripts in order to identify the emergence of themes. The coding process was informed by Storey's (2015, in Lyons and Coyle, 2016: 68) IPA recommendations providing detailed information on the process and practicalities of applying IPA to interview data. Due to the nature of IPA, interpretations of the data can be idiographic, in that emergent themes relate to the personal experiences of an individual, or nomothetic, in that they can manifest across multiple participants. Each transcript was analysed independently, thereby upholding the idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) and were then analysed in parallel in order to identify nomothetic themes.

Analysis and Discussion

After conducting an IPA, 2 superordinate themes emerged from the transcripts. These central but intersecting themes summarise participants' experiences of self-esteem and self-perception through social media. The two themes discovered were 'Image' and 'Uses of Social Media'. These are discussed here, as well as their subordinate themes, with reference to extracts from the interview transcripts and relevant theory and literature.

Superordinate Theme One: Image

Analysis of the transcripts revealed two recurring themes that were grouped together under the banner of Image: Self-Perception and Self-Presentation. The internet is unique in that users can choose to be kept anonymous, leading to a more in-depth

exploration into their identity (Spears et al., 2000). As well as this, social media provides an opportunity to present an ideal self that other users will approve of (Gunduz, 2017; Greenwood, 2013).

Self-Perception

This subordinate theme reflects the participant's view of themselves within the social media atmosphere i.e. their self-image, and the effect that social media has on the participants self-perception and idea of their own identity. Brinthaup and Lipka (2002) state that a person can have multiple identities, and in the 21st century this can extend to the online world too.

"It's just a portrayal of one side of a person" (Amy, 85-86)

Donna spoke about not taking her tweets at face value as they may not represent who she truly is, which suggests that her Twitter identity differs in some respect from her real-life identity (35-36), also stating that "Snapchat is where I'm a bit more myself" (39). This highlights a crucial element of social media in that one platform may house a distinct identity for the user that differs fundamentally from another, while both may be contained within the overarching self. This represents social media as a fulfilment of specific gratifications (Katz and Blumler, 1974), namely exploring alternate aspects of the self. However, those who engage significantly less with social media, such as Fiona, deem their identities in the real world and online as "very similar" (32).

"Social media allows us to create perceptions of self by identifying within us a specific group" (Chris, 165-166)

This quote reveals that social media allows for the consolidation of a user's identity through connecting with like-minded individuals. It is through experimentation with shared interests that social media provides opportunities to create "an identity for them where they can form social bonds and share experiences" (Chris, 170-171). Although the identity portrayed on social media is just one side of a person's self, it does represent a very real identity that can aid the user "develop" as a person (Chris, 192).

"I was too concerned with likes, and it made me feel really shallow and bad"
(Amy, 203-204)

"It contributes to your self-image in a way that it can be kind of vain or conceited" (Donna, 94)

The general consensus among the participants was that social media had a negative effect on their self-perception and well-being. Engagement in self-presentation activities, which are central to the social media experience, caused participants to develop negative feelings about themselves in that they felt "shallow" (Amy) or "vain" (Donna). However, this can be contradictory to how participants perceive themselves to be or what they should be as Donna notes that these representations may "not necessarily [be] how you're going to perceive a good woman" (111-112), highlighting a disconnect between how you may see yourself and how you present yourself. This is explored further in the next theme.

Self-Presentation

The second subordinate theme focuses on how individuals choose to present themselves over social media. With such a wide and immediate audience, social media provides the opportunity to sell oneself like a “brand” (Chris, 190; Donna, 13) (Gunduz, 2017). Amy stated that “being recognised makes you feel good” (69) revealing that having others appreciate one’s ideal self-presentation can have a positive affect on well-being and self-esteem. Changing the way in which one presents themselves to appease their audience may be an effect of self-perception upon self-presentation. The desire to “feel good” through recognition from other users drives a necessity to tailor the presented content, which can also have negative implications as discussed earlier, through feelings on vanity and conceitedness.

“I have to make sure I take a good picture before I upload it” (Donna, 81)

Donna’s statement is indicative of the human need to feel seen and valued by others (Greenwood, 2013) and the social enhancement value of U&G explains this desire to portray an ideal lifestyle through pursuing an enhancement of social status. The expression “I have to” suggests that social media removes an element of autonomy from the individual if they wish to be accepted by other users. There is an indication that social media puts “a lot of pressure or attention on something that’s not really important” (95-96) rather than “stuff that really matters” (97-98), revealing that participants’ know what the focal points of their lives should be, but rather allow social media to dictate to them what is really important: presenting the ideal version of yourself to others. In this way then, the user is responsible for their own negative affect since they recognise the ways in which they are being manipulated. Generally, the participants expressed a recognition of this inauthentic portrayal over social media.

“You only post what you want people to see. You don’t post real aspects of your life” (Ben, 25-26)

“You’re going to get removed or blocked or unfriended if you’re posting stuff that no one wants to see all the time” (Chris, 10-11)

“When I was younger I’d spend all this time on Instagram and Facebook and hide behind this online persona” (Emily, 120-121)

“There’s probably a lot of discrepancy between who they actually are and how they present themselves” (Fiona, 35-36)

Portraying an ideal self by tailoring content seems to represent a desire to be accepted by other users, as evidenced by Chris’ expressions that you will face rejection if you present “stuff that no one wants to see” (11), implying that rejection will lead to lower self-esteem as one’s social standing decreases. Emily articulates how she “definitely felt better” (93) about herself after taking a break from social media revealing that this presentation of the ideal lifestyle, which is “never as great as it looks” (95), can have detrimental effects for the viewer. Therefore, specific self-presentation represents a desire to be seen by other users because “they want the approval of other people” (Chris, 227), explaining why users give an inauthentic portrayal of themselves. However, social media platforms differ in the form of presentation that is required. LinkedIn necessitates “more strategic” (Fiona, 19) presentations in a professional setting (Van Dijck, 2013) such that giving an inauthentic representation of the self can have alternate disadvantageous consequences such as being rejected from a job after having lied about one’s credentials. Therefore, an authentic presentation is paramount for social enhancement whereas the opposite can be said to be true among less

professional platforms. Nevertheless, participants view the opportunity for self-presentation as “pretty restricted and somewhat isolated” (Ben, 28), suggesting that even a desire to fully express oneself authentically would still not be sufficient due to the nature of social media itself (Marwick, 2005).

Superordinate Theme Two: Uses of Social Media

Analysis of the transcripts revealed two additional recurring themes: Comparing Oneself with Others and Connectivity. These were grouped together under the banner of how people use social media as the participants expressed its usefulness in remaining in contact with friends and remaining up to date with the wider world, along with comparing oneself to other users as an unavoidable facet of social media.

Comparing Oneself to Others

Participants felt as though comparing oneself to others was an inevitable aspect of social media usage for men and women, particularly on image-based platforms such as Instagram where it is easier to portray an ideal lifestyle as people tend to trust visual modalities more (Sundar, 2008).

“If you’re following a body builder, and you’re a not big person, you’re going to feel bad about yourself” (Ben, 105-106)

“It can be really negative in the sense that you tend to compare yourself to other females” (Donna, 14-15)

“I know girls my age now who are still going through Instagram and worshipping these girls and hating on themselves” (Emily, 66-67)

“She’d just think that this is what beauty is and she doesn’t look like that, so she’ll probably feel a lot more self-conscious” (Fiona, 177-178)

Donna’s further expression of how it is “worse for women” (109) coupled with the quotes from Emily and Fiona suggest that social media sets a standard that individuals use to compare themselves against, much like social media dictating what is important to the individual. The effect of negative upwards comparisons was also seen among the male participants. Chris recounts that seeing muscular men on social media can cause him to “feel a bit shit” (151-152), while Ben states that “you’re going to feel bad about yourself” (106) after observing these seemingly ideal body types, signifying the effect that a negative upwards comparison can have on self-esteem (Marsh and Parker, 1984; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle, 1985). However, as Lockwood and Kunda (1997) suggest, upwards comparisons can be beneficial to users as “some people might use that as a motivation” (106-107), thereby inspiring participants to become more like their comparison targets.

“There’s always going to be someone out there who’s got more connections or contacts than you, has achieved a lot more success than you” (Fiona, 118-120)

The quotes from participants also revealed that these comparisons exist not only in a physical sense, but also professionally and intellectually as evidenced by Fiona, who only uses the LinkedIn platform after having left Facebook and Twitter several years ago. Taking into account the quotes mentioned earlier, this suggests that upwards

comparisons negatively effect self-esteem by garnering feelings of inferiority for users, regardless of the category of comparison (Marsh and Parker, 1984; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle, 1985), while also acting as a means of inspiration as evidenced by her use of the word “hope” that she will be “that successful” one day (127) (Kunda, 1997). Chris describes these comparisons as “a constant cycle of competition” (108) suggesting that little enjoyment is gained through posting on social media. The “competition” element suggests that the purpose of posting is to have others engage with one’s content in an upward comparison (Vogel et al., 2014), while “constant” indicates a negative affect through the activity being a laborious, tiresome effort.

Connectivity

A common theme identified in the transcripts was one of connectivity. The ability to keep in contact with peers is essential to the use of social media (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008), as in today’s world it allows communication between people like never before. Cheung and Lee (2009) identified this as a key value to the use of virtual communities in the form of maintaining interpersonal connectivity and purposive value.

“It makes me feel happy because I’m more connected. I can see what people are doing and I’m happy people are enjoying themselves” (Amy, 150-151)

“It’s still the way that I connect with people...[it] increases well-being because of that sense of connectedness” (Ben, 10-11; 202)

“I could keep up to date with all that was happening with my friends and in general” (Fiona, 6-7)

To the participants, social media is essential to facilitate connectivity with friends and extending even to the wider world as “society has become so dependent on it” (Fiona, 94). Amy’s use of the word “happy” and Ben’s sense of increased well-being through connectedness suggests there are benefits to its use through the social bonding it provides (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001). Chris identified this as a “key aspect” (22) of using social media, highlighting social media as fundamental to staying up to date with friends in the modern world as it is important for users to interact with their peers, perhaps for fear of missing out on experiences.

“It makes you feel a bit shit if you’ve ever been ignored by someone and you then see them out with your other friends” (Chris, 79-80)

“You’ll be missing out...because everyone has moved towards using it... it can have bad consequences for the individual, in terms of their well-being, and in terms of just feeling like a part of society” (Fiona, 92-93; 95-96)

These statements emphasise the impact that exclusion from social activities can have on a person’s self-esteem (Clark, Algoe and Green, 2017). Although Chris’ friends could have left him out for a myriad of reasons, simply being excluded has caused him to feel sub-standard in the context of his friendship group (Woods and Scott, 2016; Clark, Algoe and Green, 2017). This emphasis on being excluded in the real world could be a sign of pre-existing loneliness that is exacerbated by social media (Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2000). Other participants share this sentiment as Fiona notes that “social media breeds insecurity” (134-135).

“I went on a social media blackout when my ex-boyfriend died” (Donna, 119)

Similarly, Donna spoke of her negative experience with connectivity. Her recount of her ex-boyfriend passing away was interpreted as a quasi-voluntary abandonment of social media due to a need to “alleviate any added stress” (118-119) from “the negativity of people’s opinions” (120). It is clear from her response that, although her trauma was experienced in the real world, her presence on social media only intensified this effect as a result of connectivity. This is indicative of the anonymous nature of social media, in that users feel as though their actions in the virtual world will not have any real-life repercussions, therefore providing Donna’s abusers with the opportunity to attack her online (Spears et al., 2000).

Furthermore, Fiona expressed that her desire to “keep up to date” (6) with her friends as a youth was “quite overwhelming” (113):

“I’d maybe catch up one day and by the next day there’d be hundreds more tweets and I’d think ‘ugh I’ve got to scroll through all these tweets again” (113-115)

A breakdown in entertainment and purposive value could have conceivably motivated her decision to abandon most social media, as mentioned earlier, and evidenced by her expression “I feel a lot happier” (148). Fiona also identified real world friends and connections as more meaningful to her. An issue she holds against social media is that many of her online ‘friends’ were people she hadn’t spoken to in years, and so she didn’t feel as though she needed to keep up with their lives anymore:

“If someone is important to me...we’ll communicate in natural ways, rather than me gleaning from what they’ve posted how they’re doing. I’d rather ask them than to try to figure it out from what they’re doing online.” (142-145)

This desire for authenticity and intimacy in her relationships is at the core of her decision to abandon social media as it doesn’t add any value to her life to maintain these connections (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001).

Final Discussion

The aims of this study were successfully explored by using the IPA process to create and analyse the superordinate and subordinate themes respectively. The current study predicted that social media would have an overall negative effect on well-being and supports previous findings that social media use is associated with lower levels of self-esteem and well-being (Vogel, Rose, Roberts and Eckles, 2014; Murphy, 2013), whilst also exploring factors that mediate this relationship such as comparing oneself to others and the ability to explore and present one’s identity.

Generally, these findings revealed social media to be both potentially beneficial and detrimental to an individual’s well-being, thereby supporting previous theory and literature in this area stating that the use of virtual communities is determined by fulfilling the key values of Uses and Gratifications theory (Cheung and Lee, 2009), such as demonstrating the improvement of well-being through connection-promoting (Clark, Algae and Green, 2017; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001), as well as highlighting the accrual of negative feelings through social comparison (Marsh and Parker, 1984; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle, 1985). However, further

exploration of this topic area is necessary to establish why users remain on social media despite its detrimental effects on well-being.

Concluding remarks from this research suggest that social media is a facilitator for the formation and consolidation of distinct identities via the use of different platforms (Katz and Blumler, 1974), representing a fulfilment of specific gratifications for the user. Several key values of U&G (Cheung and Lee, 2009) were epitomised in the data. The researcher found that connecting with other like-minded people was significant in consolidating perceptions of the self through self-discovery, aligning with research by Turkle (1995), Wallace (1999), and Katz and Rice (2002) stating that online communities encourage identity experimentation. This social connectedness also provides a basis for promoting well-being through a shared sense of identity (Jetten et al., 2014). Connectivity is seemingly the primary motivator for participants' use of social media as it allows them to not only keep up with their peers, which helps boost well-being, but also prevents them from missing out on the wider social world which would counteract the positive effect of connecting with friends.

Naturally, this study was accompanied by limitations. One such limitation was the use of younger participants. Although many social media users fall into the 18-25 age range, these findings cannot be used as a generalisation of all ages as the median age for social media users is 30.8 (Chaffey, 2019). With this in mind, social media has been revealed to benefit adults of older ages beyond mere social engagement, but by also acting as a means of cognitive stimulation (Quinn, 2018). Along with this is the limitation of the sample size. This study only used six participants, so it cannot be generalised to a population of the same age range as it does not encompass a substantial range of perspectives. An enhanced evaluation of experiences can be made with data from a larger and wider ranging sample.

Nevertheless, this study supplemented the current body of literature within this research area, whilst also providing a foundation for further expansion. Possible strategies going forward include partnering psychometric measures of well-being with qualitative data in order to explicitly present participants' levels of well-being rather than simply inferring from the data as they were here.

Reflexive Analysis

“The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of their world” (Smith and Osborn, 2015: 53). It is accepted among qualitative researchers that an objective viewpoint is not possible, as merely studying a phenomenon will in itself affect and change it (Parker, 2004). Thus, by being reflexive it allows the researcher to critically self-evaluate how their own beliefs, values and experiences may affect the outcome of the research (Etherington, 2004).

I chose this research topic as I am a young person in the same age range as the participants in this study and I also use social media on a regular basis. During my second year at university I noticed that social media had a tremendous impact on my well-being when I took a break from it to focus on my studies. I felt that this break gave me a clear perspective on how I was using social media in my daily life and how it affected my anxiety and stress levels as a result, particularly as I was using it as an escape from personal commitments and social responsibilities.

Upon undertaking the literature review for the project, I found that social media was consistently linked to lower levels of self-esteem and conditions such as depression, and as such I was curious as to whether other users were aware of the impact that social media was having on themselves. In my research I expected the participants to give anecdotal accounts of the platform that correlated to my own, such as how it had negatively affected their well-being as previous research suggests, and how it had negatively affected my own. Instead, I found that participants spoke primarily about the general effects on the majority of users, with some participants even expressing the benefits of social media such as providing an ideal to strive towards. I realise that this may have been to avoid portraying themselves negatively as unhappy people whose mood and well-being are strongly affected by something flippant as social media, having been guilty of this myself. This can be quite embarrassing for them and would be an understandable tactic.

On previous academic projects I have conducted interviews akin to those in this research, however I felt apprehensive when it became time to organise an interview schedule and to develop interview questions, doubting my own interviewing skills as a researcher. Yet, I do feel as though this was supplemented by my existing relationships with some of the participants. My biggest fear was in eliciting enough data from the participants during the interview stage, as I felt that many were too short to form any meaningful discussion. This was in part due to my method of identifying areas of interest after each interview day, which occasionally ruined the flow of conversation and prevented participants from fully expressing alternative points. Nevertheless, at the analysis stage I discovered that I had gathered sufficient evidence from the participants to make adequate interpretational analyses that linked well to previous research.

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