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Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: An Experiential Perspective on Social Networking Sites

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Facebook – FB

Thematic Analysis – TA

Social Media – SM

Social Networking Site(s) – SNS(s)

II. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the participants who shared their experiences in this study. Thank you for your time and thank you for your openness throughout the interviews. I hope I have given voice to your experiences in a way that has helped shed light and insight into the complex world of social media. I would like to thank my initial supervisor for her support in the early stages of this research project. I would also like to thank my current supervisor for her constant guidance and invaluable encouragement in helping me overcome the challenges and difficulties throughout this journey. A big appreciation goes to the members of staff at City University who helped me navigate some of the tricky challenges in developing this study. Last but certainly not least, to my family and friends, for their patience and understanding and for providing me with the constant support and space needed to complete this research project.

III. Declaration of Powers

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IV. Preface to the Portfolio

'We have to let ourselves not know before we can discover anything new' (Welwood, 2001, p. 334).

This portfolio consists of three sections: a qualitative research study, a combined client study and process report and a publishable journal article. The client study presents my experience and therapeutic work with a client struggling with depression and anxiety. This form of anxiety included social anxiety as well as a persistent negative sense of self that manifested as low self-esteem. What emerged from my experience in working with this particular client, along with my professional development as a trainee, is the powerful role of being 'unknowing' within the therapeutic and research process. This theme threads its way throughout this portfolio, emerging within my therapeutic work and the qualitative research journey I embarked upon with eight research participants.

As therapists, we hold a number of benefits when it comes to data collection; we are aware of how to use the self as a tool in a relational context, to offer our warmth, empathy and nonjudgemental attitude and to provide others with a safe space to express themselves (Finlay, 2011). Finlay (2011) highlights the significance of 'being-with' a participant - to be able to let ourselves go and to be open and unknowing. Throughout the interview process, Finlay's (2011) insights resonated with me when she states that the process of gathering data is less about the application of techniques and more about encountering the other person. This echoes with my experience from trainee to counselling psychologist, as I navigated the world of integrative therapy and searched for a therapeutic style that connected to my perception and experience of the world. Humanistic values embedded within the core principles of person-centered therapy became a bedrock and applying the three core conditions formed an integral part of my therapeutic practice. Yet what struck me most about the person-centered approach is the desire for an equality forming between therapist and client and the central idea that the client is the expert of their own lives.

Whilst holding the principles of person-centred values, I also incorporated Cognitive-behavioural Therapy (CBT) into my practice and this approach became one of the dominant modalities I drew upon whilst delivering short-term (6-12 session) work during my clinical placements. In utilising a CBT model with this particular client, one of the challenges that emerged in my therapeutic approach was around striking the right balance between providing her with direct feedback with moments where I felt I could have been more unknowing. Upon reflecting on this relationship, I noticed that I was perhaps providing this client with a 'safety net' or a 'comfort blanket', in being someone she might have perceived as a 'knower' and a person she could rely on to guide her through the model and the change process.

As a reflective practitioner, I recognise there is a constant desire for growth and learning generated through reflecting upon how I interact with clients. Through contemplations upon my encounters with clients using the CBT model, I came to realise that there are significant therapeutic moments where adopting an unknowing position can lead to valuable insights and a shift in the focus of the therapeutic work. As Padesky (1993, p.4) highlights, if you are too sure of where you are going, "you only look ahead and miss a detour that can lead you to a better place". Such a moment was highlighted in my client study, where an intervention of pausing and then engaging in a further collaborative exploration of this client's emotion, could have facilitated a deeper connection to the emotional realm and perhaps a felt sense within.

As an integrative practitioner, I am aware of the value in maintaining an open and inclusive attitude towards different therapeutic models and techniques (Zabro, Tasca, Cattafi, & Compare, 2016). During my training, one concept I came across whilst exploring the work of Carl Rogers and Eugene Gendlin was the bodily felt sense. Therapeutic unfolding, or "the process of making implicit felt meaning explicit" is when we communicate from a felt sense as opposed to from what we *think* about it (Welwood, 2001, p. 335). The focusing process developed by Gendlin (1962, 1964, 1981) highlights the significance of client change arising through the process of tapping into "presently felt meanings" primarily experienced in the body (Welwood, 2001, p. 335) echoing the work of Merleau-Ponty (1960) and Todres (2007). This potentially stimulates a connection with a felt sense that exists within a tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1966). Yet within this technique, there is an emphasis on maintaining a position of 'not knowing' so that something new can emerge (Hendricks, 2007), as the body holds its own wisdom (Gendlin, 1992). Through the process of unfolding, a client can alternate between a connection to an elusive felt sense and the expression of the meanings implicit within this felt sense (Welwood, 2001).

During my client's process of articulating certain emotions she was feeling in response to a self-critical thought, there was a moment where holding an unknowing position - as opposed to providing her with direct feedback - may have generated a space to connect with a deeper felt sense (Welwood, 2001). During such moments, the therapist can assist a client to 'pause' the emotion they are expressing or the cognitive contemplating as a means to attend to a bodily felt sense (Hendricks, 2007). Hendricks (2007) brings a case for integrating focusing with CBT by incorporating focusing responses. Within a CBT intervention, the therapist and client can discover whether a thought (e.g. 'It's hopeless') really feels 'hopeless' somewhere in a client's body, allowing a movement into an experiential level, thereby moving away from the cognitive (Hendricks, 2007). She reports that focusing can help clients detect and change belief systems embedded within their cognitive core schemas at a much deeper level (Hendricks, 2007).

Welwood (2001) states that this unfolding process, where there is a dynamic movement between articulation and nonarticulation is the crux of all innovative discovery and insight, whether within the

therapeutic encounter or the sciences or arts. This process can also be applied to the research setting, as Finlay (2011, p.30) highlights that an engagement within phenomenological research, allows the researcher to tap into an awareness that our bodies are in constant connection with the world, by concentrating on “the visceral and felt sense dimensions of bodily lived experience”.

My reflections on this clinical case illustrate my contemplation on whether there was a potential collusion in using a pure CBT model with this particular client, in terms of colluding with the rational and the cognitive. As I indicate, this client had a potential tendency to overcompensate for her emotional needs not being met by rationalising and overanalysing her predicament. From this, I realised there was a greater potential value in incorporating the unfolding process and thinking about the impact of the wider-body-mind connections whilst being an unknowing witness to her inner experience. As Teasdale (1996) notes, the use of rational argument to challenge a negative thought, if agreed upon on an ‘intellectual level’ may not alter the felt sense within.

Casemore (2011) underlines the importance in resisting the temptation to constantly seek and provide explanations, thereby fitting the client’s subjective lived experiences into pre-formed theories in order to evade the anxiety of not knowing. Being unknowing is therefore an attempt to be open to whatever presents itself in the space between therapist and client and an effort to treat the apparently familiar, or that of which we are informed or which we assume we already understand, as new and available to formerly uncharted possibilities (Spinelli, 1997). During moments of an in-depth encounter, Casemore (2011) suggests that the therapist attends and then brackets off any pre-existing assumptions by becoming aware of any biases that arise from one’s own experience of their own world. This resonates with the work of Finlay (2011) who outlines that discovering new awareness and insight through research, being moved and surprised, begins from holding a non-judgemental, relatively unknowing position shaped by a genuine curiosity. In this way, the researcher must be ready to allow things to spontaneously arise in the space between researcher and participant (Finlay, 2011).

My effort to embrace and adopt an unknowing position through the data gathering process entailed a mindful self-reflection on any pre-existing assumptions and thoughts I may have held about the world of social media. Furthermore, as someone who came from a background in quantitative research, I had to learn how to shed the trappings of positivism along with the need for certainties, to eventually embrace the thematic analytical method. This allowed me to understand how it could produce meaningful data, without requiring measurement and calibration instead looking at the internal worlds of people along with their perception of the external world.

Resonating with my client, I held a tendency to overanalyse and I became aware of this whilst undertaking the research. The transcripts were filled with flows, ruptures, connections and breaks, at many instances clouding my comprehension and this was part of the difficult process of seeing how each

participant interconnected to develop the themes. Through self-reflection, I realised that what I needed was to step outside of the cognitive world and the world of thinking in order to connect to my own bodily felt sense as a means to understand the research process in different way. This allowed me to release what felt like ‘mental knots’ and inner ‘blockages’ and return to the data with new awareness.

In the application of the phenomenological attitude, there is a shift to looking at what is not known rather than what is currently understood. I learnt that it involves a move into the consciousness of the ‘other’; based on an analysis of what is immediately communicated and then a further analysis may be tacitly understood (Finlay, 2011). This exists beyond the initial presentation; looking at the taken for granted ways of communicating to then thinking about the implicit underlying meanings which may underpin the participant’s perspective. This shift towards a phenomenological attitude of openness resonated with my therapeutic values and enhanced my appreciation for a phenomenological conceptualisation of the self. As Finlay (2011) outlines, the phenomenological position has the potential to deepen our therapeutic practice. This was indeed my experience when looking back, as my appreciation in the value of embracing this attitude extended towards a deeper reflection on the therapeutic encounter.

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Section A: Doctoral Research Project

The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: An Experiential Perspective on Social Networking Sites

Abstract

The growth of social networking sites (SNSs) has led to significant alterations in the dynamics of our interpersonal relationships as well as how we present and experience ourselves (Alloway, Runac, Quershi, & Kemp, 2014). These transformations have important implications for researchers and practitioners in the field of counselling psychology. SNSs have become an integral aspect of many people's lives and have grown faster and changed more than any other Internet activity over the last decade (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). The primary aim of this study was to explore the experience of the self on SNSs with a focus on understanding online interpersonal interactions and how participants experience their relationship to social media (SM) from an experiential perspective.

Eight participants were recruited for this study between the ages of 20 – 41. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore participants' experiences on these platforms. An experiential inductive thematic analysis was utilised to analyse participants' accounts. The epistemological position adopted was phenomenology and the ontological position was critical realism. Analysis generated five themes and seven sub-themes representing patterned meaning throughout their accounts with a central theme 'double- edged sword'. The themes were the following: 'active versus passive use' (sub-themes: 'numbing versus stimulating - positive versus negative stimulation', 'recognition – social comparison', 'perception of oversharing'), 'perception of control versus loss of control' (sub-theme: 'more control in the presentation of the self', 'addictive'), 'virtual versus physical presence' (sub-theme: 'virtual versus sensory connectedness'), 'bridge versus loss of connection' (sub-theme: 'surface-level platform').

Findings indicated that participants' experience of and their relationship to SNSs can be described as a 'double-edged sword'. Although they experienced positive aspects to SM, including positive ways of connecting to others, all their narratives of their lived experiences included negative consequences of engaging in the use of SM. The findings of the study offer some important insights into the role of SM within these participants' lives, providing a potential guideline for other therapists and researchers to build upon. The results bring to light the vast complexity of individual and relational experiences that are taking place on SNSs and thus, highlight the potential value in exploring the experiences of clients' who utilise these sites within a therapeutic setting (Gowen, Deschaine, Gruttadara, & Markey, 2012).

Key words: social networking sites, social media, lived experience, thematic analysis, connectedness, online interactions, self-presentation, social support, self-disclosure, self psychology

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Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

1.1 Introduction

With the rapid and exponential growth of technology, our lives are immersed with artificial life forms in the shape of digital technologies (Weber, 2014). These digital technologies permeate people's daily lives, organising, structuring, and mediating how individuals engage with others and the world (Lévy & Bononno, 1998). The speed of technological development has been so fast that many of us have not had adequate time to understand on a fundamental level, both psychologically and physiologically, what it means to constantly have technology involved in everything, from the most marginal to the most intimate parts of our life (Weber, 2014). A strong Internet presence has become a fundamental part of day-to-day living and carries an indisputable and often unchallenged power (Weber, 2014).

The digital age is distinguished by fast transformations in the variety of technological mediation through which we encounter each other (Baym, 2015). This raises significant questions such as: what is the self if it is not in the body? How can we be present but also absent? What do 'public' and 'private' mean today? (Baym, 2015). Gergen (2002, p. 227) depicts many technological users as struggling with the challenges of "absent presence," being physically present yet "absorbed by a technological mediated world of elsewhere". His concerns are that too often we occupy a "floating world", engaging largely with non-present individuals (Baym, 2015). Balick (2011) asserts that our external and internal worlds are fused as aspects of ourselves are present online 24 hours a day. Cyberspace is provoking a substantial change in our cultural understanding of reality, streaming in yet another experience of reality, one that expands upon access, permitting several realities to coexist and be true at any moment (Hartman, 2011; Turkle, 1996).

The realm of online social networking in particular is fast growing, exerting profound influences on the ways in which users perceive themselves and relate to others. Social networking sites (SNSs) are becoming increasingly dominant in the lives of many individuals and are among the primary ways through which they communicate, express themselves as well as build and maintain relationships (Lehavot, Barnett, & Powers, 2010). With a 10-fold increase in the use of SNSs over the last decade, it is estimated that over 69% of adults use these sites on a frequent basis (Tutelman, Dol, Tougas & Chambers, 2018)

A SNS is a networked communication platform in which users have identifiable profiles and can consume, create or interact with streams of user-generated content as well as connect with other users (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal (2015) assert that SNSs have grown faster and changed more than any other Internet activity over the last decade. This has corresponded with the sharp rise in

individuals who own smartphones, allowing SNSs to be accessed anywhere and anytime (Lup et al., 2015). As of the second quarter of 2018, the well-known SNS Facebook (FB) has over 2.23 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2019a). Instagram is a SNS that involves posting photographs with the choice of using enhancement filters as well as nonreciprocal following of other users (Lup et al., 2015). As of June 2018, Instagram has one billion monthly active users worldwide, making it one of the most popular social media (SM) applications (Statista, 2019b).

With the fast-growing popularity of SNSs, the level of engagement in online interactions has grown, making it now more probable than ever before that the majority of one's offline social network can be contacted online (Ryan, Allen, Gray, & Mclnerney, 2017). This movement has significantly altered the dynamics of social interaction and holds implications for how one's need for social connectedness is established, sustained or thwarted (Ryan et al., 2017). Researchers face a unique challenge in attempting to study this swiftly moving phenomenon, as they try to make sense of users' experiences whilst the very systems through which such experiences are enacted shift (Ellison & Boyd, 2013). SNSs have become an integral aspect of many people's lives; Kuss and Griffiths (2017) suggest that they have become *a way of being*.

1.2 Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experience of the self in cyberspace with a focus on understanding online interpersonal interactions and the experience of the self on SNSs from an experiential perspective. Further objectives were to consider the implications of the findings within the field of counselling psychology as well as to offer recommendations for future research in this area.

The research questions of interest were the following:

1. How does one experience oneself on SNSs?

2. How does one experience other people on SNSs?

3. How does one experience one's relationship to SM?

1.3 Limitations of the Literature

The majority of research examining the psychological impact of today's SNS activities have been quantitative studies and can be primarily found in the journals *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking* and *Computers in Human Behaviour*. A search in the EThOs e-theses online service revealed only a few qualitative dissertations investigating the experiences of adolescents who use SM with an even smaller number of studies examining the experiences of adults. A chief limitation when relying on objective studies is that they do not adequately attend to both the individual and the relational lived experiences of users' who engage in these platforms. Following a review of the literature, it was evident that qualitative research in this area was sparse, particularly for population samples of individuals above 25 years of age. The majority of research in this area has focused on a narrow demographic: adolescent to undergraduate students. The reliance on this demographic remains a considerable limitation in this field, one that needs to be addressed by expanding the age range for future studies (Ryan et al., 2017). Furthermore, there has been limited research in the area of psychology exploring the impact of SNSs on interpersonal relationships (Okdie & Ewoldsen, 2018). The bulk of research in this area stems from domains outside of psychology including media, communications, sociology and education (Okdie & Ewoldsen, 2018).

Overall, there remains a clear gap in the qualitative research literature examining the experiences of adult SM users, particularly from an experiential perspective. Qualitative methods are needed to elaborate on quantitative research in order to gain more insight into the depth and breadth of people's changing experiences on SNSs (Fox & Moreland, 2015). In addition, many quantitative studies have concentrated on pathology with regards to users' participation on these platforms. This research aimed to give voice to SM users - a voice which can often be regulated to second place in quantitative studies - in order to explore their experiences on these sites at both an individual and relational level. Research of this kind can provide valuable insights to researchers and professionals concerning the potential benefits and disadvantages of participating on SNSs. The literature review to follow draws on both quantitative and qualitative studies. Quantitative studies will be discussed since there is a scarcity of qualitative research within the field and it was important to situate the current study in relation to existing findings.

1.4 Concepts of the Self

The nature of the self is at the heart of the field of psychology, driving many of its most profound and urgent questions (Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017). It has often been portrayed as predominantly a private domain, an inner realm of personal thoughts, strivings, values, feelings, and desires (Elliot, 2013). It can be thought to contain multitudes: a mind and body, desires and intentions, thoughts and organs, impulses and dispositions (Strohminger et al., 2017). The self has been theorised in a multitude of

different ways, influencing a range of disciplines including philosophical, humanistic and psychoanalytic perspectives. Sleeth (2007) notes that of all the psychological concepts, possibly none have had a lengthier history or generated more ambiguity than that of the self. George Herbert Mead is widely considered to be the founding father of a broad tradition of theoretical thinking concerned with the self, that of symbolic interactionism (Elliot, 2013). Mead places extensive emphasis upon the social self; as individuals, we approach a sense of our own selfhood through engagement with other selves (Elliot, 2013). According to Mead: "our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also" (Mead, 1934, p. 343). Symbolic interactionism offers a social theory of the self, with the underlying assumption that "social interaction forms the roots of consciousness of self" (Lane, 1984, p. 273).

When thinking about the aims of the current study, it was considered important to provide a conceptualisation of the self as a stance to reflect on an individual's experience of the self on SM. This required a careful consideration upon the various conceptualisations of the self, which led to initial contemplations on Jungian and Winnicottian perspectives. Both Jung (1966) and Winnicott (1956) distinguished between the persona or false self and a person's inner self. Jung's (1966) notion of the persona and Winnicott's (1956) false self are representations of intrapsychic function that have much in common (Balick, 2013). Both can be perceived as ego functions as they lie between the intrapsychic (internal experience) and intersubjective; thus, they can be viewed as relational as they develop for the purpose of handling the space between the self and other (Balick, 2013). As SNSs involve a high degree of interpersonal relating (Balick, 2013), these concepts were initially considered. However, Kohut's psychoanalytic theory of 'self psychology' was eventually drawn upon to frame how an individual's sense of self and structure of self becomes shaped.

Self psychology consists of both a developmental model and a model for clinical practice, providing a useful framework for considering the various implications for how we understand and work with an individual's sense of self (Banai, Mikulincer, Shaver, 2005). Furthermore, although it was conceived as a psychoanalytic theory, self psychology is applicable to a broad range of client populations and clinical contexts (Martin, 2007). Similar to Rogers, Kohut's theory focuses on the subjective experiential life of each individual (Kahn, 1985), which was considered relevant to the present study. As this study will be contributing to the discipline of counselling psychology, there is a focus on individual wellbeing. Reflecting on the self from the perspective of self psychology may offer valuable insights towards an understanding of how an individual's sense of self is shaped by one's experiences in cyberspace. This can also provide a space to explore the internal complexities of the developing self (Lane, 1984) by drawing upon what Kohut's ideas might offer in clinical practice.

Kohut perceived the self to be the initiating core of personality, the essence of an individual's psychological being and the center of experience (Banai et al., 2005; Lessem, 2005). According to his conception, the self is hypothesised to be a system or process that organises an individual's subjective experience in relation to a cluster of developmental needs (Banai et al., 2005; Wolf, 1988). Kohut (1971) termed these 'selfobject needs' since they are connected with sustaining the self and necessitate the participation of external figures in an individual's life for their fulfilment (Banai et al., 2005; Lessem, 2005). He defined selfobject as referring to "that dimension of experience of another person that relates to this person's function in shoring up our self" (Kohut, 1984, p. 49). Wolf (1988), one of Kohut's chief collaborators, wrote: "selfobjects are neither self nor object; they are the subjective aspect of a function performed by a relationship" (Wolf, 1988, p. 271). A selfobject is therefore not a person but an intrapsychic experience; a person, such as an analyst or parental figure, can function to foster the individual's selfobject experience (Bacal, 1994). The self is perceived as embedded in a 'selfobject matrix' and for the most part, although in varying degrees, regarded as in need of selfobject experience (Lessem, 2005). The value in exploring Kohut's ideas stems from its focus on those selfobject experiences required to attain and sustain a reasonably fulfilling and functional sense of self (Lessem, 2005). The therapeutic aim within this model is to transform problematic facets of the client's self-experience and to strengthen the client's self-functioning (Lessem, 2005).

1.4.1 Self Psychology: The Concept of Selfobject Needs

Kohut conceptualised three fundamental selfobject needs that relate to three axes of self-development: the need for idealization, the need for mirroring and twinship or alterego needs (Banai et al., 2005). Kohut (1971, 1977,1984) underlined how initial caregiving experiences play a significant role in fostering the development of a cohesive sense of self by meeting these essential selfobject needs (Marmarosh & Mann, 2014). The need for mirroring corresponds to the need to feel admired for one's accomplishments and abilities and to feel accepted and recognised (Banai et al., 2005). A healthy mirroring selfobject experience fosters one's ambition, ability to sustain a stable sense of self-esteem and the capability for self-assertiveness in later life (Marmarosh & Mann, 2014). The need for idealisation is the need to form an idealised image of significant others and to merge with and feel linked to an idealised other (Banai et al., 2005, Lessem, 2005). When the child's idealising selfobject needs are met with recurrence, this gradually helps the child develop internal capacities to self-sooth (Lessem, 2005*).* Healthy idealisation selfobject experience generates a sense of safety, security and/or inspiration and promotes a healthy sense of values, goals and ideals (Banai et al., 2005; Marmarosh & Mann, 2014; Lessem, 2005).

The need for twinship experience is the need for a sense of kinship or likeness as a human being

along with the need to belong and feel a connection to others who are similar to the self (Lessem, 2005). The gratification of this need enables the growth of empathy, social skills, intimacy, a sense of connection to a wider community and feelings of belongingness (Banai et al., 2005; Marmarosh & Mann, 2014). Generally, the twinship selfobject experience developmentally progresses from having a merged quality to the ability to have twinship experience with an increased tolerance of individuality and of difference (Lessem, 2005). The twinship selfobject can be an individual, object or even an abstract notion, which emerges to restore a feeling of companionship, based on empathic understanding or the alikeness of needs (Silverstein, 1999). An example of a twinship experience is an individual who responds to another so that the two can feel a source of joy in each other (Silverstein, 1999). The twinship provides a sense of calming that can be induced as a presence that is silent when the individual's self-esteem is vulnerable (Silverstein, 1999). While the above three selfobject needs have been the focus of self psychology, self psychology theorists Stolorow, Brandchaft and Atwood (1987) have suggested another selfobject need for 'validation' of an individual's experience; with the most significant aspect being validation of the individual's affective experience (Lessem, 2005).

Kohut (1966) considered narcissism (libidinal investment in the self) as a normal developmental phenomenon (Banai et al., 2005) and a critical resource to be cultivated to ensure it matures and transforms (Lessem, 2005). He initially postulated two different aspects of narcissistic development: the idealised parent imago and the grandiose-exhibitionistic self (Lessem, 2005). The grandiose self emerges from relating to an empathic responsive mirroring selfobject, who validates and approves the child's unique displays and achievements (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012; Kohut, 1977). The idealised parental imago, develops from the child attributing omnipotent power and perfection to one or more parental figure(s) in relation to whom the child feels special (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012; Patton & Meara, 1996). It develops from the interaction to a selfobject that permits the child's idealisations; who offers the strength and soothing responses required for the child to feel a sense of safety (Auchincloss & Samberg, 2012). He later added a third axis leading to a 'tripolar self', termed the alter ego-connectedness axis; this referred to the individual's ability to develop intimate relationships, communicate feelings to important others, and become part of a wider group (Banai et al., 2005).

Self psychology theorists have attributed great significance to empathy in both the therapeutic process and in facilitating the development of the self (Lessem, 2005). In Kohut's last definition of empathy, he named it "the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person" (Kohut, 1984, p. 82). He described empathy as 'vicarious introspection': the means for accessing the inner life of others (Lessem, 2005). While he initially focused on empathy as a mode of observation, he later shifted to considering it to be a critically important mode of responsiveness (Lessem, 2005). He perceived empathy to be the only valid method for gaining psychological access into the subjectivity of another person; although empathy is seen to be always filtered through an individual's own subjectivity (Cooper &

Randall, 2012; Lessem, 2005). Empathy is deemed necessary for appropriate parental functioning in response to a child's emotional life and selfobject needs in particular (Lessem, 2005). The selfobject concept signifies the need for fundamental relational experiences, induced through the empathic responsiveness of others (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

In Kohut's perception, empathy is a "primary guide for the selectivity of the responsiveness" of parents and others to the child (Lessem, 2005, p. 69). Phase appropriate and inevitable small lapses in parental empathy result in frustrations in the child's need for selfobject responsiveness termed 'optimal frustrations', which promote the cohesion of the self (Lessem, 2005). Optimal frustrations and empathic attunement are both needed for the process of 'transmuting internalisation' (Lessem, 2005). This is a "process of structure formation in which aspects of the function of the self- selfobject transaction (e.g. soothing, affirmation, etc.) are internalised under the pressure generated by optimal frustration" (Wolf 1988, p.187). Selfobject experience progresses on a continuum from the earliest archaic forms focused on the core and developing sense of self to later mature forms, where there is an increasing recognition of the subjectivity of the other (Hagman, 1997).

A distinction has been made between archaic and mature selfobjects, where archaic selfobjects are considered a normal necessity of early life (Hagman, 1997; Kohut, 1984); whereas mature selfobjects are those that we all require for our psychological survival from the beginning of life until death (Kohut, 1984). The primary difference between the two forms of relating is the ability to empathise with the selfobject, to perceive the other as separate from oneself; as an independent center of subjectivity, with needs that are distinct from one's own (Brown, 2014; Hagman, 1997). Kohut explained that even an adult who is considered psychologically healthy will continue to need: "the mirroring of the self by selfobjects…and he continues to need targets for his idealization…selfobject relationships occur at all developmental levels" (Kohut, 1977, p. 188). According to Hagman (1997), mature selfobject experience necessitates the capacity and wish to expand self-experience in a way that incorporates the other. In archaic selfobject relating, the subjectivity of the other plays a small role in the experience of its chief functions (Hagman, 1997). Mature selfobject relating also entails the experiences of reciprocity; however, when there is regression to archaic needs, reciprocity may be provisionally arrested (Hagman, 1997).

Hagman (1997) highlights that a quintessential mature selfobject relationship is the experience of friendship. Although the alterego or twinship aspect of friendship experience is more clearly identifiable, friendships can also provide mirroring or idealising functions (Hagman, 1997). According to Hagman (1997), empathy is a crucial component. While the experience of selfobject failure and the triggering of archaic needs can interfere with the reciprocity of a friendship; it is the motivation to work on and nurture such a relationship that exemplifies mature selfobject relating (Hagman, 1997). Hagman (1997) also spoke of other forms of mature selfobject relating, which include mature love, marriage, parenting and creativity.

Teicholz (1999) asserts that a mature self engages with others in the mutual satisfaction of selfobject needs. There is still a need for archaic selfobjects in later life, either in disorders of the self or chronically, or during phases of extreme stress in an individual without pathology (Kohut, 1984).

1.4.2 Injuries to the Self

In self psychology, the focus of pathology is on a vulnerable self-structure stemming from "the experience of insufficient selfobject relatedness and reactive self-protective patterns" (Lessem, 2005, p. 101). In Kohut's view, failure to have one's selfobject needs met sufficiently can lead to an avoidance or craving of those needs in adulthood (Marmarosh & Mann, 2014). A more fragmented (as opposed to cohesive) sense of self may emerge and a disorder of the self may arise (Piotrowski, 2018). Thus, the self is perceived to be susceptible to the deficiency or lack of selfobject experience throughout the life span (Lessem, 2005). Due to inadequate responsiveness to different aspects of selfobject needs, the person develops problematic 'organising principles' (e.g. people will not be there for me when I am distressed), which make it more challenging to find and generate needed selfobject experience in the future (Lessem, 2005).

Repeated empathic failures from parental figures and the child's responses to them are viewed as a source of nearly all forms of psychopathology (Baker & Baker, 1987). For example, narcissistic pathology is perceived to be an individual's attempt to compensate for a deficiency of parental empathy (Miller, 1992). The absence of an empathic other can lead to pathological efforts at self-regulation and an exacerbation of an individual's distress (Lessem, 2005; Mollon 2001). Some of the signs of a vulnerable self-structure include difficulties with self-regulation in relation to different functions including affect tolerance and self-esteem maintenance as well as the emergence of frequent surges of anxiety, depression or irritability (Lessem, 2005). Maladaptive patterns of relatedness, behaviour disorders and symptoms (e.g. anger, rage, shame) are viewed as efforts to protect the vulnerable self as well as to sustain the prospect for selfobject relatedness (Lessem, 2005). For psychopathology to develop, it is perceived that the child experience repetitive difficulties in at least two of the poles of the self (Lessem, 2005).

A classic example of a mirroring developmental experience is when a child shows his parents a newly learnt skill (Lessem, 2005). A parental response that signifies interest and pride reflects back to the child a sense of value and self-worth, fostering a valued sense of self (Lessem, 2005). If what is reflected back is an absence of value through a pattern of parental responses that are overly critical, apathetic or hostile, a child's assertiveness and sense of self-worth can be negatively impacted (Lessem, 2005). Repetitive parental failures to sufficiently meet the child's mirroring needs can lead the child to split off and disavow these feelings (Lessem, 2005) and this is linked to later difficulties in striving to achieve

(Erwin, 2002).

A child may react to the frustration of this critical selfobject mirroring need by responding with a self-protective process called the 'vertical split' (Silverstein, 1999). When grandiosity is repressed or split off, the psyche is deprived of its primary source of self-esteem and as a result, self-valuing can be significantly impacted (Lessem, 2005). In such cases, the psyche becomes very susceptible to narcissistic injury (Lessem, 2005). This may lead to the development of a hypersensitivity to any signs of disapproval or criticism and the individual may react to any indications of self-limitations with rage and shame (Lessem, 2005; Summers, 2014). In Kohut's view, shame is a reaction that results from repetitive failures of selfobjects to respond to a child's mirroring needs; for example, to the child's enthusiasm with admiration (Silverstein, 1999). The 'horizontal split', which is considered less pathological, refers to the use of repression, with clinical outcomes that can include feelings of emptiness and worthlessness (Lessem, 2005).

Failure to meet the child's idealising selfobject needs can result in a range of negative outcomes including a diminished sense of safety, which can restrict the child's capacity to moderate fearful or aggressive emotions (Lessem, 2005). In addition, the child may lack a good model to organise around and identify with, which in turn can negatively interfere with the child's ambition (Lessem, 2005). This can lead the individual to feel a sense of emptiness and a longing to have a relationship with an idealised figure (Lessem, 2005). If twinship needs are recurrently interfered with during development, failures to secure these needs can generate states of severe disconnectedness from others or groups that define an individual's work or existence (Silverstein, 1999). This can reveal itself through feelings of isolation, loneliness and a lack of kinship with others (Martinez, 2003). For some, these failures can manifest as feelings of alienation from esteemed values (Silverstein, 1999).

Kohut described the potential for an individual to fall within several different 'character types' arising from experiencing repeated frustration in different selfobject needs. Kohut and Wolf (1978, p. 422) highlighted that these character types should, in general, not be perceived as forms of psychopathology but viewed as "variants of normal human personality" that fall somewhere in the middle of an adaptive versus maladaptive continuum (Estrin, 1987). For example, individuals who fall within what is termed a 'mirror-hungry' personality tend to be compelled or driven to display themselves, to seek admiration from others and are continuously searching for selfobjects who will mirror their self-esteem and self-worth (Jackson, 1991). Such individuals need to evoke admiration from sources outside of the self in order to diminish feelings of worthlessness (Jackson, 1991). 'Ideal-hungry' personalities describe those individuals who are persistently looking out for others "whom they can admire for their prestige, power, beauty, intelligence, or moral standards" (Jackson, 1991; Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 421). Without such individuals, these personality types lack values and can suffer from a sense of worthlessness (Jackson, 1991). Their needs for soothing

functions are met by individuals outside of the self (Jackson, 1991). 'Alter-ego hungry' personalities are on the search for a selfobject who seems to be similar to the self so that they can confirm their self-experience of belonging; as such individuals tend to feel out of place in the social environment.

Kohut (1971) proposed the potential that in adulthood, present relationships and social experiences might compensate for the developmental insufficiencies in childhood (Banai et al., 2005). This is the way he theorised the process of therapy and the notion of selfobject transferences (Banai et al., 2005). In treatment, archaic selfobject needs are gradually transformed by means of transmuting internalisation within the therapeutic relationship (Piotrowski, 2018). Through this process, the client's problematic organising principles can be transformed (Lessem, 2005). Through the process of transmuting internalisation, an individual builds the capacity to perform what is required to maintain a cohesive self, which expands one's ability to cope with an environment that does not always offer the required selfobject experiences (Gleason, 2005). The experience of transformation is at the crux of Kohut's approach of interpretive change (Hagman, 1997).

1.4.3 The Self Online

In today's modern societies, the development of media technology has had a significant impact on the experience of the self and identity formation (Roesler, 2008). Turkle (2004) depicts the Internet as a powerfully influential object for rethinking identity, encouraging individuals to alter their sense of self in terms of numerous windows and parallel realities. For some, cyberspace can be a space to act out unresolved conflicts; for others, it can offer an opportunity to resolve important personal problems, to utilise the resources of cybersociality to find new solutions (Turkle, 2004). Turkle (2008) speaks of a new form of sociality in which the isolation of our physical bodies does not signify a lack of connectedness but might be its prerequisite. She speaks of a *tethered self,* tethered to our always on/always on us communication devices, the things and people we reach through them and the gratifications provided by our online selves (Turkle, 2008). The self, now attached to its devices, inhabits a liminal space between its lives on various screens and the physical real (Turner, 1969), partaking in both realms at the same time (Turkle, 2008).

Turkle (2010, p. 6) states that the relationships individuals develop on SNSs are "excellent contenders for the role of selfobject". SM may share various features with selfobject experience, making its use appealing to those who are longing for deficient selfobject experience or to repair painful previous self-experience (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Since a selfobject experience is related to how the self experiences the other, irrespective of the other's intent (Piotrowski, 2018), on SNSs, users "can be imagined to be what the fragile self needs them to be" (Turkle, 2010, p. 6). These platforms might be an attractive avenue for those individuals who may fall under Kohut's character types, in constant search of

missing selfobject experience. On SNSs, a user's internal world can be displayed to the masses in just a few characters in a status update, resulting in followers who will challenge, magnify or mirror one's feelings (Philips, 2016). Since abstract representations or ideals can also offer an idealising selfobject function (e.g. in the form of spirituality, religion or sources of inspirations such as ideas, literature or music) (Silverstein, 1999), there may be plentiful opportunities on SM to search for idealising selfobject functions at one's fingertips. Li (2016) asserts that the popularity of SNSs is propelled by strong selfobject needs; he suggests that SNSs can widen one's reach and range of social connections, which can magnify the selfobject experiences derivable from these sites (Li, 2016).

Early studies on the experience of the self online have shown that in anonymous cyberspace, individuals are more likely to engage in a multiplicity of role-play games, taking on different identities (Turkle, 1995). Suler (2002) sees the dissociation of one's numerous online identities as an effective way to manage the multiplicities of selfhood and asserts that cyberspace may give people the opportunity to discover aspects of their identity that they may not normally express in their face-to-face interactions. Presently, online social interactions are increasingly no longer anonymous and SNSs generally encourage users to use their real names and share information about themselves (Flick, 2013). More recent research has shifted its emphasis to 'self-presentations' in less anonymous environments online. SNSs offer an entirely novel process of self-presentation (Mehdizadeh, 2010), with research indicating that a major motivation for the use of these platforms is self-presentation (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

1.5 The Experience of the Self and Interpersonal Relationships on SNSs

1.5.1 Online Self-Presentations

Self-presentation involves any behaviour intended to create, alter, or maintain an impression of ourselves in the minds of others (Brown, 2014). According to this definition, whenever we are trying to lead others to think of us in a certain way, we are engaging in self-presentation (Brown, 2014). Online self-presentation is considered to be a multidimensional concept and assumes that people intentionally control how they are perceived based on their behaviours online (Keep & Attrill-Smith, 2017). SNSs are designed to promote strategic self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007); they provide the opportunity to participate in selective self-presentation, allowing users to selectively show and conceal aspects of themselves (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

Goffman (1959) wrote extensively about the presentation of self and social interaction. For Goffman, the presentation of the self in everyday settings is a continuing process of performance and impression management (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018). Goffman's dramaturgical approach is a figurative model intended to

explain how individuals present idealised rather than authentic versions of themselves (Hogan, 2010). Life is perceived as a stage for activity; in the front stage, we are conscious of being observed by an audience and we are attempting to present an idealised version of the self that corresponds to a specific role (Hogan, 2010), while in the backstage, we do most of the real work needed to maintain appearances (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010) and a person can 'step out of character' (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Goffman's approach draws heavily from symbolic interactionism and social psychology (Chan, 2000) and is often considered valuable for understanding presentations of the self in cyberspace. For example, Boyd (2004, 2006, 2007) used Goffman to describe SNS activity as networked identity performance (Hogan, 2010).

Existing research suggests that on SNSs, individuals often filter out negative information (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) and generally present themselves and their lives in a positive way (Dorethy, Fiebert, & Warren, 2014). Some studies have shown that the positive self-presentation aspect of these platforms can be advantageous when users concentrate on themselves (Vogel & Rose, 2016). For example, when users update or observe their own profiles, they create an idealised perception of themselves and integrate this perception into their self-concept (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Vogel & Rose, 2016). Furthermore, viewing and updating one's profile can fulfil a need for positive self-presentation (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012) and lead to an increase in self-esteem through a process of self-affirmation (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012).

In contrast, there has been research demonstrating that when the focus is other-oriented, viewing others' positive self-presentations can result in negative perceptions about the self and negatives outcomes via social comparison (Vogel & Rose, 2016). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals base their own perceptions of themselves at least partially on how they feel they are doing in comparison to others (de Vries & Kühne, 2015). Comparing oneself to others can occur for a number of reasons, including self-improvement (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and evaluation of the self (Festinger, 1954). Social comparisons can be upward or downward; upward comparisons occur when making a comparison to someone perceived to be superior (Wheeler, 1996), while downward comparisons occur when making a comparison with someone perceived to be inferior (Wills, 1981). Studies have shown that upward comparisons typically bring about negative feelings (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006) such as feelings of envy of the profile(s) being viewed and can result in negative consequences including reduced self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2016), symptoms of depression (Appel, Crusius, & Gerlach, 2015; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015) and anxiety (Lee, 2014).

As well as influencing the concept of the self through self-presentation and social comparison, SNSs are also sites that alter the ways in which a person interacts with others, thus impacting the experience of interpersonal relationships. While SNSs are designed as spaces to connect, develop and maintain

relationships with others, there has been much debate concerning how online interaction might impact on the quality of those relationships (Ledbetter et al., 2011).

1.5.2 Encountering Empathy in the Digital Age

There has been growing interest within the research field on the relationship between SNS usage and empathy. Nonetheless, findings in the literature among quantitative studies have been mixed. Empathy is considered to be a multidimensional construct (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi, & Kemp, 2014) and can generally be defined as the ability to understand and experience the feelings of others (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Several studies have indicated that empathy has been decreasing in younger generations since online interaction has become predominant (Carrier, Spradlin, Bunce, & Rosen, 2015; Konrath, 2013; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). A cross-temporal meta-analysis investigating changes in empathic concern and perspective taking among more than 14,000 college students in America from 1979 to 2009, demonstrated around 40% reductions on both types of empathy over time (Konrath et al., 2011). Konrath et al. (2011) argue that a significant cause for this reduction is the simultaneous rise of the Internet, but more precisely SNSs.

Konrath (2013) suggests some reasons why SNSs could facilitate reduced empathy and a fall in the associated trait of compassion. During face-to-face interaction, we are exposed to an extensive range of signals from others, from auditory (e.g. tone of voice) to visual (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions) along with tactile (e.g. touch) plus chemical (e.g. olfactory cues) (Konrath, 2013). The author claims that being in frequent practice within a multisensory atmosphere can assist in honing one's empathy skills (Konrath, 2013). It may be difficult to tell how someone is really feeling in the absence of nonverbal cues such as not being able to see someone's facial expressions (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). In a study among 18 to 30-year olds, Carrier et al. (2015) found that while spending time online does not decrease real-world empathy, the absence of nonverbal cues online may contribute to overall lower levels of virtual empathy. However, as this was a correlational study, causation between empathy and the time spent online cannot be inferred.

In contrast, a number of research studies with younger age groups suggest that being online can support empathy. In a longitudinal study by Vossen and Valkenburg (2016), the authors found that among young adolescents, SM use improved both their capacity to understand (cognitive empathy) and share the feelings of their friends (affective empathy). They suggest that it is possible that the negative impact of SM on empathy that has been reported may occur in older populations such as older adolescents and young adults. Nonetheless, it is important to note that when measuring empathy, many empirical studies have used questionnaires that more accurately measure sympathy which may be differentially related to SM use (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). Several quantitative studies have looked

into the relationship between empathy and the frequency of SM use but what is lacking in the literature is a deeper and more comprehensive exploration that focuses on individual experience including the many different ways of using SNSs.

1.5.3 Self-disclosure

Previous research has identified self-disclosure, the process of sharing personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others (Liu & Brown, 2014), as a core behavior that influences a user's experiences and attitude towards SNSs. Literature has indicated that self-disclosure is especially prevalent in cyberspace (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011) and central to many users uses of SNSs (Vitak & Kim, 2014). The significant role of self-disclosure in fostering relational development has been long documented (Ledbetter et al., 2011; Petronio, 2002). The process is perceived to be vital to relationship maintenance with researchers highlighting it as an essential component in increasing intimacy (Carpenter & Greene, 2015; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998), assisting in connectedness and leading to increased relational closeness (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Vitak & Kim, 2014). Extensive research has demonstrated therapeutic outcomes for self-disclosure; for example, it can alleviate distress through the release of emotions by sharing difficult experiences (Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992). Different methods of self-disclosure such as disclosing to a therapist or within interpersonal relationships for social support have been shown to be beneficial to one's mental health (Ma, Hancock, & Naaman, 2016; Pennebaker, 2012; Waddell, & Messeri, 2006). Despite the association with mental health and wellbeing, much of the research on self-disclosure within the context of SNSs has come from researchers within the fields of media and communication studies.

An important focus within self-disclosure research is privacy, with some researchers outlining privacy as a boundary regulation process through which an individual controls other people's access to personal information (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Vitak & Kim, 2014). A user can control the boundary of personal information by managing the degree, depth and regularity of disclosures (Vitak & Kim, 2014). However, users might choose to relinquish privacy if they wish to attain certain goals linked with self-disclosure such as impression management and increasing intimacy (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Vitak & Kim, 2014). With the growing popularity of SNSs, disclosure behaviours have transformed in significant ways (Vitak & Kim, 2014). These sites contain 'affordances' that play an important role in influencing disclosure practices and generate an alternative communication experience as interaction shifts from one-to-one to a group or mass-personal context (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Self-disclosure will be explored within the context of SNS affordances and social support below.

1.6 The Impact of Affordances on Users' Experiences

SNSs permit individuals to broadcast personal content and receive updates about other users' lives (Bazarova, 2012). Affordances can be thought of as aspects of technological media that individuals perceive as influencing their ability to meet their goals and needs (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). These affordances generate interaction patterns that are unique when compared to interactions through other routes such as face-to-face interaction (Zurbriggen, Ben Hagai, & Leon, 2016). SNSs can be differentiated from other forms of media due to their distinctive affordances, including the persistence and visibility of content, the connectivity or association and the ability to edit content (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Vitak & Kim, 2014).

The edibility affordance refers to how users are able to expend time and effort editing a communicative act prior to and after it has been perceived by others (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The persistence affordance refers to the notion that SNSs permit conversations and content that persists after the time of the initial posts (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Thus, communicative acts can have repercussions and still be available long after the first point of presentation and may be difficult to delete permanently (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The visibility affordance refers to the private or public nature of information presented online and it allows the observing of other users' content without their awareness (Fox & Moreland, 2015). The connectivity or association affordance allows users, regardless of how geographically distant or disparate, to recognise one another's presence and observe each other's content though a direct connection or shared node (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

SNS affordances permit users to participate in sharing and spreading content and consumption in less time and at a lower cost than would be possible without these platforms (Vitak & Kim, 2014). These affordances can impact users' positive and negative experiences with these platforms (Mao, 2014) and influence how users interact with and disclose information to others, which hold important implications for relationship maintenance (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Studies have shown that bonds between friends, distant friends and acquaintances can be initiated, maintained and strengthened by SM use by providing a convenient channel for communication (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). On the other hand, research has shown that affordances such as visibility and connectivity may also induce negative outcomes such as relationship interferences (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014).

Fox and Moreland's (2015) qualitative study using thematic analysis (TA) among adult FB users revealed that SNS usage can trigger both minor and major negative emotional experiences, where many of the negative emotional experiences were found to be afforded by FB's design. Within the theme 'relationship tension and conflict', the study revealed that FB's affordances such as the visibility of content presented numerous areas where outwardly trivial matters generated new sources of disputes or intensified existing

offline arguments. Within romantic contexts, social comparison was another salient aspect of participants' narratives, where they would utilise FB's affordances of connectivity and persistence to compare themselves to a current romantic interest's ex-partners.

Indeed the affordances of SNSs can offer users access to information about their partners that would not otherwise be available (e.g. messages posted on their partner's walls, receiving notifications when their partner adds new contacts) (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). For example, participants in Muise et al.'s (2009) study noted that they felt the FB environment amplified worries about the quality of their intimate relationships. Their results indicated that FB may present users with information that stimulates jealously towards their partner; which can then lead to an increased monitoring of their partner's FB page and this can further amplify feelings of jealously as a result (Muise et al., 2009).

Emerging research has also begun to explore how SNSs offer an alternative channel that can facilitate online infidelity behaviours (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2012). In Clayton, Nagurney and Smith's (2012) quantitative study among 18 – 82-year olds, the findings indicated that negative relationship outcomes, such as breakup and infidelity are sometimes mediated by FB-related conflict for couples who are in recently developed relationships of three years or less. The authors suggested that high levels of FB use might function as an indirect enticement for emotional and physical cheating. Jealousy or arguments may arise due to potential problematic intimate behaviour (e.g. discovering your partner begins to chat with an ex-partner on FB), with such behaviours then leading to excessive partner monitoring and further conflict (Clayton et al., 2012).

Cravens et al. (2012) used a grounded theory methodology to analyse 90 narratives posted on the 'FacebookCheating' website about FB infidelity written by nonparticipating partners. The narratives demonstrated intense feelings of anger, hurt, shock and a loss of trust; where many participants questioned whether to end the relationship (Vossler, 2016). One of the primary themes that emerged was the 'boundary/damage appraisal' phase, which illustrated the struggle that many participants faced in interpreting their partner's behaviours. This also included an ambiguity around what impact this should have on their relationship (Cravens et al., 2012). In addition, there was a lack of consensus among many participants concerning what SNS behaviour crossed a relational boundary; and there were challenges in how to define their partner's transgressions (Cravens et al., 2012). Participants reported that they grappled with how to proceed, particularly when an agreement on what was deemed 'appropriate behaviours' could not be reached. Some participants highlighted specific boundaries and rules around FB use; for example, some expressed issues around 'friending' one's ex-partner, while others felt uncomfortable with their partners adding any member of the opposite sex who was considered attractive (Cravens et al., 2012).

Cravens and Whiting's (2016) mixed-methods study explored how individuals interpret infidelity on FB. Participants took part in a story completion task in which they completed a narrative involving questionable behaviour on FB. The findings suggested that 51% of participants interpreted the online behaviour as cheating; only 2.9% explicitly indicated that it was not. Impacts of FB infidelity included arguing, retaliation, loss of trust, ending the relationship and various negative emotional experiences. Gender differences in the interpretation of the cue story were also found; where women were found to be more inclined to write about hurt and betrayal and write more about the relationship (e.g. loss of trust) using more emotional language in their responses.

There are a new set of challenges with numerous clinical implications arising from problematic intimate behaviour on SNSs, particularly in the field of couples, marriage and family counselling (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Vossler, 2016). A growing number of couples are presenting with issues emerging from SNS use including online infidelity (Vossler, 2016). When working with couples presenting with such issues, it is important for clinicians to ensure there is an open communication between them around what defines and constitutes Internet infidelity for each partner (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). Within the treatment process, therapists can assist each partner in exploring what behaviours they would consider appropriate or inappropriate on SNSs within the context of their relationship, in order to set agreed upon boundaries (e.g. 'friending' ex-partners) (Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2012). Clinicians can also assist couples to consider the implications around the impact of monitoring behaviours on their intimate relationship and negotiate how certain rules and boundaries on each partner's SNS use will be reinforced. For example, a large majority of participants in Cravens and Whiting's (2016) study spoke about issues related to privacy violations.

Vossler (2016) states that there is a lack of empirical evidence looking at the effectiveness of treatment models for Internet infidelity. This highlights the need to further investigate the distinctive factors and vulnerabilities linked to intimacy issues on these sites in order for clinicians to expand their understanding and adapt their treatment approaches accordingly (Vossler, 2016). Future research should focus on definitional distinctions of Internet infidelity in relation to age, gender, sexual orientation as well as the perception and experience of Internet infidelity in different cultural settings in order to account for the role of subjectivity and contextuality (Vossler, 2016).

Research has also underlined the pertinent role that affordances play in both seeking and receiving social support on these sites (Utz & Breuer, 2017). Literature has shown that SNS affordances significantly facilitate users' capability to request and obtain social support (Liu, Wright, & Hu, 2018; Tufekci, 2008). For example, studies have indicated that FB may be a suitable channel through which to seek social support due to the unique affordances it offers (Li, Da Xu, & Zhao, 2015), such as enabling users to reach out to their entire network (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017).

1.6.1 Online Social Support

Both quantitative and qualitative studies have identified benefits of SNSs in offering social support. These include 24-hour accessibility (Wright, 2016), the ability to reach a broader audience, and receiving prompt responses and varied information from diverse networks (Liu et al., 2018). While SNSs are rapidly altering the manner in which individuals offer and receive social support (Park et al., 2016), research exploring the experience of seeking and receiving social support through SNSs has been mixed. Literature has demonstrated the protective role of social support for mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Kelly et al., 2017; van de Velden, Setti, van der Meulen, & Das, 2019). Receiving social support has been associated with numerous beneficial mental health outcomes such as diminishing the impact of negative experiences (Trepte, Dienlin & Reinecke 2015), operating as a buffer against stress (van de Velden et al., 2019), reducing symptoms of depression, improving physical health, increasing subjective wellbeing and enhancing quality of life (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013; Yoo et al., 2014; Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). Social support can improve wellbeing directly by offering positive affect and a sense of connectedness and stability in one's life (van de Velden et al., 2019).

A diminished social presence and asynchronous interactions have been presumed to assist support-seeking behaviours on SNSs, especially among users with low self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2012). During asynchronous interaction, individuals do not communicate with each other in real time; not having to receive immediate responses from others can allow users to open up and express themselves and their needs more (Suler, 2015). The communicative affordance of FB permits provisions to social support by lowering barriers to presenting one's support needs and providing easy methods to respond and offer support (e.g. commenting on someone's status) with minimal labour (Park et al., 2016; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). The affordances on these sites may be transforming the manner in which people access social support by increasing the range of users who can offer support to include, for example, weak relational ties (e.g. friends of friends) (Vitak & Ellison, 2013).

In a qualitative study by Vitak and Ellison (2013) among a group of adults (ages 25-55), many participants described the ability to broadcast messages to one's entire FB network as a convenience that was particularly helpful when seeking informational resources or when they were coping with a significant experience such as an illness. Nonetheless, while the communicative affordance made the exchange of social support much more efficient, participants brought forth several concerns regarding pursuing and offering social support through these semi-public routes. Several participants questioned the authenticity of support offered solely through the site because of the ease through which an individual can like a post or post a comment. Other barriers to seeking support included privacy concerns as well as the presence of multiple audiences, where many participants' comments reflected the concept of 'context collapse'.

Context collapse is when different social contexts are collapsed into one (Boyd, 2008a; Ellison et al., 2011) and this can generate tensions when users try to present themselves in ways consistent with a diverse audience (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Vitak and Ellison (2013) suggest that for individuals who may share the same feelings, FB may best function as an enabler of support through alternate mediums.

Seeking social support through SM may be especially pertinent for certain individuals experiencing physical or mental health difficulties including social isolation. For example, individuals who experience symptoms that can interfere with socialising in face-to-face interactions (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016) and find it difficult to access support through alternative mediums (Huh & Ackerman, 2012). For example, research has shown that adolescents with social anxiety disorder are more prone to use SNSs over face-to-face communication to acquire social support (Weidman et al., 2012). In a study by Indian and Grieve (2014), findings demonstrated that perceptions of FB social support were predictive of subjective wellbeing for users who experienced high levels of social anxiety. Seabrook, Kern, and Rickard (2016) assert that social support obtained through SNSs may be particularly beneficial to users with social anxiety who are not able to access these resources in face-to-face settings.

Studies have also looked into the role of perceived social support in terms of the relationship between cyberbullying and SNS use. Cyberbullying has been defined as “repeated unwanted, hurtful, harassing, and/or threatening interaction through electronic communication media” (Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014, p. 364). SNSs provide a new conduit to engage in negative social interactions, which include cyberbullying and trolling; where the latter involves posting what are deemed offensive or unconstructive messages to intentionally provoke disruption and conflict (Bishop, 2012; Cole, Nick, Zelkowitz, Roeder & Spinelli, 2017). Incidences of such online behaviours are increasing and are becoming a growing concern among users (Cole et al., 2017). Cyberbullying is a significant public health issue, which can lead to an increased risk of mental health difficulties (Garett, Lord, & Young, 2016). Research investigating the negative psychological outcomes of cyberbullying highlights a greater probability of experiencing social anxiety, depression, substance abuse, paranoia, lower self-esteem, poor life satisfaction, somatic symptoms and suicide ideation (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Garett et al., 2016; Tennant, Demaray, Coyle & Malecki, 2015).

The distinctive affordances of cyberspace such as asynchronous communication, 24-hour connectivity and anonymity introduce new dynamics that differentiate cyberbullying from offline bullying. These affordances can amplify and worsen the impact of cyberbullying (Davis, Randall, Ambrose & Orand, 2015). For example, victims can be bullied anytime and anywhere and incidents usually occur in front of a wider audience (Schacter, Greenberg, & Juvonen, 2016). Tennant et al. (2015) highlight that the level of anonymity available in cyberspace and the diminished risk of punishment or retaliation may make perpetrators more likely to pursue cyberbullying over traditional forms of bullying. Anonymity and the ability to reach a large audience (including the potential of embarrassing content going viral) can also

magnify fear amongst those targeted and thereby provide cyberbullies with greater flexibility to inflict harm without having to observe the reactions of the victims or the impact of their actions (Wright, 2014).

One theme from Smith et al.'s (2008) findings undertaken from focus groups with secondary school students led to the understanding that the absence of any face-to-face interaction when engaged in cyberbullying diminished empathy between the perpetrators towards the victim. In Boyd's (2008b) research on young people and social networks, the adolescents she interviewed: "conceded that technology could amplify bullying, but they did not believe that technology was the root cause of it" (Boyd, 2008b, p. 245); the threat was in the "ability to copy and paste conversations and access interactions asynchronously [which] can amplify the spread of gossip and magnify the cost of bullying" (Boyd, 2008b, p. 251).

Davis et al.'s (2015) study using content analysis explored participants' personal stories of bullying and cyberbullying including how they coped. Several participants spoke about seeking social support online, particularly supportive communities that helped buffer against bullies, both online and offline (Davis et al., 2015). In Cole et al.'s (2017) study, online social support was found to offset some of the distressing effects of cybervictimisation. Both online and in-person social support ameliorated the adverse impact of victimisation on depressive thoughts and feelings. The authors concluded that SNSs can offer a new source of social support which can function in ways that are similar to in-person social support for cybervictims.

The emerging research in this area is particularly crucial for victims who find it challenging to develop support systems offline. Several factors can interfere with the development of healthy in-person support systems that may be less relevant online such as poor social skills, social anxiety, disability, being 'different' in physical appearance and minority status (Cole et al., 2017; Renner & Boel-Studt, 2013). Such factors may be less noticeable and more manageable online (Cole et al., 2017). These findings open up new avenues in the field of counselling psychology for the development of interventions that provide a way for victims to expand their support system through the strategic use of SM (Cole et al., 2017).

Research has also explored the impact of bystanders' reactions in influencing the way victims adjust after cyberbullying occurrences (Schacter et al., 2016). Findings indicate that while victims experience increased distress when there is an absence of interference from bystanders online, obtaining social support from bystanders can significantly ease the adverse effects of bullying (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). Nonetheless, research has shown that there is a significant decreased likelihood of bystander intervention online compared to in-person (Barlinska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013). In addition, bystanders are also more likely to reinforce cyberbullies online when compared to offline contexts (Barlinska et al., 2013).

To explore the conditions where bystanders offer increased social support to victims of cyberbullying, studies have looked into bystanders' attributions of empathy and blame for the cybervictim (Schacter et al., 2016). Preliminary findings indicate that online self-disclosure among victims impacts bystanders' perceptions of cyberbullying occurrences (Schacter et al., 2016). For example, Weber, Ziegele and Schnauber (2013) found that victims who disclosed more personal content on their SM profile received more blame for being cyberbullied, which resulted in a reduced likelihood of receiving social support from bystanders. In addition, the findings of Schacter et al.'s (2016) study suggested that bystanders' assigned more blame and displayed less empathy towards victims who disclosed highly personal content, irrespective of whether the disclosure was positive or negative. Lower empathy and greater victim blame was associated with a decreased likelihood of offering social support to the victim. It may be possible that bystanders utilise cues from the target's posts to make wider judgements about the target's personality, which can influence their level of empathy and attributions of blame (Schacter et al., 2016). Educational programs that aim to improve the awareness of the role bystanders play in cyberbullying incidents will be an important prospective step in fostering victim wellbeing (Schacter et al., 2016). One potential area of intervention entails increasing positive bystander involvement online through empathy training and perspective-taking (Salmivalli, 2014).

As previously mentioned, self-disclosures are common among SNSs (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2012). Research has indicated that this is particularly the case for individuals who are experiencing depression, who have been shown to disclose negative sentiment on social networks more regularly than healthy users (De Choudhury, Counts, & Horvitz, 2013; De Choudhury, Counts, Horvitz, & Hoff, 2014; Moreno et al., 2011; Park et al., 2016). Yet studies indicate that users who experience higher depressive symptoms perceive their social networks as offering them *less* social support than they actually receive (Park et al., 2016). As such, seeking support through SNSs may worsen depressive states for some users when there is a larger inconsistency between perceived and actual social support (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Literature has shown that perceived (as opposed to actual) social support is more strongly predictive of mental health outcomes, suggesting that targeting perceptions of social support on FB within the setting of interventions for depression could be a beneficial endeavour (Montpetit, Nelson, & Tiberio, 2017; Park et al., 2016; Steffens, Hays, George, & Krishnan, 1996; Zhu, Woo, Porter, & Brzezinski, 2013).

However, such findings need to be understood in the context of a "positivity bias" in SM interaction, whereby users typically prefer disclosing and sharing positive content with their network (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014, p. 95). The positivity bias can partly be explained from the conceptual perspective of norm violation on SNSs (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). Social norms are generally thought of as a set of rules that establish acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in a given context (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Due to their novelty, interaction rules on SNSs are presumed to be primarily implicit (McLaughlin & Vitak,

2012; Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017), not written down but understood within a group (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003). The positivity bias also appears to be context-sensitive; the impact of message valence on perceived appropriateness of interaction is most pronounced in relation to public forms of communication on these platforms (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017).

Qiu et al.'s (2012) quantitative findings suggested that participants were more prone to share positive over negative emotional experiences on FB in comparison to offline. This has also been associated with self-presentation, where users typically present a more enhanced presentation of their emotional wellbeing on these sites (Qiu et al., 2012). Furthermore, in a quantitative study by Vogel, Rose and Crane (2018), results suggested that participants were more likely to offer social support on FB to posts that were positive and incorporated temporal context (illustrated improvement over time). This was in line with both Park et al.'s (2016) and Forest and Wood's (2012) quantitative findings.

Research has indicated that those who seek emotional support through SNSs have violated an implicit norm; yet studies exploring social support on SNSs have suggested that these sites are advantageous channels though which to seek social support (Buehler, 2017). In response to this contradiction in the literature, Buehler's (2017) qualitative inductive TA explored how participants balanced their needs for emotional support with avoiding violating FB norms associated with publicly seeking emotional support. The authors identified several strategies that participants used to seek emotional support while concurrently trying to abide by these implicit norms. 'Redirecting attention to others' was the most common theme, in which participants redirected attention away from themselves and sought support on behalf of someone else. Other themes included 'projecting optimism in the face of adversity', 'vaguebooking' (posting ambiguous and sometimes passive aggressive posts), 'rich storytelling', 'disarming with self-deprecating humour and sarcasm' and 'remarking on the significance of the date' (making reference to anniversaries and time in their posts such as the date a parent had passed away).

Support seeking approaches varied in directness, which seemed to reflect the social costs that participants felt they would incur if they openly expressed their emotional distress (Buehler, 2017). Findings also illustrated the delicate involvement of self-presentation that is performed while participants tried to attain their support seeking aims (Buehler, 2017). This study provided insights from several participants regarding the strategies used when trying to negotiate their needs on these platforms (Buehler, 2017). Qualitative studies such as these can elaborate on and complement existing quantitative research, particularly when it comes to inconsistent findings.

1.7 SNSs and Mental Health: Quantitative Studies

The increasing usage of SNSs has generated widespread attention regarding the impact these sites may have on users' mental health and wellbeing (de Vries et al., 2018; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Pantic, 2014). There is presently a shortage of research in fields that might increase our understanding of the complex relationship between SM use and mental health problems (Singleton, Abeles, & Smith, 2016). A review of the literature made it clear that many quantitative studies produced contradictory findings. The majority of cross-sectional studies have focused on the relationship between quantity of time spent on SNSs and mental health-associated issues, with studies showing indications for positive, negative and neutral associations (van der Velden et al., 2019). What is lacking in many of these studies is an exploration of the ways users utilise and experience these sties, as investigating frequency can be restricted in its capacity to explore these aspects (Radovic, Gmelin, Stein, & Miller, 2017).

Longitudinal quantitative studies exploring the degree to which SNS use predicts an increase or decrease in mental health issues over time, above and beyond prior mental health problems, have likewise illustrated inconsistent findings (van der Velden et al., 2019). There also appears to be a scarcity of research exploring the quality of experiences on these platforms, despite indications that this impacts symptoms of depression (Feinstein et al., 2013). Increasing our understanding of the manner by which emotional states such as depression and anxiety become associated with SM use may therefore require a more detailed, in-depth exploration (Radovic et al., 2017). A review of the quantitative research exploring the association between SNSs and mental health will be discussed below.

1.7.1 Overview of Key Findings

Research has indicated that FB use can impact users' mental health and wellbeing with diverse effects reported including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Labrague, 2014); discontent with intimate romantic relationships (Elphinston & Noller, 2011); negative moods following social comparisons (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015); reduced self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011); and communication overload and increased psychological distress (Chen & Lee, 2013). Research has also explored the relationship between body image and SNS usage with many studies indicating that users report experiencing increased body dissatisfaction (de Vries, Peter, de Graaf, & Nikken, 2016; Thompson & Lougheed, 2012) and a motivation for thinness (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017) following observation of images of others on these platforms. However, it should be cautioned that some studies indicate that SNS use may take place as a symptom of underlying issues (Van der Velden et al 2019).

Factors of particular significance in impacting wellbeing include social comparison (Lup et al., 2015) and

rumination, which have been found to be linked (Feinstein et al., 2013). Rumination involves sustaining attention on negative feelings (Flynn, Kecmanovic, & Alloy, 2010) and is often linked to higher levels of depression (Seabrook et al., 2016). Research has indicated that there is substantial potential for SNSs to augment and facilitate ruminative processes by subjecting users to a continuous stream of social content that can be reflected on selectively as enduring information on an individual's profile (Davila et al., 2012). Thus, there is potential that users who engage in rumination may be at a higher risk for problematic experiences on these platforms (Feinstein et al., 2013).

Studies have also shown that both negative social comparison and regular negative status updates on SNSs can lead to increased rumination (Feinstein et al., 2013; Locatelli, Kluew, & Bryant, 2012). For example, Feinstein et al. (2013) found that negative social comparison predicted depressive symptoms via increased rumination. Baker and Algorta (2016) assert that online behaviours that lead to social comparison or rumination may be especially important for clinicians to consider where depressive symptoms are denoted. Both have been shown to be potential mediators in the relationship between depression and SNS use. For therapists, the importance of being aware of SNSs as interpersonal spaces where maladaptive strategies (rumination) can be enacted highlights the value of enquiring about a client's experiences on these platforms.

Literature has demonstrated an inclination and preference for online over face-to-face communication for users who experience social anxiety symptoms (Weidman et al., 2012). Online interactions seem to be particularly appealing since these interactions can avert the cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety and offer increased control over one's self-presentation (Lee & Stapinski, 2012; Young & Lo, 2012). Nonetheless, studies have suggested that an inclination towards online social interactions combined with social anxiety symptoms may be linked with negative consequences such as poorer quality of life and depressive symptoms (Weidman et al., 2012). This may suggest that efforts to compensate for social difficulties online may not translate into everyday interaction or improve wellbeing (Weidman et al., 2012). Shaw, Timpano, Tran, and Joormann's (2015) study among a nonclinical sample of undergraduate students indicated that greater symptoms of social anxiety were associated with both passive use of FB and increased time spent on FB.

Passive use has been generally defined as observing content on SNSs (e.g. other users' profiles) without engaging in activities that enable direct interactions with others such as commenting on status updates or posting content (Verduyn et al., 2015). The findings suggested that users with high social anxiety primarily utilised SNSs for private interaction and for observing content passively rather than content generation, which may place them at an increased risk for more regular social comparison (Lee, 2014). They also identified brooding, a known risk factor for social anxiety disorder, as a potential mechanism that might trigger anxiety on FB. Brooding is a maladaptive type of rumination involving such processes as comparing one's present condition passively with unrealised standards (Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-

Hoeksema, 2003). Their findings suggested that brooding and social anxiety demonstrated a cyclical relationship with passive use of FB. Nonetheless, as a result of the correlational nature of the data, causal claims concerning the nature between FB use, social anxiety and brooding cannot be made. Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian's (2017) findings among 18-22-year olds suggested that higher daily SM use was linked to increased dispositional symptoms of anxiety. They hypothesised that SM might function as a source of stress (e.g. receiving negative feedback, cyberbullying) or alternatively, users might use SM as a maladaptive coping strategy (e.g. avoid real-world stressors, constantly posting about one's problems). Important limitations included the cross-sectional design, which limited assertions concerning causality and directionality, and the reliance on self-report measures. A more nuanced investigation of SM use which explores motivations for use (e.g. self-presentation) along with how users engage with these platforms (e.g. posting, passive use) is called for in order to advance our understanding of the relationship between SM and anxiety as well as to inform and develop targeted treatment approaches (Vannucci et al., 2017). While the present study did not seek to investigate anxiety, it incorporated open-ended questions in the interview schedule that explored both the functions and motivations for engaging with these platforms.

Seabrook et al.'s (2016) systematic review revealed that the salient risk factors associated with anxiety and depression were negative perceived interaction quality, recurrent social comparison, rumination and problematic or addictive SNS use. They highlight that these factors may be augmented by the persistent nature of social information on these platforms. Similarly, Frost and Rickwood's (2017) systematic review of mental health outcomes linked with FB use found social comparison including appearance comparison, rumination and brooding to be commonly assessed as mediators of negative mental health. The interconnecting nature of these constructs involves a negative evaluation of the self relative to others (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Overall, several studies propose that the negative link between SNS usage and wellbeing may be mediated by social comparison (Clark, Algoe, & Green, 2018), indicating that this link is not just about the constant flow of social information but more importantly the constant triggers for social comparison.

Despite the varied studies that associate SM with a negative impact on mental health, there have been a number of contrasting studies that demonstrate its positive impact. This research has supported the notion that sites such as FB afford psychosocial benefits, including perceived social and emotional support from others (Akbulut & Günüç, 2012) as well as diminished feelings of isolation (Asante & Nyarko, 2014). For example, for users who have reduced mobility or are geographically isolated, SNSs can provide a consistent space to communicate with friends and family (Ryan et al., 2017). Ahn and Shin (2013) and Sheldon, Abad, and Hinsch (2011) found that SNSs users can experience an increase in social connectedness. Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) found that personal community and a sense of belonging existed on Twitter through the maintenance and development of new social connections. Kim and Lee's (2011) study among college users demonstrated that honest self-presentation

on FB may enhance subjective wellbeing that is grounded in social support offered by FB friends. Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, and Marrington's (2013) study demonstrated that there were mental health benefits linked with feeling connected to others on FB. Their findings illustrated that participants who described feeling increased social connection from their use of FB experienced reduced anxiety as measured by the Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

The literature illustrates both positive and negative outcomes linked with SNS usage and thus, when it comes to mental health and wellbeing, SNSs offer both opportunities and challenges (Singleton et al., 2016). While the existing quantitative research is critical to advancing our understanding in this area and has offered valuable insights, much of the research has also concentrated on the associations between SNS use and predefined psychological concepts (Singleton et al., 2016). Qualitative studies that have focused on users' subjective lived experiences will be discussed below.

1.8 Qualitative Trends Exploring Users' Online Experiences

Powell, Gray, and Reese (2013) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study exploring how individuals make meaning of their experiences on SNSs as well as how they describe their offline and online relationships. They selected university participants who reported using SNSs for at least 2.5 hours daily. The authors identified five themes: 'compulsive use of SNSs', 'preferring to have offline relationships', 'connecting with others', 'feelings (emotive responses) resulting from SNSs', and 'communication using SNSs being easier than offline communication'. Based on their findings, the authors reported that some individuals use SNSs more frequently when they feel isolated in life and that they feel isolated in return when they reduce their usage of SNSs. Further, they found that at times, SNSs can allow users to ignore responsibilities and relationships offline and that users can often use SNSs compulsively and can struggle when they attempt to decrease their SNS usage. However, an important limitation of the study was that the researchers did not research any co-occurring disorders that may have accounted for the participants' experiences of SNSs.

Hammond's (2017) qualitative study using TA investigated the experiences of adolescents who use SM. The following five themes with accompanying sub-themes were reported: 'feeling connected' (sub-themes: friendship intimacy, strengthening family ties), '24/7' (sub-themes: morning, noon and night, keeping in the loop, without it I'd be bored, striving for a healthy balance), 'expression of self' (sub-themes: confidence and freedom of expression, misconstrued meaning, self-conscious selfies), 'cyberbullying' (sub-themes: the hidden bully, gang mentality, lack of control), and 'emotional rollercoaster' (sub-themes: construction of self-esteem and identity, destruction of self-esteem and feeling anxious, transient happiness - long-lasting distress). The findings revealed a complex interaction between negative (e.g. long-lasting feelings of distress, destruction of self-esteem and feeling anxious) and positive (e.g.

ability to express their true or ideal self and feeling connected to others) implications for adolescent development and wellbeing (Hammond, 2017). This study offered an important contribution to the literature on the social wellbeing and mental health of adolescents by offering rich narratives that challenged some of the adult meta-discourses around modern media practices in young people (Hammond, 2017).

Calancie, Ewing, Narducci, Horgan, and Khalid-Khan's (2017) qualitative study among a group of adolescents with a primary diagnosis of anxiety explored how FB might influence their anxiety. The findings generated six themes related to FB stressors: 'fearing judgment', 'wanting privacy', 'seeking approval', 'negotiating self and social identity', 'connecting and disconnecting' and 'escalating interpersonal issues'. The results suggested that there were specific characteristics of FB that could facilitate pre-existing maladaptive behaviours (e.g. ruminations, excessive social comparison) or that could create fear for users with anxiety. They concluded that there are several mechanisms through which FB might worsen anxiety in this demographic and thus make them susceptible to negative experiences on FB. A limitation concerned the focus groups, where several adolescents voiced that they were not comfortable disclosing distressing events about their online experiences and thus declined participation. This resulted in much smaller focus groups (two members each), which could have limited the ability of participants to draw upon other users' experiences. These themes can assist practitioners, educational professionals and parents in detecting potential stressors for anxious adolescents in relation to SNS usage and in developing effective approaches around SM use for this clinical population (Calancie et al., 2017).

Singleton et al.'s (2016) qualitative study explored the psychological experiences of adolescents with mental health difficulties on SNSs. Using a grounded theory methodology, a complex interaction was revealed between social networking experiences and wellbeing. Participants experienced 'connection and support' and 'threats and judgment', which were eased by having constant accessibility to a social network. These participants made sense of threats and judgement as an outcome of the characteristics of interaction on these sites (e.g. the absence of receiving 'likes' was interpreted as judgement). Direct judgements, threats and social comparison practices for the most part resulted in participants' belief that they were 'not okay', and were linked with anxiety, low mood and insecurity. Various strategies were utilised to cope with the emotional influence of these experiences, including self-harm. Judgement also encompassed participants judging themselves as well as judging others. Importantly, these sites also generated positive experiences, such as connecting with close friends and family and seeking support in relation to their emotional needs from others who they perceived as similar to themselves. In addition, participants described using the search features on these sites to find others with similar struggles, which helped validate and normalise their experiences and motivated some participants to take positive action.

Radovic et al. (2017) explored the experiences of 23 adolescents with a diagnosis of depression to

examine how SNS use might impact and be impacted by mental health difficulties. Using a content analysis approach, the findings illustrated both positive and negative uses of SNSs. Positive use involved searching for positive content for humour and entertainment, using SNSs to experience independence, exploring identity as well as in an attempt to attain peer acceptance, social support and for social connection with friends and family. Some participants spoke about their experiences of attaining social support from others who had also experienced mental health difficulties, as on SNSs, one can develop communities based on shared experiences. On the other hand, negative consequences included experiencing cyberbullying, feeling distressed over social comparisons and sharing risky behaviours.

Some participants increased their use of SM when they were feeling more depressed in an attempt to improve their mood, with the intention of releasing emotions, attaining social support, looking for an online community or for entertainment or distraction. While at times, these benefits were attained, at other times participants would experience negative consequences, which would unintentionally exacerbate their mood. Participants also identified three types of use, which were perceived as problematic: 'oversharing' (sharing too much personal information and negative status updates), 'stressed posting' (sharing negative thoughts publicly with their social network) and experiencing 'triggering posts' (encountering upsetting content such as disordered eating). These three uses appeared to initially emerge from an attempt to cope with negative moods yet they would lead to negative outcomes. For example, stressed posting was perceived as a method of releasing feelings such as frustration or anger. While at times oversharing was used as a way to passively look for social support, at other times, participants expressed that the consequences of such posts were judgement, misinterpretation, cyberbullying, losing confidentiality, embarrassment and making others feel uncomfortable or concerned. Participants also observed that using SNSs without a purpose when they were in a negative mood did not help. Intentional uses such as connecting with a supportive friend in a private message or with an online community of others going through similar difficulties were experienced as more helpful. The authors assert that using SNSs in an intentional way to connect with supportive others may assist in decreasing symptoms of depression (Radovic et al., 2017).

1.9 Rationale for the Study

A primary rationale for conducting this study was to contribute towards filling an important gap in the literature by carrying out a qualitative piece of research that explores how users experience themselves on an individual and relational level on these platforms. By adopting an experiential perspective, this study aimed to offer an in-depth analysis of the experience of the self in cyberspace, with the intention of contributing to and deepening our understanding of this subject area. Research of this kind can offer valuable insights to both practitioners and researchers seeking a deeper understanding of the potential

dynamics that may operate when it comes to a user's online experiences.

Although quantitative data enable generalisations and trends to be discovered, users are not given the opportunity to articulate and make sense of their own experiences. It is important that we change the nature of questions we are asking to include ones that focus on individuals' subjective lived experiences on these sites and the meanings held about those experiences. Given the complexity of this fast-moving phenomenon, qualitative methods that explore users' experiences on SNSs can assist in offering a more comprehensive understanding of some of the processes taking place (Singleton et al., 2016). Undertaking a qualitative study allows an examination of this important contemporary subject area with a depth that may not be available with quantitative methodologies.

1.10 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

When considering the relevance of the topic presented to the field of counselling psychology, it is important to consider studies that have examined the impact that cyberspace has within a therapeutic context. Lingiardi (2007) presents two case studies where the Internet impacted the therapist and client relationship and describes how for both clients, cyberspace was seen as a tool for regulating emotions. He explains how the therapeutic relationship aimed to give this tool some relational meaning, assisting the clients in shifting from compulsive use to a transformative use of the object (Lingiardi, 2007). Malater (2007) presents several case studies where clients have brought up Internet-related material in therapeutic sessions and discusses the challenges in interpreting this material in relation to his clients. It is cases like these that help us to contemplate some of the challenges associated with the entrance of cyberspace in a therapeutic context (Lingiardi, 2007).

The widespread use of SNSs means that practitioners are likely to work with clients who may bring Internet-related issues into the therapeutic realm, including the impact that SNSs are having on their lives (Morris & Cravens Pickens, 2017). This requires reflection around how clients experience themselves in connection with other people on these platforms. As a counselling psychologist trainee, this was indeed my own experience with several clients and one of the motivations for undertaking this study. Balick (2013) asserts that psychotherapists ought to develop approaches in both theory and practice, especially in talking therapies such as counselling, in order to meet the particular issues that their clients are facing in relation to SNSs. While clients may not pursue therapy explicitly for issues related to technology use in the form of SM (Morris & Cravens Pickens, 2017), studies have linked SNS use with mental health outcomes and emerging research indicates that these technologies are reconfiguring personal and relationship dynamics. Feinstein et al. (2013) assert that mental health professionals are encouraged to explore the kinds of experiences clients are having on these platforms. Psychologists ought to be aware

of potential problematic relationships that users' may develop with these sites including how this might interfere with individual and social functioning and the impact this may have on a user's mental health (Giota & Kleftaras, 2013).

There is a growing need for psychologists to receive training and education on the impact of technology use and particularly SM on wellbeing, yet research within the field of counselling and clinical psychology is still in its infancy (Blumer, Hertlein, Smith & Allen, 2014). It is therefore important for practitioners to have awareness about the latest research in this area in order to contribute to the overall dialogue, so that they can be knowledgeable about how research into SNSs can inform their practice (Morris & Cravens Pickens, 2017). Increasing our understanding of this topic can assist us to work with clients around how they engage online, when this is deemed helpful; it can help us to identify potential risk and protective factors that can be incorporated into treatment such as developing sustainable support networks. This can also assist in guiding the management of negative experiences on SM in a relationally and psychologically healthy way (Fox & Moreland, 2015). SNSs are a universal and widely utilised avenue for engaging in interpersonal experiences. Quality in-depth research exploring use has significant implications for users and educational and mental health professionals in shaping wider society's understanding of SM upon the individual. Given the speed at which SNSs have become embedded in everyday life, and the rate at which they are projected to grow within the next decade, the requirement for in-depth research is vital.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Overview

This chapter provides a detailed report of the methodology utilised to design this study as well as the methods used to collect and analyse the data. I begin by positioning the research epistemologically and ontologically as well as discussing the theoretical framework of the research design. I follow this by presenting an account of methodological reflexivity and explore the research design journey including a review of alternative methodological considerations. I then provide a detailed account of the process of data collection and sampling including the ethical considerations. Finally, I offer an in-depth report of the research process involved in the analysis of the data.

2.2 A Qualitative Approach

In contrast to quantitative research, which tends to be concerned with the identification of cause-effect relationships, qualitative research is concerned with meaning, how individuals make sense of their world and the quality and texture of experience (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2008). Taking a qualitative approach allows a deep exploration and understanding of people's lived experiences and the chance to challenge the existing body of knowledge and assumptions about phenomena. A phenomenological position aims to get as close as possible to the quality and meaning of participants' experiences (Willig, 2017) and explores the subjects' perspectives of their world with the intention to "grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings" (Kvale, 1996, p. 53). Resonating with the ethos of counselling psychology, it offers the opportunity to hear first-hand qualitative accounts relating to the impact of SNSs on people's experiences of themselves and their world, in order to gain a better understanding of the potential implications for both research and treatment. Given the aims of this study and in particular the research questions, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate.

2.3 Philosophical Underpinnings

2.3.1 Ontology

Ontology is the philosophical study concerned with the nature of the world. The question that drives ontology can be thought of as 'what is there to know?' (Willig, 2013). Ontological positions of realism and relativism lie at opposite ends of a continuum. A realist perspective holds that it is possible to obtain

objective knowledge about the world and considers the world to be made up of objects and structures that have cause-effect relationships with one another (Willig, 2013; Finlay, 2011). In contrast, a relativist ontology rejects such a perception, maintaining that there are multiple understandings and meanings of the world (Willig, 2013; Finlay, 2011). With a relativist perspective, what is 'reality' can only be captured through language use and/or personal perception (Finlay, 2011). This research situates itself on the continuum between relativism and realism, with an ontological position of critical realism.

Critical realism developed through the work of Bhaskar in the 1970s and 1980s, originating as a scientific alternative to both constructivism and positivism (Fletcher, 2017). It was further investigated and developed by critical realists such as Sayer (1992), Collier (1994), and Lawson (1997). A critical realist ontology rejects a correspondence theory of the truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It argues that there exists an external world independent of human consciousness, yet that there is also a dimension that involves our socially determined knowledge about reality (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). It does not reject the notion that there is a social world we can try to access or understand, however, it contends that some knowledge can be closer to reality than other knowledge (Fletcher, 2017). It suggests that it is possible to achieve knowledge of actually existing generative mechanisms and structures, although not in terms of a mirror image (Danermark et al., 2002).

In qualitative research, this position considers meanings to be fluid, while accepting that individuals' stories of the phenomenon of interest do "reflect something of their subjective perceptions of their experience, if not their actual experience" (Finlay & Ballinger 2006, p. 20). Thus, a critical realist position holds that a knowable and real world exists which sits 'behind' the socially located knowledge and subjective knowledge a researcher can access (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Since knowledge is perceived as socially influenced, it is thought to reflect a reality that is separate and that can only be accessed *partially* (Braun & Clarke, 2013). With this position, there is a need to assert that some 'authentic' reality exists to generate knowledge that might 'make a difference' (Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1997).

2.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is an area of philosophy concerning the theory of knowledge, which attempts to offer answers to the questions: 'How and what can we know?' (Willig, 2001). This involves contemplating about the nature of knowledge itself, its scope and the reliability and validity of claims to knowledge (Willig, 2001). What counts as knowledge establishes how meaningful knowledge can be produced as well as what it is seen to represent (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The type of knowledge a methodology intends to produce is dependent on its epistemological position (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2008). As with ontology, there exists a range of epistemological positions along the realism-relativism continuum (Willig, 2008). In contrast to researchers within a positivist epistemology, as qualitative researchers we perceive our epistemology as broadly interpretivist but with substantial variation as to where we position ourselves on

the continuum (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006).

In keeping with the research questions, aims of the study and the experiential framework of the method, I held an epistemological position of phenomenology. Phenomenology sits between a realist and relativist continuum and can be thought of as an 'in-between' position that maintains that although "experience is always the product of interpretation and, therefore, constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed), it is nevertheless 'real' to the person who is having the experience" (Willig, 2013, p. 12). Adopting a phenomenological position fit well with the ontological position of this study. Finlay and Ballinger (2006, p. 20) report that with a phenomenological position, the aim is "to capture, as closely as possible, the manner in which a phenomenon is experienced and its essential structures" and therefore, critical realist or realist ontological positions are typically adopted. While the epistemological position adopted was phenomenology, it is important to highlight that the current study was phenomenologically-inspired and not an attempt to reach a phenomenological description. As such, there are no claims that the methodological approach adopted was phenomenological or that this is a phenomenological study.

2.4 Reflexivity

Within a positivist-empiricist model of research, objectivity is valued and avoiding bias, the notion that the researcher might have inadvertently influenced the findings, is a principal concern (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In qualitative research, subjectivity is valued; research is perceived as a subjective process whereby researchers bring in their own values, assumptions, beliefs, histories, mannerisms, perspectives and politics into the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The research topics that interest us, the questions we ask about these topics and the parts of our data that intrigue and excite us, are all part of who we are, part of our subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In the qualitative paradigm, our subjectivity and our humanness can be utilised as a research tool (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the role of the researcher is recognised as a principal factor influencing the collection and selection of data and its interpretation (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006).

Within a qualitative paradigm, research is thought of as a joint creation between the researcher, the participants and their relationship (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006). In order to develop self-awareness of these inter-subjective dynamics, researchers engage in reflexivity (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006). Reflexivity necessitates an awareness of the researcher's influence on the construction of meanings and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of "remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter" while engaging in the research process (Willig, 2013, p. 10). Thus, reflexivity involves an exploration of the ways in which my involvement with this study "influences, acts upon and informs" this research (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

2.4.1 Position of the Researcher

The basis of my exploration extends from my interest in understanding how people interact upon SM and how this can pose certain challenges for therapists. I came to realise that this cultural field could not be ignored as this new way of engaging potentially changes the focus of therapeutic work. Whereas previously the therapeutic focus was on relationships taking place within families, leisure, education and the workplace within a western paradigm, now the access to and growing use of SNSs offers another set of interaction dynamics. In terms of my biography, I am a 30-year-old woman of Lebanese heritage, and thus I predate the formation of the Internet. I do not have an active account on any SNS, moving away from a short-lived engagement with FB in early adulthood. Although interested in using FB as a tool for communicating with friends, I became apprehensive at the idea of posting photos of myself, as showing everyone my lifestyle choices dissolved my sense of privacy. As a result, my use of FB became limited to 'Messenger' where I could make contact with others across the globe if I wanted, and they could contact me. However, this function diminished with time, as I found myself rarely attending to or checking for any messages I had received through the site.

Despite my disinterest in engaging on a personal level, I remained curious from the periphery about what my close friends were truly getting out of their engagement with SM. Whilst I remained outside of these dynamics, I questioned the benefits of posting photos of oneself, friends or family online. At times, I felt that the way some people were presenting themselves on SM was a façade. At other times, I perceived this activity to be a powerful form of self-expression, a way to visually represent and share one's experiences over time and connect with others. I had also grown fascinated with how the public-facing aspects of the self presented through these visual representations, along with the comments and 'likes' that accompany them, become integrated into how one then perceives oneself. Despite experiencing some peer pressure some time ago to join new SM applications, the rise of the cult of the selfie was one of the factors that drove me away. At the same time, I noticed that some of my friends were joining interest groups and were getting invites to cultural events though SNSs, along with building networks of connected people from across the globe. This made me reflect on whether there were some opportunities through participating in these platforms that I could potentially benefit from. Nonetheless, I noticed that I never felt an inner motivation to participate, and thus I remain an 'outsider' when it comes to my own limited experience of myself on these platforms.

When I chose to pursue this topic, I realised that I had only limited awareness of the complexities of what was arising within people's online experiences. However, a potential benefit of my research approach was this relative 'blindness' to the experience of being on SM, despite my early adult skepticism. Due to this, when I eventually conducted the interviews, my participants were empowered as educators. The power shifted as they were much more aware than I was of the complexities of being involved in the world of SM. It was through this process that I learnt about their worlds rather than imposing myself upon them as

an expert. As a naïve interviewer, I encouraged my participants to 'state the obvious' (Willig, 2013) and to then help me understand what existed underneath it, allowing them to explore what this meant for them.

2.4.2 The Phenomenological Attitude

As my epistemological position was phenomenology, it was important to adopt a 'phenomenological attitude' throughout the research process. The interest in exploring experience was embraced during the initial stages of the development of the study, including the development of the interview schedule. A primary task for the researcher embracing a phenomenological attitude is to move beyond established knowledge or the knowledge one holds from experience with regard to the phenomenon under study (Finlay, 2014). This is an important philosophical point but not easy to undertake in everyday life, because the 'schemas' and perceptions of the past and present cannot easily be erased. It therefore requires some reflection upon what appears as 'common-sense' in order to reposition the self in response to what is normally viewed and perceived.

Ideally, one must move away from one's own 'natural attitude', but this first requires establishing what one's own natural attitude is in order to then remain genuinely curious and open to novel understandings, embarking on a radical journey of "seeing afresh" (Finlay, 2014, p. 122). The researcher's usual ways of understanding a phenomenon are bracketed such that prior experience and views, as well as any explanations, judgements and theory, are provisionally left behind in order to explore the "is-ness" of the phenomenon further (Finlay, 2014). To undertake this required concentration and reflection in working upon the self, to outline what these normative concepts were and why they were held, in addition to the value they may have held.

As suggested by Finlay (2014, p. 124), a primary question I held in mind was: "how does the world appear to the participant?", with the objective of trying to access experience as lived. In the spirit of qualitative research, the process of reflexivity involved recognition that the aim was not to go into the research process from a detached and purely objective position but rather to manage (as opposed to eliminate) subjectivity (Finlay, 2014). With a phenomenological stance, the emphasis is on how the phenomenon is presenting and, in particular, how it is experienced by individuals in such a way that a researcher acknowledges that what participants articulate about their own experience is their 'truth' (Finlay, 2014). Finlay (2014, p. 123) asserts that the focus is on "the meaning of the situation as it is given in the participant's experience". In addition to maintaining genuine curiosity, compassion, and empathy, a researcher adopting a phenomenological attitude should remain critically aware of their own perspectives, given their cultural, historical, and personal position (Finlay, 2014). Gadamer (1975, p. 268-269) expresses the importance of being mindful of one's own bias, so that the data can present itself in "all its otherness" and hence, affirm its "own truth against one's own fore-meanings".

Embracing this attitude was a learning experience as I had to expand to engage with the participants' experiences, without seeking to impose top-down interpretations and this meant constantly revisiting my insights. I realised when embarking upon the research that in drawing on the phenomenological attitude, I had to try to discard any frames held beforehand. As Finlay (2011) highlights, there was a sense of a voyage into the unknown and it was this not knowing that created some initial apprehension. To undertake this approach meant working upon my own perceptions and understandings of the world and reflecting upon my own 'schemas of apperception' (Adler, 1930) and how these had formed in relation to the ecological environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) I had existed within, which helped to generate my common-sense (Billig, 1996; Moscovici, 2000). Through undergoing self-reflections and working through my own ways of being, I was then able to move into the perceptions and experiences of the participants. By reflecting upon my own perceptions around what people were revealing about themselves, I was able to think about how I was 'framing' their experiences. This meant thinking about how I viewed what they were saying and trying to explore the meanings within their own frames of reference.

My attempt to maintain a phenomenological attitude extended to the literature review as I chose to avoid engaging in an extensive review of the literature in the early stages of this study. The reason for this was to prevent prior theoretical contributions and ideas of others from shaping the analysis (Finlay, 2011; Willig, 2013). Finlay (2011) asserts that undertaking a detailed literature review can also 'strain' attempts to bracket previous understandings. Braun and Clarke (2006) also highlight that an inductive approach, which was the approach utilised in the analysis of the data would be enriched by not engaging with the literature at the initial stages of the analysis.

Thus, the way that I came to adopt a phenomenological attitude was through undertaking some work on myself. One of the ways I did this was by keeping a diary and audio recordings of my thoughts and reflections throughout the research process. This allowed me to obtain an insight into what I was originally thinking and how I could begin to challenge some of the views I normatively held. This was also undertaken through engaging in supervision and discussions with a support network, where I was challenged around these assumptions, leading me to think and reflect upon them. Therefore, I adopted the phenomenological attitude as a journey, rather than 'flicking a switch' and this was based upon an initial naivety around the whole process. This is the conclusion I have reached, after reflecting back to the origins, and to where I eventually travelled.

2.5 Thematic Analysis

The term 'method' refers to "a specific research technique" (Silverman, 1993, p. 1), whereas 'methodology' refers to a general approach to studying research topics (Langdridge, 2007). After careful

consideration of a number of different approaches, TA was selected as a well-suited method for this study. TA is considered to be a qualitative research method that can be utilised across a range of research questions and epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Many other qualitative approaches are more accurately described as methodologies, since they are located within specific theoretical frameworks, which inform the methods of collecting data and analyses (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017).

As this was the first time I conducted a qualitative research study, it was an unfamiliar arena of research for me. As Chamberlain (2012, p. 5) notes, in seeking a degree of certainty, sticking with codified and established methodologies is an "easy way to achieve this". In my preoccupation with finding the 'perfect' methodology that fit with the research questions and aims of the study, I came to realise that perhaps there was no *one* perfect fit. Chamberlain (2012) states that codified and established methodologies can limit a researcher's engagement in reflexivity, criticality and creativity and as such place important limitations on key practices for achieving high-quality qualitative research. He notes:

> Every piece of research is unique, in what it seeks to do and how it seeks to do it. So methodological ideas and concepts, like theoretical ideas and concepts, are there to stimulate, to be drawn on and utilised, to be adapted in context; they are not there to be followed slavishly (Chamberlain, 2012, p. 5).

This reflection made me deliberate upon my choice of methodology and the considerations below highlight some key areas of contemplation that shaped a significant aspect of the research process.

2.5.1 The Journey: Methodological and Analytical Considerations

A proposal was initially submitted where the aim of the study was to utilise a psychoanalytic lens in order to explore the experience of the self in cyberspace. This can be seen in the ethics approval letter, information sheet, consent sheet, debrief sheet, and recruitment advertisements (appendix. 6.1-6.5). As SNSs involve a high degree of interpersonal relating, drawing on concepts from relational psychoanalysis was proposed as a potentially valuable perspective in looking at the data. The core of relational psychoanalysis is in understanding the nature of what is happening between individuals, an outlook that is key to online social networking since it is an area that mediates so much person-to-person relating (Balick, 2013). Taking a relational approach allows for both the intrapsychic (what is happening inside one's psyche) and the intersubjective (what is happening between psyches) perspectives to be recognised (Balick, 2013). Frosh and Baraister (2008) claim that the contribution that psychoanalysis

offers in research stems from the sophistication of its concepts, which can offer an enrichment of interpretive understanding on personal narratives, particularly those emerging out of interviews. As such, it was essential to adopt an approach that offered flexibility in the analysis and interpretation of the data. TA is a method that is characterised by theoretical flexibility (Willig, 2013) and thus can be applied across a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

My interest in attempting to combine a psychoanalytic lens with a phenomenologically-inspired study had emerged from intriguing material I had come across by Professor Robert Romanyshyn as well as Roger Brooke, who were bridging phenomenology and psychoanalytic thinking in their research work. I considered incorporating the psychoanalytic lens in two ways. The first was to draw from the psychosocial literature and the ethics of doing a psychosocial reading and to take a binocular approach to the analysis of the data. This meant that the first level of analysis would be a bottom-up level TA and the line would then be drawn here. The second level of analysis would then be presented in a separate section and would be a top-down analysis of the themes that were found, which is where the latent level would come in. The psychoanalytic reading would be in relation to the *themes* themselves rather than being a psychoanalytic reading of the participants' words. This approach would be undertaken with a clear awareness not to impose any theories onto the participants' words themselves. An additional research question would be incorporated on the subject of exploring the unconscious experience of relating online, which would allow for a more suspicious reading of the data. This second level would be considered if I felt that there were important unconscious aspects of participants' experiences that I wanted to account for. In considering the ethical implications, transparency and clarity would be reported in relation to the two distinct levels of analysis and writing with modesty, while being very tentative within the interpretation or psychoanalytic lens, would be vital.

The second option I considered was to draw on general psychoanalytic theories and concepts tentatively in the discussion as a way of theorising the findings. Yet an awareness of the radical tensions between phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches to interpretation and the epistemological tensions between a theory of the unconscious and phenomenology, which focuses on conscious experience, had left me feeling uncertain in the approach I was considering. The research questions and the majority of the interview questions were focused on experience and the aim on the basis of the research questions was to adopt an experiential TA and embrace a phenomenological attitude. As such, the uncertainty remained, even when I considered incorporating a psychoanalytic theoretical lens in the introduction and discussion chapter only.

In the development of the study, the choice to either tone down the phenomenological attitude or consider dropping the psychoanalytic lens altogether had emerged on a number of occasions. However, I felt more committed towards the position of exploring experience and maintaining a phenomenological epistemology. After a lengthy deliberation, involving discussions with different professors on the potential

in integrating both interests, I decided to incorporate ideas from self psychology in the introduction and discussion section only. This decision was taken so as not to graft on a theoretical lens in the analysis that was external to phenomenology, as this could show a lack of commitment to a phenomenological epistemological position and potentially raise complications.

Following my decision to drop the psychoanalytic lens in the analysis, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was also considered. With IPA, the assumption is that individuals are 'self-interpreting beings', meaning they are actively involved in interpreting people, objects, and events in their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In order to investigate this process, IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of hermeneutics, idiography, and phenomenology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The analytic process in IPA is commonly described in terms of a dual interpretation process (double hermeneutic) where firstly the subject is attempting to make meaning of their world and secondly, the researcher is trying to make sense of the subject's meaning-making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA studies typically explore existential concerns of substantial importance for the subject; a concern with a sense of self and identity, a focus on subjects' meaning-making and an attentiveness to bodily sensation within lived experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

As an IPA method is interested in how meanings are constructed by participants (Smith & Osborn, 2003), it can allow for an exploration of how a participant makes sense of their interpersonal experiences online as well as an exploration of the meanings that these experiences hold for the participant. In discussion with my research supervisor, along with another professor at City University, we considered whether I should switch to an IPA. While an IPA could have also been a suitable choice, the preference lay with the thematic approach, as I was still unsure about how much interpretation would be required. I was keen to select a method that would offer flexibility in researching a broad topic such as the experience of the self in cyberspace in which varying levels of interpretation might have been needed. Further, IPA has a dual focus on the unique characteristics of individual participants as well as the patterning of meaning across participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007). On the other hand, TA is primarily focused on the identification of patterns across the dataset, although differences and divergences can still be accounted for (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The intention of the study was to focus on patterned meaning more than to take an ideographic approach and examine the detailed experience of each case in turn (Smith, 2015). Thus, a TA was selected as the chosen method.

2.5.2 Thematic Analysis: Strengths and Limitations

Braun and Clarke (2006) depicted TA as "a poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used qualitative analytic method" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). However, since the publication of Braun and Clarke's paper on TA in 2006, TA has gained a vast amount of recognition as a reputable method of data analysis (Terry et al., 2017). The method adopted for this research is by Braun and Clarke (2006) – an

approach that allows theoretical flexibility and places TA fully within a qualitative paradigm (Terry et al., 2017). Indeed, the epistemological and ontological flexibility is what makes Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to TA different from many other versions of TA as well as other qualitative approaches (Terry et al., 2017).

TA is a method consisting of the identification, analysis, organisation, description, and reporting of themes found within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves the generation of codes followed by themes. However, coding in TA is not just a method of data reduction; it is an analytic process that captures both the surface (semantic) meaning within the data as well as the underlying (latent) meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2014). TA highlights the active and reflexive role of the researcher, whereby the researcher makes active, interpretive choices in constructing codes and generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Unlike other versions of TA that involve the use of a code book (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2012) or the development of a coding frame (Joffe & Yardley, 2004), coding in Braun and Clarke's (2006) version of TA can be thought of as a more organic process. There is no one 'accurate' way to code data and as such, the reasoning behind inter-rater reliability disappears (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

TA provides an approach that can be adapted for the needs of many studies, allowing a rich, thorough, and complex account of the data (King, 2004). However, it is important to take into account some of the disadvantages of this method. Although TA is flexible, this flexibility can result in a lack of coherence and inconsistency when generating themes from the data (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Since TA does not in itself offer the researcher a theoretical basis, the researcher must engage in a significant amount of conceptual work prior to beginning the research itself (Willig, 2013). The lack of a clear theoretical base can result in researchers making the mistake of conducting a TA without locating it epistemologically and theoretically (Willig, 2013). TAs conducted in this way often lead to a 'shopping list' of 'themes', which tend to represent the researcher's interview schedule, with limited insights achieved (Willig, 2013). In order to promote cohesion and consistency it was of great importance to apply and make explicit an epistemological position that could coherently form the basis of this research study's empirical claims (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

2.5.3 Thematic Analysis Research Design

The flexibility of TA makes it particularly essential for researchers to state their theoretical approach and analytic choices explicitly (Braun & Clark, 2013). As the research questions were exploratory, an experiential orientation as opposed to a critical one was adopted. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that an experiential TA is particularly well suited for research questions that are interested in exploring experience as they aim to capture participants' experiences and perspectives and ground research in participants' accounts. An experiential orientation focuses on what participants feel, think, and do and is

grounded in the theoretical assumption that language reflects either a singular universal reality or the perspectival reality of a particular participant (Terry et al., 2017). This orientation aligned with the epistemological and ontological position that I had adopted. In line with the above, an inductive 'bottom-up' approach was chosen over a deductive 'top-down' approach.

2.6 Quality and Rigour

In order to produce meaningful results, qualitative research should be conducted in a rigorous and systematic way (Nowell et al., 2017). Qualitative researchers adopt multiple standards of quality known as credibility, rigour, validity, or trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). When it comes to conducting a rigorous TA, there are limited examples in the literature to help guide researchers (Nowell et al., 2017). The objective with the present study was to conduct a TA that could generate insightful, rich, sensitive, and trustworthy findings (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for a good TA was followed in order to ensure quality of analysis (appendix 6.6). Furthermore, guidelines concerning quality in qualitative research were referred to, and these included Elliot, Fischer and Rennie (1999), Williams and Morrow (2009), and Yardley (2000).

Showing *sensitivity to the data* meant the avoidance of merely imposing any pre-conceived categories on the data but allowing a careful consideration of the meanings created by participants (Yardley, 2017). Demonstrating *commitment and rigour* involved prolonged engagement with the topic, thorough data collection, immersion in the data and an in-depth analysis (Yardley, 2000). Pilot interviews were conducted in order to test the suitability of the interview questions for depth, to look out for any potential difficulties I might encounter, and to help refine the research questions (Willig, 2013). The pilot interviews helped me practise and refine the interview schedule as well as my role as a researcher in the interview process. The analytic process took a considerable amount of time in order to ensure thoroughness and to give it the necessary space and attention to be able to attend closely to each participant's accounts whilst referring back to the entire dataset. Analysis involved numerous revisions of themes and sub-themes prior to finalising a thematic map. Striving for a *balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation* depends on both reflexivity and subjectivity (Williams & Morrow, 2009). I 'bracketed' my known biases in advance and engaged in self-reflective journaling throughout the research process (Williams & Morrow, 2009). *Clear communication and application of findings* was strived for by highlighting limitations in current methodological approaches, proposing alternatives to consider and future directions for research as well as highlighting the relevance and potential implications of the findings for treatment and the field of counselling psychology (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

There are numerous methods for checking the credibility of a researcher's themes or accounts (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Credibility relates to the notion of internal consistency; in order to enhance

credibility, a reflexive diary was kept throughout the research process as well as audio recordings, documenting my reflections, actions and methodological choices and rationales (Morrow, 2005; Nowell et al., 2017). *Owning one's perspective* means acknowledging one's interests, values, and assumptions including the role that these play in understanding (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). This was explored in the 'Position of the Researcher' section above.

An additional level of credibility suggested by several researchers including Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Yardley (2000) is participant or member checking. Due to time constraints, *member checking* was conducted with some participants who were able to respond within the timeframe to check for resonance and accuracy with their experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016). However, Finlay (2011) suggests caution when performing member checks as participants have their own needs, interests and motives and what might have been 'true' for them at the time of the interview may not be any longer. Due to this, I treated the process of member checking carefully, with the idea held in mind that these findings were generated in a specific context (Finlay, 2011). The emphasis was not on validating the 'correctness' of findings but rather empowering participants to take part in meaning-making processes (Haumann, 2004; Finlay, 2011). In addition, extracts of coding and themes were shared throughout the analysis with the research university supervisor. As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), *peer debriefing* was used to increase credibility and offer an external check on the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). This is a process whereby a researcher asks a peer who is not involved in the research study to assist in probing the researcher's thinking around parts of the research process (Given, 2008).

Other guidelines applied to increase quality and rigor included *grounding in examples*, which involved the presentation of examples of data to support one's interpretations (Morrow, 2005). Quotations derived from the data are presented throughout to illustrate examples of themes and sub-themes, including further quotations presented in the appendix (6.7). In addition, transcripts demonstrating initial coding, including tables taken from the initial coding process as well as a mind map and a provisional thematic map are presented in appendices 6.8–6.10. Another consideration was *coherence*, which refers to the representation of the understandings in a manner that attains integration and coherence, while retaining nuances in the data (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The extracts were embedded within an analytic narrative that demonstrated the story that was being told about the data, moving beyond the mere description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, discrepancies within participants' accounts were retained and presented throughout the analysis as well as an integrated summary of the analysis (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). When it came to *situating the sample*, the recommendations are to describe the participants and their life circumstances in order for the reader to judge the range of situations and persons to which the results may be relevant (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). Nonetheless, there were limitations when it came to presenting any identifiable information on participants as the methods of participant confidentiality and anonymity that were specified in the ethics form included

de-identified samples. Nevertheless, demographic data, which included participants' age and heritage, are provided in a table below.

2.7 Sampling Considerations and Procedure

2.7.1 Sampling

While sample size is a much-debated subject in qualitative research (Terry et al., 2017), Terry et al. (2017) have proposed general suggestive sample size recommendations across TA projects of different sizes. For a professional doctorate, they suggest collecting between 6 and 15 interviews. A total of eight participants were recruited for this study. Participants were recruited from student and community populations through posters on local public notice boards. These were placed within different universities, including City University, and within postgraduate departments as well as public common spaces around these universities such as public libraries and cafes.

The research advertisement indicated that the researcher was looking for volunteers to take part in a study on "how we experience ourselves in cyberspace as well as how we experience our social interactions on social networking sites" (appendix 6.5). The advertisement also indicated that participants would be offered £9 in appreciation of their time. While offering compensation for participation in research has been a debated issue, after some deliberation, my supervisor and I decided that £9 would be a suitable amount to account for participants giving up their time for the interview. Once participants had been identified and solicited, they were asked to come in for the interview at a private room booked in one of City University's libraries. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. Names of all participants have been altered to maintain confidentiality.

Pseudonym	*Gender*	*Age*	*Heritage*
Zoe	F	30	Italian
Leo	M	41	Indian
Dan	M	37	Canadian
Astrid	F	36	Belgian/British
Aria	F	31	Moroccan
Ella	F	21	Pakistani

Amy	F	22	Chinese/British
Ivy	F	24	American

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Once potential participants made contact, they were sent the information sheet and the consent sheet. The inclusion criteria were the following:

• Over 18 years old

• Has not been diagnosed with a psychiatric diagnosis and is not currently receiving treatment for a psychiatric problem(s); is not taking any psychiatric medication (this did not include medications for general health concerns)

The absence of any psychiatric diagnosis was deemed important for ethical considerations so as to minimise the chance of any distress. A list of counselling services was also provided in the debrief sheet should participants feel the need for support following the interview process.

The participants' were from a variety of cultural backgrounds, although several had reported growing up in the UK (Ella, Amy, Leo). Whilst this was a commonality, their heritage marked a cultural divergence. Astrid stated she had lived in the UK since late adolescence, while the rest of the participants reported coming to the UK primarily to pursue higher education (Aria, Zoe) or to further their career (Dan, Ivy). Several of the participants had reported having dual language, which may influence the way they think of themselves in relation to others. Some of these cultural differences had emerged in their interviews and appeared to play a role in the way they experienced and utilised SNSs.

2.7.2 Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was used (appendix 6.12). Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of collecting data in qualitative research in psychology and is compatible with numerous methods of data analysis (Willig, 2013). It was considered a suitable method of data collection for this study as it offers the chance to hear participants discuss particular aspects of their experiences (Willig, 2013). In using this approach, it was kept in mind that the interaction between the researcher and participant generates the data that is to be analysed (Willig, 2013). The semi-structured interview contains both features of a formal interview as well as those of an informal conversation (e.g. open-ended questions), with an emphasis on experience and narrative (Willig, 2013).

The questions were formulated to encourage the participants to explore the topic in more depth

by providing a space for them to stimulate novel ways of perceiving and understanding their online experiences. In devising the questions for the interview schedule, these were initially guided by Spradley (1979) who suggested incorporating four different types: structural, evaluative, contrast and descriptive. However, a new idea arose after reflecting on Jung (1966) and Von Franz's (1995, 1996) work on fairy tales, which inspired two further questions (Q3, Q10). My intention was to move away from a purely abstract or propositional understanding of what may be taking place within cyberspace; and instead explore the different facets of their experiences. The participants each lived within their own cultural frames and therefore the idea of using a fairy tale or 'other' character was explore their unique experiences by drawing upon an articulated motif. This motif was still left for each individual to interpret however, allowing for a multiplicity of experiences to be eventually expressed. The questions potentially prompted the participants to view their SM experiences as a journey into another world, something, which may parallel the existing world. It is a world people can enter and also retreat from, albeit slightly altered by each experience and this informed my early understanding. I was initially aware of this frame that I had composed and this was open to being challenged by the participants in relation to how they made sense of their world.

2.7.3 Ethical Considerations

This type of research was approved for light touch review from the ethics committee. The study carries no health and safety risks. Any potential psychological risks were expected to be minimal without any lasting or prolonged effects. These may include participants inferring information about themselves during or following the interview or feelings that may emerge in relation to being researched, which could potentially cause some discomfort. Once full ethical approval was granted from the ethical board of City University, the process of recruitment began. Professional guidelines for ethical conduct of research were followed including protecting, respecting and never deceiving participants, gaining informed consent prior to conducting any interviews, debriefing participants afterwards and maintaining confidentiality (Finlay, 2011).

It is possible that as a result of the interview process, a participant begins to reflect on aspects of their experiences in a different or novel way so that new understandings and knowledge are created for both the researcher and the participant (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). It was kept in mind throughout that the semi-structured interview process required ethical and sensitive negotiations of rapport between the researcher and the participant (Curtis & Curtis, 2011). Indeed, it was important not to misuse the informal atmosphere of such an interview to encourage participants to reveal more than they might have felt comfortable with (Willig, 2013). The questions in the interview schedule were not intended to encourage participants to disclose any sensitive issues of concern; however, there was the possibility that participants would choose to disclose such information. While this did not occur in the present study, a list of support

organisations was provided in the debrief sheet should any participant feel the need for support after the interview process.

2.7.4 Informed Consent, Confidentiality, Debriefing, and Data Storage

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencing the interviews in the form of a consent sheet. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from participation in the study at any time. Prior to the interview, all participants were given sufficient information about the study in the form of an information sheet. The information sheet included information about the general aims of the study, method of data collection, confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the data, timing commitments, their right to decline any information requested, their right to ask for the destruction of all or part of the data that they had contributed, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any unfavourable consequences. In addition, information about how the data would be utilised was also included.

Once the interviews had finished, all participants were provided with a debrief sheet (appendix 6.4). The debrief sheet included additional information about the aims of the study and the purpose of their participation as well as contact details of both the researcher and supervisor should they wish to request further information about the study. To ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, de-identification of data was used. All participants' names were referred to by pseudonym in the present study as well as in any publication that should arise from the research. Furthermore, all participants were asked permission for the use of direct quotes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word and audio recording files and interview transcripts were stored on an external hard drive and a personal laptop, both under password protection. Hard copies of the interview transcripts and consent forms were stored in separate locked filing cabinets at the researcher's home.

2.8 Data Analysis

2.8.1 Six-phase Analytic Process

While Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA is presented in a linear, six-phased method, it is considered to be a recursive and iterative process, with the researcher moving back and forth between the different stages of the analytic process (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase analytic steps were followed, which were the following:

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The first phase involved immersing myself in the data. The process began with me transcribing all the audio recordings of the interviews and producing verbatim accounts (e.g. including nonverbal utterances and silences). This was followed by repeated readings of the transcripts of the interviews in an *active* way – by noticing patterns, being observant and beginning to ask questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). During this process, I noted questions that came to mind as I read through the data and was attentive to any potential patterns in the overall dataset. Observational notes were kept in the margins of the transcripts; in this way they could be referred back to at a further point in the analysis. Familiarisation enabled a deep engagement with the data and an intimate knowing of the dataset (Terry et al., 2017).

After developing a thorough sense of the overall dataset, the second phase of the process began, which involved the generation of codes. The coding process involved a detailed, comprehensive, and systematic production of meaningful labels tied to specific segments of the dataset – segments that held meanings that were relevant to the research questions (Terry et al., 2017). This phase provided a thorough and rigorous base for the analysis. The content of the entire dataset was coded manually, giving equal attention to each data item and coding inclusively by preserving the surrounding data when relevant so that the context was not lost (Bryman, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Notes were written on post-it notes on the transcripts and a variety of coloured pens and highlighters were used across the entire dataset to signify potential patterns. The data was coded using sticky coloured label tags, with each code handwritten on the label tags. Once all data extracts were coded, they were grouped and organised together within each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were modified and revised throughout the process. In TA the final thematic map generated does not have to smooth out the contradictions and tensions within and across data items, so accounts that departed from the dominant story were retained during the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The third phase of constructing themes started once all the data had been thoroughly coded and collated and a list of diverse codes had been identified across the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). During this phase, the analysis of the codes began, which involved a thorough deliberation of

how the different codes could combine to form overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase involved a very active process of identification and pattern formation, with the research questions guiding and helping define what was relevant and what was not in terms of potential groups of patterned meaning (Terry et al., 2017). Indeed, this was one of the most challenging and time-consuming phases and the research questions served as a critical guide during this process. This phase entailed an investigation of the codes and the related data, in addition to clustering, combining, and collapsing codes together into larger or more meaningful patterns (Terry et al., 2017). Features of relationship and similarity across a series of different codes were identified, which indicated that they could be grouped together into a potential theme (Terry et al., 2017). In order to achieve this, I identified a *central organising concept*; a "clear core idea or concept that underpins a theme" (Braun, Clarke & Terry, 2014, p. 102) that was shared across the range of codes. Two large whiteboards were purchased and index cards were used to assist in this process. Quotes were also typed and printed and placed under each potential theme. Each theme was treated as provisional, which facilitated the opportunity to let go of any candidate theme or discover other possibilities, before ultimately finalising a set of themes and sub-themes (Terry et al., 2017).

The fourth and fifth phase involved reviewing and defining the candidate themes, whereby the themes were further refined and shaped and the thematic maps were altered, which lead to some candidate themes being renamed, collapsed into an overarching theme or rejected altogether. This process ensured that the themes worked well in relation to the research questions, the dataset and the data that had been coded (Terry et al., 2017). The initial step involved examining whether all the data extracts represented by each provisional theme had a clear relationship with the central organising concept and that the diversity of meaning around this central organising concept was also captured (Terry et al., 2017). This step applied to each provisional theme developed at this stage as well as across all the provisional themes, which necessitated a revisiting of the whole dataset to evaluate whether the themes worked well across the entire dataset (Terry et al., 2017). A balance was maintained between making sure the themes were related and ensuring that they were distinct from one another, which was a challenging endeavour. To assist with this process, definitions were written for each theme and sub-theme in order to define the boundaries and focus of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The next step involved defining and naming themes and a move towards an interpretative position – narrating a story based on the data that takes into account and makes sense of the diversity of meaning (Terry et al., 2017). The process of reviewing the provisional themes and sub-themes led to modifications of the thematic map. For example, the provisional theme 'sense of disembodied versus embodied presence' was altered to 'virtual versus physical presence'. The reason for this was that the word 'disembodied' could have potentially been too strong of a term to use in describing participants' online interactions. Another modification involved the theme 'bridge versus loss of connectivity'. The words 'connectivity' and 'connection' were considered potential representations of participants' experiences. However, connectivity was changed to connection, as this theme also encapsulated alternative forms of

connections that participants could seek if they did not have access to SM, such as being in nature. Thus, the term ‘connectivity’ did not feel representative of this aspect of their experiences. The final phase involved the opportunity to refine the analysis, determine which order the themes would be presented in, and establish where the primary focus would be in telling the complex and rich story of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014). After a thorough and careful consideration of all the themes and sub-themes, the central theme ‘double-edged sword’, having weaved its way throughout the narrative of participants, was considered representative in guiding the primary focus of the analytic story.

During the analytic process, the objective was to select themes that both on a collective and individual level offered the richest account of meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and that were representative of participants’ core experiences and relevant to the research questions. In alignment with the epistemology and the experiential nature of the study, the aim was to explicate the lived experience holistically and to capture something meaningful that articulated or pointed to the path of the specific lived experiences of participants (Finlay, 2014). Finlay (2014) states that if a researcher can reveal some ambiguity, intricacy, and ambivalence involved, all the better. Throughout the research process, I maintained the assumption that what participants were expressing reflected their perceptions of their experiences (Finlay & Eatough, 2012). The focus of the analysis was to avoid importing any external theories or theoretical concepts (Willig, 2017) and to stay as close to the data as possible. However, by taking an ‘empathic approach’, the objective was to also explicate meaning that was implicit within the data (Willig, 2017).

I endeavoured to identify themes that were convincing, coherent and grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Finlay, 2011). Polarities and divergences between participants’ accounts were also accounted for and represented within the themes and sub-themes. Finlay (2011) cautions against researchers who offer a description of ‘general themes’ and claim that these fit all their participants. Such an approach can potentially push the specific voices of the participants into the background (Finlay, 2011). Thus, in line with a phenomenological epistemological position, it was kept in mind that different individuals can and do perceive and experience the ‘same’ environment in radically different ways (Finlay, 2011).

Chapter 3: Analysis and Results

After several revisions of candidate themes and modifications of thematic maps, the final thematic map was created and is shown below in figure 1. A previous revision of this map can be seen in appendix 6.11. TA resulted in five main themes with seven sub-themes. Within the quotes, "…" was used in the place of any information that was not relevant to the themes and sub-themes including some additional repetitive terms (e.g. the-the, I-I). Throughout the text, any words or phrases in quotation marks are taken directly from participants' words from the interviews. In appendix 6.7, lists of additional quotes supporting each theme and sub-theme are presented and referred to throughout the analysis.

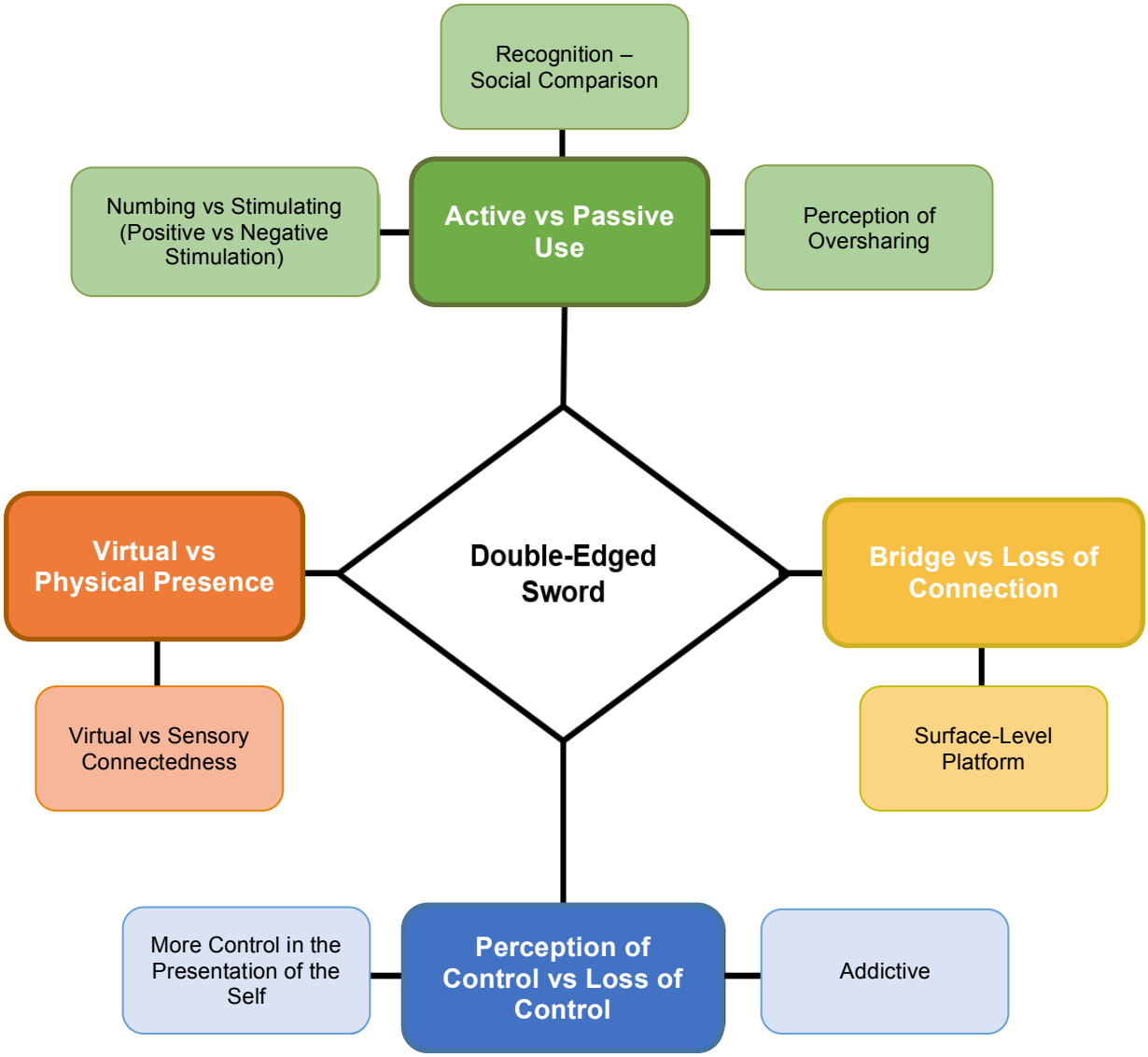

Figure 1: Final thematic map

3.1 Theme: Bridge Versus Loss of Connection

This theme focuses on the notion that SM acts as a bridge, offering participants multifaceted forms of connections; allowing connectivity and access to people and information, including updates about the world (e.g. shared news articles). The bridge aspect includes the ability to meet other like-minded people through SNSs, to connect to others by sharing and updating one's social network about one's life and to even promote one's career (e.g. one's performances as an actor) to a larger audience. In addition, the bridge aspect also assists in maintaining relationships with others. When considering the research question regarding how they experience their relationship to SM, the majority of participants spoke about how it allows them to feel 'connected' (e.g. global connectivity, online community, long distance relationships, updates about the world). The polarity of this theme 'loss of connection' focuses on how participants would feel without SM and involves an overall sense of feeling a loss of connectivity to their SM network as well as a loss of access to information such as updates about other people in their network and updates about the world. Several participants reported that they would feel more "isolated" and/or "lonely", with some stating that they would have fewer friendships and would lose contact with a global network of people. This theme also demonstrates how some of these participants experience the uniqueness of SM in generating community in the modern era.

The polarity 'loss of connection' also refers to their awareness that the connections offered by SM can distract from other forms of connection outside of these platforms. Without their time being taken up by SM, certain participants acknowledged that they would seek out other forms of connections, such as being in nature or socialising more in person. In addition, 'loss of connection' refers to the notion that without SM, many participants expressed that they simply do not have a comparable replacement for the global connectivity or sense of virtual community that it offers. This type of loss of connection may relate more to the challenges associated with creating physical communities in modern lifestyles.

In terms of the positive sense of social connection that can be gained from SM, Ella reports that using SM has been a "kick boost" to her social life by helping her meet more people and access social plans. Amy expresses that she can be "quite introverted sometimes" but that she would "like to stay in contact" with her network; so SM serves as an "easy and effortless channel" for "bridging that gap", "creating those connections" and making you feel like "you're not missing out". Aria describes SM as a "very powerful tool" that can create links and connect you to people you may never have been connected to. She discusses certain artists she follows, expressing that without SM, it would take much longer and there would be "too much of a gap" to find and reach out to such people. Similarly, Zoe describes SM as a "bridge" for new friendships, for keeping in touch with friends and family and for opening up space to communicate with like-minded people. She reports that she can't "just walk down the streets and look for like-minded people" but that though SM, "people do put themselves out there", which enables her to find others through mutual interests. The common thread throughout participants' responses is a sense that

these connections could not be achieved or would be more difficult or effortful to achieve through another medium – that SM opens up their social world and makes access to people far easier.

In relation to loss of SM, participants felt strongly that they would lose a form of connection that cannot be replaced elsewhere, giving rise to the polarity of the bridge theme – 'loss of connection'. Dan highlights many aspects of his uses of SM that represent the bridge polarity (appendix 6.7, A5-8) and describes a life without SM as "more lonely and more isolated". Nevertheless, he says his life would be much more about "living in the present" and that he would have more time for "more meaningful" things. In other words, he might be suggesting that he would be more connected to certain things that SM may not offer. Yet he expressed that it would also mean:

> "Throwing everything, everyone from my past away who wasn't still currently involved in my life…I would be cut off from a lot of people that I wouldn't be cut off from…if I'm experiencing something in my life like a holiday or a job or love…I wouldn't necessarily be able to tell people about it [pause] I wouldn't feel quite as connected to the world as in when major events happen I would be more dependent on tuning into the news channel or buying a newspaper as opposed to being able to punch it up on SM…I think life would be more peaceful…but I would also be a bit more cut off and even missing people". *(p.36)*

Ivy expresses that a life without SM is something she doesn't know anymore:

> "I almost don't know how I'd make friends. I don't know how I'd keep up with friends. I don't know if I would have my friends that I have because [pause] I'll definitely lose a lot of friends I have…I would lose my sense of like safety and like my place in the world because almost my SM represents my place in the world…it's crazy to say it like that but like it does in a lot of ways and if I lost it then like I would be off the grid…and I would have to have my small community of people who are literally physically around rather than having a network of friends around the world...I just can't imagine life without SM because how would we connect with people, how would we find - know where our friends are, know what people are up to, know what the state of the world is in…like there's so many things that we depend on SM for." *(p.37)*

The above extracts illustrate a loss of experiencing the bridge aspect of SM. It is interesting to note that what Ivy may be suggesting here is that without SM you can't really exist in the modern world, that it is

integral to how we build and maintain relationships and do community in the modern era. However, she also voices that without SM, she would feel more "grounded" and "more connected to mother earth", thus offering the opportunity for other forms of connection. She notes:

> "It would look like a deserted beach. You're just on your own but you're maybe finally connected with nature." *(p.30)*

The image of a deserted beach echoes the polarity of feeling a loss of connection. The necessity of keeping up with this new way of doing community and connection was articulated by Zoe, who describes social pressure to use new SM features and keep up with this "new language" in order to continue to communicate with her online community for fear of staying behind, "no longer engaging in the conversation", "not speaking the same language as the rest of the world" and therefore becoming "disconnected". She notes a dissonance between her on-going use of new SM features despite feeling that SM as a whole can be "so annoying" and that she would rather not be using it had she had a "physical community" around her. She voices that being without SM would mean communicating with a "few people very rarely".

Overall, participants' accounts suggest a sense that SM expands one's reach as a person, such as through being able to connect to people they wouldn't normally be able to connect to. These findings are important to the research questions as they shed light on how participants understand and experience their relationship to SNSs, in terms of what it is offering them through the bridge aspect of this theme and what they feel they would lose without it.

3.1.1 Sub-theme: Surface-level Platform

The following sub-theme shares the same central organising concept as the above theme, however it develops a distinct element of the theme. It focuses on the idea that while SM serves as a bridge, for some participants, the experience of being connected (e.g. whether to people or information) within the context of SM is described on a number of occasions as a connection that is surface level, superficial or one that is lacking in depth. The sub-theme is demonstrated in Astrid's description of her experience on FB in her excerpt below, where there is a sense that everything skates upon a 'surface' and there is no 'depth':

> "I find it a kind of frenetic dead space. It's not that stimulating [pause] it's an entirely surface stimulation [pause]. It just is like what's the latest current affairs thing I should know - just because I'm being told that's the latest current affairs thing I should know. I'm not swimming in my deep water, other people aren't swimming in their deep water like it's rare…you know sometimes someone puts a poem up there but then like the poem seems really weird when it's there [pause] it's designed as a surface – as a space of surface. So when something turns up where you're like oh a metaphor? I don't know what to do with a metaphor in this context." *(p.14)*

Astrid offers insight into her own experience of herself and her experience of other people when she indicates that both herself and other people are not swimming in their deep water. Despite this, one could speculate that it's not necessarily the content itself that's surface level, as Astrid suggests that when a metaphor turns up, she doesn't know what to do with it *in this context.* Thus, perhaps there may be an implicit indication that despite the content presented on the platform, it is the way she experiences the content *through* the *context* of the platform that's bringing about a more surface-level experience ("it's designed as a surface – as a space of surface"). In the sub-theme perception of oversharing further below, Astrid describes her experiences of other people in her social network who openly share very sensitive content such as their experiences of sexual assault publicly on SNSs. Thus, perhaps this reinforces the idea that it's not the content itself that is surface-level, but the manner in which she experiences the content through the context of these sites.

Similar to Astrid, Zoe seems to be focusing on her experience of the actual interface of SM:

> "You scroll through like an ad of something and then right under it is like an intimate moment a friend is sharing and it's almost like equated with this ad right - right before it. Like it's all on the same platform…like there's no way [short pause] this place allows me to [pause] have a deeper connection with myself or other people." *(p.17)*

Comparably, she may be articulating that there's something about the space or interface of SM itself ("this place") that doesn't allow her to have a deeper connection whether with herself or other people and perhaps not necessarily the content shared through the platform (intimate moments). Like Zoe and Astrid, Ivy focuses on the design of the interface itself, yet she also indicates that she experiences the content through the platform of Instagram as surface-level:

> “It’s the most surface level [pause] thoughts and imagery that you see [pause] it's surface level - that's like another word for shallow. For something to have depth, there needs to be context. Instagram gives you - there's no context with it…it drops photos in increments…you know there's no [pause] big picture…it's just like it's surface…even if it's seemingly deep because some people do long posts.” *(p.27)*

Hence, one aspect that seems to be limiting the level of depth these participants experience online, whether with the content or the people they’re connected to, seems to be the way they experience the context or interface of SNSs. There is perhaps a sense that for these participants, these sites and therefore their experiences on these sites are not meant to be too deep.

3.2 Theme: Virtual Versus Physical Presence

This theme explores the experience of the absence of the physical presence of the face and body in cyberspace, particularly in reference to engaging in interpersonal interactions and building relationships with others on SNSs. The elements of interpersonal interaction that play out face-to-face, such as being able to read body language or facial expressions are lost. Some participants report being able to express themselves more on SNSs when compared to in-person interactions as well as a sense that certain expressions are facilitated by the lack of face-to-face context online. On a number of different occasions, Ella voices that she is able to express herself more online in comparison to offline:

> “I'm more confident through SM than I am in real- in real life. Like I'm able to say and express myself more through hiding my face behind the screen...I feel like when people are not watching me I'm able to express myself more rather than like being face-to-face…I feel like with them not seeing how I am - how I'm expressing it - it's easier…because if I’m trying to express it in real life I’ll just turn pink first of all and then I start shaking and then I start stuttering.” *(p.8)*

Ella seems to experience a sense of safety (appendix 6.7, B1) associated with being behind the screen, including the inability for others to visibly see the way she is expressing herself, which allows her to experience more confidence and express herself more. She notes that she tends to “fear outside interactions more” since people can see her with her headscarf and this carries the risk that someone might harass her or respond to her in a judgemental or prejudiced way. While she notes feeling “safer” expressing herself online, she also reports that although she has a political voice, she holds back from voicing her political or religious views on SM. This is due to concerns around how this might be interpreted (or

misinterpreted) by others due to her cultural background and religion.

In terms of whether she finds there is a difference in how she experiences herself online in comparison to offline, Zoe reports that she feels she can be “bubblier online”:

> “I can be like more like exclamation mark hey! Like sort of a little bit more umm...I don't know a bit nicer…I can easily say certain things that I wouldn't be able to perform to somebody's face which is kind of this like maybe a bubbly personality maybe like putting someone at ease by being super like smiley and like cheerful.” *(p.17)*

She cites that the use of “emoticons” such as smiley faces facilitate certain expressions for her and elaborates:

> “You're cancelling out those like body language cues that people maybe misinterpret…so if you want to be super nice and like friendly you add an exclamation mark or whatever it is you know like a smiley face…whereas in person I feel like I'm a lot more serious…maybe a little bit more intimidating to people because I don't have a real life like smiley face…that kind of sentiment. The body language that comes with it.” *(p.17)*

The absence of nonverbal cues seems to facilitate the movement from being more serious in person to being “bubblier” online. Thus, Zoe can express herself through her virtual presence on SM in ways that she may not be able to “perform” face-to-face. This is in contrast to Dan who states that although he finds it easier to express his “true opinions” online because you doesn’t have that “person right in front of you”, he has often been misunderstood because of the absence of facial and body language cues online. He reports that this would be much less likely to occur in face-to-face interactions. This concern is also put forward by Amy who often feels the need to compensate for the “lack of face-to-face context” and “the use of body language” by being more considerate online so she is not misinterpreted. Thus, all four participants are expressing the idea that communicating without facial cues and body language has a different impact on their experiences of interpersonal interactions through SM when compared to in-person interactions.

Zoe expresses that she experiences the online space as a space that “takes away from the pressures of the social encounter”:

> “So if you have a bit of social awkwardness you know it helps to - it takes away that pressure. So you're kind of more confident and you - you're free from the body language that's associated with awkwardness.” *(p.18)*

Nonetheless, following this extract, Zoe re-evaluates the notion of freedom on SM as she notes:

> “It's like you think you're - it's freeing you – it’s a liberating thing but then instead of focusing on you freeing yourself from it like in reality and working on yourself through encounters with human beings - you think you've gotten rid of it, you think you're free of it just because on SM you're - you're fine and you’re confident. So it's the pros and cons.” *(p.19)*

In linking to the overall central theme of experiencing SM as a double-edged sword, Zoe questions the liberation that SM offers in engaging in interactions free from body language. The disadvantages seem to be the potential to shift the focus away from working on feeling more comfortable in interacting with others offline. Similarly, Ella voices that she still “lacks the confidence” in face-to-face interactions. Thus, there appears to be benefits and drawbacks in engaging in interactions that are free from nonverbal cues, with the potential to be misinterpreted and misunderstood present in both contexts.

3.2.1 Sub-theme: Virtual Versus Sensory Connectedness

This sub-theme centres on the absence of certain sensations that are associated with the physical presence of others in the experience of interacting and connecting with people online. Many participants voiced that such sensory experiences are important aspects of connecting with and developing relationships with others. These participants had contrasted their experiences of connecting with others through SM (virtual connectedness) with a more sensory connectedness, which included expressions through body language. In response to whether she feels there’s a difference in how she experiences herself online in comparison to offline, Zoe notes:

> “The site of the online - online self is so heavily like predicated on the conversation like [pause] the language that's being typed or communicated. So whatever relationships you're building online it's really about like what you're saying and what's being said. Whereas in real life there's usually a lot more to that, there’s a lot more to relationships and friendships than - than just the process of communication…there's also a feeling of being physically with someone, walking next to someone umm you know, like eye contact, things like that -

> that you - that are very much part of relationships and the experience of the self that you don't get to have on cyberspace." *(p.19)*

She emphasises that she feels the "senses" are "huge" in how you interact with others like "touching somebody's shoulder or smelling", citing that these experiences are all "not part of the equation in cyberspace when you interact with people". Her comments indicate the absence of experiences associated with sensations that emerge when interacting with others who are physically present. She reports that this is why she feels it's important for her to use SM "as a vehicle to open up space" for meeting others in the "physical world" but "not as a replacement of it". Similarly, Dan discusses how he experiences the nonexistence of physical contact through SM, emphasising that connecting online is through written communication only. He reports that FB "creates a barrier" when interacting with others because you "don't have that personal connection":

> "We as physical beings need contact, umm physical and verbal contact. SM eliminates that…in my acting training one of the teachers said that umm human communication is based on three things…something like 80% of human interaction is - is umm physical, through body language and expression, 13% is through vocal intonation and only 7% are the words themselves. So umm this is why it's never as personal talking to somebody over the phone because you don't have the person in front of you, you cut off 80% of communication right there. But with SM you also cut out vocal intonation. So all peoplehave to go on are the words themselves…you know you cut off the whole person, physically…you cut off a whole person when trying to communicate this way…we are trying to communicate with each other, like really connect with each other with a whole brick wall between us." *(p.11)*

He follows this by citing that he does "feel the disconnectedness" on SM:

> "It's not the same as actually being with a person. I feel it most when you know say I've been online and chatting to somebody and saying we should meet up and what not and then we do meet up and it's just like a whole lot better than it was online." *(p.12)*

Dan's words of feeling the "disconnectedness" bring to mind the bridge versus loss of connection theme. While SM serves as a bridge to interpersonally connect him to others, it can create both a sense of

connection and disconnectedness through the absence of connecting with others through physical presence.

Aria reports that meeting and interacting with others through SM "can become very superficial". She emphasises that it's important for her to "connect" with others through "sensations" such as "touch" and "smell" and that "you don't get that" with SM:

> "It's words, it's in your brain but how about the other senses." *(p.21)*

Similarly, Ivy states that:

> "You can only get to a certain extent online - you - you really can't get to a place that's - that's deep I don't believe that you can because deep to me is like human connection like real life connection…yes something can occur in that space which is like in your brain." *(p.24)*

She expresses that interacting with someone on SM would never be as "deep" as when you connect with someone in a "real concrete way", which is something she reports can only occur when connecting with someone in person.

The above extracts indicate that when it comes to participants' relational experiences, an important aspect of connecting with others is through the tangible nature of the physical presence of others. The primarily text-based nature of communicating on SNSs offers some participants an opportunity to express themselves more, feel more confident and can take away from the pressures of face-to-face social interactions. Yet when it comes to moving beyond the text-mode aspect of communication, many participants expressed that there is more to building relationships than the process of written communication or what Ivy and Aria's extracts suggest to be more 'mental' forms of connections.

3.3 Theme: Active Versus Passive Use

This theme focuses on the distinctions participants describe between being active on SM and being passive – in other words, not really present or engaged. It also refers to the manner in which the platform is being used, where participants differentiated their experiences of posting content with observing

content. Five of the participants specifically used both terms “active” and “passive” when referring to the different ways of experiencing these platforms. These participants associated scrolling as a passive use of the platform and/or experienced themselves as ‘passive’ when in the process of scrolling. This is where a participant is using their time to ‘flick through’ a vast amount of content. Astrid describes feeling as though most of her SM habits are “quite passive”, highlighting that she’s “not daily actively making content”. She expresses that she feels she’s “absorbing a lot of content” but “more reticent” in terms of putting her own stuff “out there”. Aria reports feeling “more passive” online in comparison to “real life”:

> “I feel I'm more passive when I'm online…when you're scrolling down Instagram, even if you decide - you actively go - you willingly go on a profile, you're looking for something for example, there’s still things that you didn't look for but you still see them. They just…roll in front of your eyes…they should be doing something to your brain…but it's just you accept them…you're passively umm going through them…sometimes actually so much that you don't, I don't even like them. I might like the post but I don't actually like it…cause I'm in this umm momentum of just looking. I'm not really processing or doing anything about it…it's a bit like hyp – hypnosis - a hypnotic state. That's how I see it. That's why I don't think it's very good.” *(p.30)*

In the state of feeling more passive, she passively accepts images even though they could be doing something to her brain. While she might like a photo, sometimes she doesn’t actually push the “like” button, perhaps further signifying an overall feeling of passivity. In describing the experience as a bit like a hypnotic state, she is possibly switching both into the experience (she might like the post, even if she doesn’t push the ‘like’ button) as well as switching off (“I’m not really processing”). She acknowledges perhaps, that at times, there is some intentionality within the process when she indicates that even if you “actively – you willingly go on a profile”.

Zoe describes scrolling as “this passive automatic thing” that she’s “used to” and notes:

> “The scrolling is a – a form of passive consumption - like whatever’s being thrown at you, you’re just kind of like taking it.” *(p.27)*

Both Aria and Zoe mention what seem to be comparable descriptions of the experience of scrolling in terms of inducing a sense of passivity, where Zoe indicates that “whatever’s being thrown at you, you’re just kind of like taking it”, whilst Aria voices that you “just accept” the images that roll in front of your eyes.

Leo also made a clear distinction between active and passive use, expressing that passive use involves "observing" and "scrolling through" SM, which he contrasts to "actively posting":

> "When you are a passive user of the - all the SM - you seize to be conscious - you're pretty much like a - on autopilot...you're just - you're passive. Umm then you're gone – you have to stop the person and say can you just look where you're going." *(p.9)*

Leo's extract demonstrates a loss of awareness of one's external surroundings induced by passively consuming SM. He further highlights that passively using the platforms involves a "loss of self-awareness". He contrasts this to when you are "active" on SNSs, where he feels at least "you're thinking", "you're conscious of what you're doing, you're self-aware".

The potential similarities between Aria, Zoe, and Leo's extracts are around the notion of being in a passive state when scrolling or observing content online. Further, there may be possible parallels between Aria's description of scrolling as similar to a 'hypnotic state', to Zoe's portrayal of the experience as a passive "automatic thing" and Leo's description of being on "autopilot" and seizing to be "conscious".

Comparably, Ivy describes the experience of scrolling as such:

> "It's like you're in a trance, you're almost like not even looking at what the content is." *(p.35)*

Participants' accounts share the common idea of being in a state of passivity as opposed to being actively engaged with the use of SM. When it comes to passive use, there is a general sense that the passivity that they describe and the notion of not really processing the content that they are viewing are not perceived as positive aspects of the experience.

3.3.1 Sub-theme: Numbing Versus Stimulating (Positive Versus Negative Stimulation)

This sub-theme captures participants' experiences of the passive use of SM, primarily in the form of scrolling. It consists of an additional polarity in relation to stimulation (negative versus positive stimulation). Some participants use the word "numbing" in reference to their experience of scrolling through their SM feed and consuming content online. However, they also express feeling negatively stimulated whilst in the process of scrolling and/or afterwards. In addition, some participants' accounts

suggest a desire or preference to be engaging in activities or pursuits that are more positively stimulating in the place of scrolling, giving rise to the additional polarity, positive stimulation. None of the male participants represented this sub-theme.

Zoe describes her experience of scrolling as an experience that is “passive” and “numbing”, yet at the same time, eliciting a negative feeling of annoyance:

> “It’s annoying you but you're just taking it…so in a way I find myself mostly pissed off all the time when I'm on SM but somehow keep also scrolling and looking.” *(p.42)*

> “It’s just mindless, it's something that removes you from reality when you want to kind of have sort of a numbing experience so you just kind of like look at other people's lives. It’s somehow entertaining and it's annoying.” *(p.21)*

Although Zoe may be getting something out of the experience (entertainment), the cost is that she is also experiencing negative feelings (e.g. annoyance). She elaborates further on what she means by passive consumption and notes:

> “It's pissing me off. I'm not doing anything about it. People are annoying me on SM, I'm not doing anything about it yet I'm still scrolling…but you're also self hating even when you're doing it…so you also hate that you're doing that. You know it's bad for you.” *(p.42)*

The above extracts represent the additional polarity of being negatively stimulated (e.g. self-hating) and a feeling of passivity that is suggested whilst in the process of scrolling through the words “I’m not doing anything about it”, as well as “you’re just taking it”. She offers further insight into why she feels she continues to scroll despite feeling that she hates that she’s doing it:

> “It would be coming from the need to eh - the need to numb your brain from time to time just because of the like the hectic lifestyle and the big life decisions that one needs to make…I would love to open up a book…and read stuff that I'm interested in and like write…but it's kind of an escape from that - it's a mind numbing - it's - it's when I'm in a bad place I would like wanna numb my brain and just like pass out to that. If I'm in a good place I would come

back, I would you know watch something that's interesting, get inspired, write something." *(p.50)*

It appears that scrolling may serve as a form of escapism for Zoe when she's in a "bad place", as she refers to it as something that "removes you from reality". A motivation to pursue the experience seems to be coming from the need to numb her brain. The additional polarity of positive stimulation is illustrated when Zoe expresses the things she would love to do in the place of scrolling but resorts to scrolling instead. Her extracts demonstrate that not only is it an escape from the big decisions she needs to make but it is also an escape from engaging in more creative and interesting activities. She notes:

"It's an excuse. It's also like an escape. It's really hard when you have like a creative urge to actually get yourself to sit down and do it [pause] and when you have an easy distraction…you take the distraction. So it's also like a - a kind of - I call it…a creative dilemma." *(p.53)*

Thus, the creative dilemma represents the dilemma to choose whether to have a more "numbing" experience or whether to engage in a creative process. For Zoe, these creative pursuits can be hard to initiate in the face of an "easy distraction".

Zoe reports that choosing creative pursuits in the place of scrolling is "harder" because she feels that instead of "training" her brain "to be more engaged in creative and intellectual things", the process of continuous scrolling is "numbing it" and "shutting parts of it off that should be actually like exercised". She notes that she feels this on-going habit has impacted on her attention span and provides additional insight as to why she chooses this experience in the place of more creative ones:

"It requires the shorter attention span and the less commitment." *(p.52)*

There appears to be a general negative connotation attached to the experience of passive consumption through her descriptions; particularly when she says "you know it's bad for you". Zoe's extracts indicate several different overlapping factors involved in both her motivations to engage in scrolling and her experience of herself whilst in the process of scrolling.

When describing her experience of scrolling, Ivy expresses that "you're only seeing two sides of a

box", highlighting that there's "no wholeness" and "no dimensional aspect" to the experience. This may link with the 'surface-level platform' sub-theme where she expresses that there's "no context" associated with Instagram posts. Perhaps within the experience of scrolling, through the lack of context and "dimensional aspect", Ivy finds herself scrolling through the content without really connecting with the material in front of her, resulting in a more numbing experience:

> "You're numb to any feeling in general. It's a numbing thing…brain numbing." *(p.36)*

She describes scrolling as a "bad habit", expressing that "you subliminally look for that thing that's gonna trigger you":

> "You're almost like not even looking at what the content is you're just like next, next, next…what am I gonna find that's gonna trigger me…because you're scrolling, scrolling, scrolling - you stop at a picture but why did you stop at that picture…because it triggered you in some way…somehow in a negative way…there's so much information that subliminally goes into your head whether you like it or not. And it's negative, it's always negative you know." *(p.35)*

Although she describes the experience as one where "you're numb to any feeling in general", as she is in the process of scrolling, she is "subliminally" looking for a trigger, perhaps looking to feel something. She highlights awareness that the triggers are "negative", providing another illustration of the polarised sub-theme of experiencing scrolling as both numbing yet triggering this participant somehow in a negative way.

Astrid describes how she feels when she gets "sucked into" the reloading of her FB feed where she often finds herself scrolling and consuming a vast amount of content:

> "If I just stook - stuck to reading articles that might actually be beneficial for me in some way and highlighting events that I want to go to that also sound like those sort of specifically speak to an interest of mine - that would be fine. But I think I get into this strange like numbing rhythm of just taking in a lot of information that's not really giving me any joy - that isn't really mobilized into anything beyond a certain like currency of information, that I think you know either like leads to me feeling depressed or kind of is – feeds, you know is fed by

a sort of depressive - uh just like it's not active, it's not about action, it's not about my own agency." *(p.37)*

Her extracts seem to indicate that she could be using SM in a more fruitful or beneficial way. An overarching sense of passivity is reinforced as she describes the activity as not active, not about action or her own agency. She contrasts her experience of reading this particular book with scrolling and notes:

"I feel that gives space for my mind to spin off. I come up with ideas…it is incredibly rare that when I'm scrolling through shit I come up with anything." *(p.8)*

There is a sense that both Astrid and Zoe would like to pursue more creative or inspiring experiences in the place of scrolling yet find themselves resorting to this habit for various reasons. For the most part, there seems to be a negative connotation associated with scrolling, with participants moving into a state of "numbness" yet at the same time feeling a polarised state of being stimulated negatively, whether during or following these experiences. There seems to be an overarching sense that scrolling is not experienced as valuable or rewarding for these participants. The sub-themes to follow offer additional insight that help shed further light into how participants make sense of these polarised experiences while scrolling.

3.3.2 Sub-theme: Recognition – Social Comparison

This sub-theme further explores how participants experience the active versus passive uses of the platforms. 'Social comparison' involves participants' experiences relating to passive use in the form of scrolling and observing content online. Seven participants spoke about the process of comparing oneself to other people which is induced by scrolling through their SM feed or when observing other users' profiles. 'Recognition' captures how participants experience the functions and motivations behind active uses of the platform in the form of posting and sharing content online. This includes some of the motivations they felt were behind posting more private content related to the self. Within the sub-theme of recognition, is the notion of posting to be validated, acknowledged or affirmed by others. Furthermore, for Ivy and Zoe, there was the idea that the content that one would put out on SNSs was susceptible to judgement. For example, Zoe expresses that:

"When you put yourself out there to be recognised, there's that aspect that people are gonna judge you." *(p.19)*

Aria reports that she is no longer interested in posting personal photos of herself on SM. She expresses that she feels posting personal content about yourself is “all about recognition”, to get “likes” and “followers” and “a way for people to feel like they exist.” She describes feeling more specifically “like a voyeur” when looking into the lives of other people and elaborates on why she doesn’t think, “it’s a good feeling”:

> “You start developing these insecurities like as if your life is shit…because it’s in your face…it can happen to anyone, even the strongest.” *(p.20)*

She continues to describe the process suggestive of social comparison in more detail:

> “You’re always putting yourself in relation to someone else, you know, in relation to someone else's happiness or sadness…but online it's constant…it's constant, always, always. That's the danger.” *(p.20)*

Ivy felt that for the most part, after scrolling through Instagram, she never leaves feeling “grateful” but instead she leaves “feeling a little bit more like shit…like I’m not worth it or like I – there’s something about me that I’m missing or I’m never gonna make it or oh god like why am I not like more like this person rather than gratitude” (appendix 6.7, D1). This extract illustrates the process of scrolling leading to social comparison as well as negative self-evaluation. In terms of active use, she describes her motivations to post content online as such:

> “Motivations to post umm to stay relevant, which is dark, it's very dark. To umm [pause] almost for validation too which is very dark umm for [pause] almost to be - to exist which is extremely dark. It's the darkest of all because if you don't - it's almost like if you don't exist on the Internet than you don't exist.” *(p.22)*

Ivy describes these motivations as “dark”, echoing Aria in stronger terms in relation to the notion of posting to feel like you “exist”. Zoe describes what she feels is the primary function behind posting photos of yourself and your life online:

> “The function is...just a desire like fulfilling a need to be [pause] affirmed and recognised. Right. So it fulfils something that we all need…but the question is does it really?” *(p.24)*

She follows this contemplation by expressing that in contrast to the experience of sharing with people that you “target” such as close friends, sharing on SM involves sharing with a broader audience, so “you think you’re fulfilling it but then [pause] you kind of aren’t”. She further highlights that she feels a primary drive to post personal content on SM would be “recognition in order to exist”:

> “It just becomes a matter of like if you don't post about it, it means it doesn't exist right…you start to no longer exist because really you [pause] you are yourself in so - in so far as you're actually recognised by others. Like you've become a self - a person with accomplishments and a life and whatever when there's like almost a recognition of you. Otherwise you kind of don't exist you know. And it kind of is like that offline and online…but SM sort of really highlights that and makes it so much worse than it is.” *(p.25)*

Zoe, Ivy, and Aria underline the significance of posting content online as a means to “exist” and one could perhaps speculate that this motivation sits at the further end of a spectrum of recognition. Ivy’s extract highlights the extremes of this idea in such a way that if one doesn’t exist online, it’s as if they don’t exist at all (appendix 6.7, D2).

In relation to social comparison, Zoe comments on how she experiences the process of scrolling:

> “The scrolling - it's also comparing - comparing your life to other people's lives. Umm it's a process of like umm you're judging others and judging yourself and like trying to justify your life choices where - versus others' life choices.” *(p.20)*

She makes a distinction to when she feels the process of scrolling may appear on the surface level to be mindless but underneath, may actually be about comparing yourself to other people:

> “It’s not just mindless…on the surface level it’s like oh my god these people are idiots but then subconsciously you're like well what if I was that person? Well maybe I should be that person or you know that - that kind of like self identity crisis situation.” *(p.21)*

The above extract demonstrates a noteworthy comparison in terms of what is described as a surface-level process of thinking “these people are idiots”, with what she describes as a subconscious process of comparing herself to other people. Thus, despite feeling that she mindlessly scrolls through SM, she is also aware that this process is one in which she engages in social comparison which can lead to a questioning of her own identity. Leo also spoke about how he experiences people who post content of their personal lives online such as their holidays, highlighting that it “distorts” people’s behaviour because you start thinking to yourself “man I want that life”.

In comparison to the female participants, social comparison did not emerge in Dan’s narrative. While Leo did speak about how seeing pictures of other people’s lives can induce social comparison, the subtheme was much more prominent in the female participants’ interviews. Overall, many participants voiced that they feel that their own motivations as well as other people’s motivations to post content online was driven by a need to feel recognised, validated, affirmed or acknowledged or even to ‘exist’. Furthermore, their experience of engaging in social comparison may shed light onto the negative stimulation that is experienced while they are scrolling, such as the negative “triggers” Ivy referred to.

3.3.3 Sub-theme: Perception of Oversharing

The sub-theme ‘perception of oversharing’ expands on the active use of the platform in the form of posting content online. It explores how some participants’ experience the notion of disclosing private information about yourself to a broader audience on SNSs. Furthermore, it explores how they experience other people who they feel are oversharing personal information through public posts on these platforms. This seems to relate to the idea that the type of content that is appropriate to share within the context of SM should have boundaries – disclosing sensitive, private information in the public realm is perceived as less appropriate. The same participants whose accounts’ suggested that they experienced the context of SNSs as surface-level or lacking in depth represented this sub-theme. None of the male participants’ narratives represented this theme. This sub-theme also points to the idea that by oversharing, people’s lived experiences become objects of consumption and genuine intimacy is undermined.

Concerning how she experiences other people on SM, Astrid reports that girls who openly talk about their “body image problems” and “stuff around like sexual assault” and “sexual boundaries” “really annoy” her. She reports that it can come across to her as a certain type of “narcissism, you know, that sort of like negative attention seeking” and expresses that she wonders how the network serves them. Ivy made a distinction between venting online and “oversharing” such as posting things like “I wanna die” on your SM account. Echoing Astrid, she expresses that at times she experiences this type of online behaviour as a

form of attention seeking (“they clearly want attention”).

Likewise, Zoe voices that “frequent active users of SM” who are “constantly” revealing every detail of their life” “really bother” her. She voices that there’s a “difference between updating your SM community every once in a while, where you are like where you live now” but then there’s a “whole other level” such as when people post pictures of themselves “crying or upset”:

> “They can’t be treated the same…there’s different levels of – there’s oversharing and there’s sharing.” *(p.43)*

Zoe expresses that she finds it “very annoying” when she is scrolling through her SM homepage and sees close friends “overshare their private moments on SM”. Zoe reports that this way of sharing is “not reinforcing our friendship”, because the person didn’t “care to message me privately and update me” about their life. She touches upon the notion of privacy and reports that this is why she prefers the exchange of one-to-one emails to publicly sharing on SM:

> “There's something very private about our friendship and our relationship and we're sharing information about our lives with each other and reacting spon - spontaneously and genuinely and it's tailored to a specific person and - but when it's sort of just this announce - it's a public announcement…I get annoyed because…I don't wanna post on your public FB post to congratulate you on something as intimate as your baby…or whatever it is…and then at the same time...how can you...like if you put yourself out there you know that people are judging you” *(p.66)*

Zoe extracts point to the notion that public posts lack the intimacy of sharing through one-to-one tailored interactions. She states that she “resists” posting such private moments online because “the privacy of intimate moments” is a “value” for her and is “important” to her:

> “It's kind of - everything up for display, everything up for consumption…some moments are meant to be kind of sacred and shared with people around you and there's no more respect for that…that's why I resist doing it and - and why it angers me so much when I see it.” *(p.42)*

The above extracts offer a potential additional layer of insight into why the experience of scrolling may be eliciting negative feelings for Zoe (e.g. receiving intimate posts through a public channel). This may also link to her previous extract where she indicates that "this place" does not allow her to form a deeper connection with other people (surface-level platform) as she now further elaborates that receiving intimate posts publicly is not reinforcing her friendships.

Ivy offers a similar outlook concerning Zoe's perspective that "everything is up for display" on SM by zooming out to a macro level look at the notion of oversharing information online. She states that she feels the widespread sharing of private information on SM is a result of what has evolved into an "exhibitionist culture", where "everything is to show" and "nobody really has any privacy":

> "Since everybody now realises that nobody has privacy, they're just so okay with putting everything on display…that's what I mean by exhibitionist culture. They're just like okay with showing everything and like putting everything on display because as long as you have something on display, you're almost validated…you're part of the culture if you have something to show." *(p.21)*

Ivy once again brings in the idea of posting to be validated. Both Zoe and Ivy's extract may point to the idea of experiencing a general undermining or absence of the value of privacy that manifests through oversharing personal information and putting everything up for display.

Astrid brings in a metaphorical lens when she describes her experience and relationship with SM as represented by a scene from a dark fantasy film called *Legend* as well as the famous Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The scene is described as one in which a complex chain of mirrors are built from the surface to the depths in order to bring in light that is required to kill the main antagonist who is the devil, named the 'lord of darkness'. She describes this scene as she describes her experience of scrolling through her FB homepage, stating that:

> "There's a kind of suggestion that in SM, we're kind of not anonymously divulging because it's rare we're allowed to be anonymous but [pause]…there's this sort of funny boundary right. I mean you know just scrolling down my wall people are telling me about their experiences of teenage sexual assault. Okay but that's a very sensitive issue, that we might all want to draw our own boundaries around and around how we umm [pause] approach it." *(p.17)*

When we explore the representation of her experience of SM through the scene, she notes:

> "I wonder how the network serves them. I mean do they find the kind of connection and resilience that they couldn't access face-to-face?…and is the devil the experiences or the stuff that you normally keep hidden and the platform the mirror shining into it even though it's a kind of – report of it. But [pause] what does umm what does the telling do?" *(p.18)*

She notes that she would want to "protect" herself from feeling "shame", "at risk", "vulnerable" or "under attack" and would therefore think "very carefully" about who to share "such intimate vulnerable details with". On a number of occasions, Astrid questions how the network serves individuals who expose these intimate experiences so openly. She elaborates on her use of the devil as a metaphor, reporting that: "the devil is the material at risk of being exposed" on SM. When she moves on to her experience of SM as represented in the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, she narrates the myth of how Orpheus is leading Eurydice out of the underworld, expressing that there's a faith, in that Orpheus has to believe that for the whole journey, Eurydice is really there behind him:

> "But if he looks back to check, it will destroy her…I guess it's something to do with…it's - it's drawing something out from the depths that you would destroy if you looked at." *(p.24)*

My speculation is that "the depths" may represent the material that is normally kept private or hidden within the depths of oneself. She returns back to the scene of the devil in the film and expresses that the light killing the devil represents a "penetration" "from the surface to the depths" but also "a violence" and "a destruction". She relates the analogy back to SM, expressing that she feels that the exposure of sensitive, private information publicly can be destructive in a negative way. Thus, it seems for Astrid, the notion of sharing sensitive content online means that things that wouldn't normally be shared are dangerously out in the open – and that in some sense, this is destructive to the self.

Overall, the participants representing this sub-theme describe unique perspectives concerning how they experience others who they feel are disclosing or oversharing content publicly on SNSs. However, a common assumption that may underpin this theme involves the need for boundaries in relation to what is and what is not appropriate to share on SM. It is possible that these participants speak about this theme in this particular way since they themselves may not perceive these sites as appropriate spaces to share sensitive and private information in such an open way.

3.4 Theme: Perception of Control Versus Loss of Control

This theme focuses on participants' perception of control in relation to their experiences on SNSs. Overall, there appeared to be an overarching perception of having more control of their experiences in the online world, in the sense that SNSs offer more control in the presentation of the self (e.g. filtering images) as well as when conversing with others online. Yet at the same time, many participants experienced a loss of control in other aspects of their experiences online, particularly relating to excessively scrolling on SM.

Zoe conveys that to her, the experience of the self in cyberspace is "a lot more of an intentional experience that you have created for yourself". She reports that she doesn't think of it as "the experience of the self" in a way where you can "go out into the physical world" and "be open to sort of spontaneous random experiences":

> "There's more control available...you're more in control of your experience…it's more of a mediated controlled environment…whereas physical space for me is a lot less controlled and a lot less within your ability to control." *(p.2)*

She discusses her experience of interpersonal interactions online, reporting that on SM, you can "curate" what you say and you are able to "better control the conversation". Dan similarly contrasts his experience of expressing himself on FB compared to face-to-face interactions and reports that on FB, "you can think very carefully" about how you want to say something. Likewise, Astrid compares SM interactions with offline encounters, stating that in face-to-face interactions:

> "It's less mediated and less controlled and it can't be edited, right. You don't pause in the middle of a sentence that you're having with someone live and like rephrase it to make yourself sound better. So there's a kind of a umm slippage that can occur in life and that sort of slippage is - is being ironed - is ironed out." *(p.18)*

Conversely, there were a number of ways that participants experienced a lack or loss of control on SNSs. Zoe, Ivy and Aria discuss not being able to control other people's reactions and responses to the content that one puts out on SNSs to an audience. For Ivy, this loss of control is dependant upon who is authorised to see her account. She describes her private Instagram account as being in a "vortex of my own world that I can control who – who I see and who sees my pictures". When it came to her experience on her public Instagram account, Ivy expresses that she tends to "get rid of negative comments" by

“blocking people” she doesn’t know. Yet despite the ability to control negative feedback, she highlights that there are “trolls” on SM, so if you “block someone they have a group of friends that are gonna come for you…so you can control it in a sense but you can’t in a sense as well”.

The contrast between the perception of having more control on SM versus a loss of control also extended to how companies use your profile and track your online behaviour to gather data and manipulate what you are exposed to on SNSs. The concept of loss of control played a big part in Leo’s narrative. He voices a significant change in his relationship to SM from when he first started using it, expressing that SNSs are “emerging as data gatherers” and that what they are “really doing behind the scenes is putting together a profile of you”. He asserts that the future direction of where he feels SM is heading is something he is “not comfortable with” which has impacted on how he experiences and uses these sites:

> “There is an agenda. So the way I look at it is - it’s loss of control you just don't realise it…you will lose control and you think you're gain -you are in control but increasing you are loosing control of the process…so without realising it you're being directed in a certain way.” *(p.17)*

As Leo reflects on his experience online in relation to the advertising aspect of SM, he articulates that we are already “losing control” of what information is presented to us on these sites. Similarly, Aria brings in the notion of “losing control” when you think you are in control of your experience because “algorithms” control your feed, expressing that these companies have their own “motives” (appendix 6.7, H1).

Zoe addresses the impact that the “data retargeting” aspect of SM has had on her experience of herself, asserting that when SM started to “catch up” to who she was as a “demographic” and the friends she follows, “it went out of control”. She reports that she was getting “bombarded” with all these advertisements of wedding dresses and baby photos where it felt as if she was being fed information insinuating that “this is you now, this is you”. This made her feel like she was “in a research lab” and led her to experiment with starting to “play their game” by changing around how she interacted with the platform:

> “You’re not gonna just throw things at me and tell me what I should be.” *(p.26)*

In summary, there were several commonalities found across participants’ accounts in relation to those aspects of their experiences online that they perceived they had more control over with aspects where

they experienced a loss or lack of control. Although they were aware that they can control what they put out on their profiles, they were also aware that their data is being consumed and used to target them with marketing, as well as the notion that they could not control other users reactions to what they put out on these sites. The sub-themes to follow exemplify distinct elements of this theme concerning more specific aspects of their experiences online.

3.4.1 Sub-theme: More Control in the Presentation of the Self

Most participants expressed various outlooks and feelings relating to their perception of control in presenting oneself on SM. The majority of participants voiced that they experienced SM as a space where they could present themselves as well as a space in which there was more control available in presenting oneself when compared to offline contexts. Within this sub-theme, many participants report that there is an opportunity to control the perception of how others see you through the presentation of the self on SNSs. For example, Ella contrasts her experience of herself online with that of real life:

> "I don't have the tools to do that…I can't present myself to be super confident all the time whereas on SM I could make all my posts amazing, amazingly filtered and amazingly shot and everything but in real life you can't get that. In real life there's gonna be the - the imperfections of you presenting. But online you only post the perfections of you - the things that make you, you and you're proud of - whereas in real life you can't kind of - you can't get rid of the things that you're not proud of." *(p.17)*

Her extract points to an implicit suggestion that there is more control available on SM in relation to how one presents oneself and that there is the opportunity to present herself in ways that she is unable to in real life. Amy expresses that one of the functions of her use of SM is that it serves as an "extension" of her "presentation" of herself. In contrast to the majority of participants, she feels there is less control online in relation to other people's perception of her presentation of herself:

> "In real life you very much consider the person first and you choose the person and you can kind of almost anticipate how they might react or how they might think about you and consider you as a person whereas I think online you very much present a version of yourself…you can't control who is going to perceive you or how they're gonna perceive you." *(p.24)*

Thus, it seems her perception of having less control emerges in the form of the awareness of the presence of an audience on SM and the inability to control the perception of how members of this audience might perceive you in comparison to real life. On many different occasions, Leo describes his own experiences and the way he experiences other people on SM by asserting that he feels that SM is a space that offers the opportunity to "create" yourself, because it's "much more controllable in terms of how you present yourself than it is in real life". He voices that he rarely ever posts photos of himself on SM as he feels that there is a "falsehood" associated with the process in which one presents oneself online because there is "more control" available. He underlines that presenting oneself "in the best possible light" is an "opportunity" that SM offers that "you could never do" in real life. Similar to some of the other participants, Leo reports that there is a loss of control associated with people responding to what you put out on SM. Comparably; Zoe voices a similar notion in relation to how she experiences the increased control available in presenting oneself on SM:

> "There's a lot of room for faking things and fabricating things and just kind of making it become just this pure like representation with no substance to back it up." *(p.13)*

In summary, the majority of participants experienced more control in relation to the process of presenting oneself on SNSs. Nonetheless, for Zoe and Leo, there was a sense that having more control meant that there was more room for falseness and fabrication, which is fuelled by having too much control over how one is perceived.

3.4.2 Sub-theme: Addictive

The following sub-theme captures certain experiences on SNSs that five participants express are addictive. These participants use the terms "addictive", "addiction" and/or "like an addiction" when referring to these online experiences. Zoe, Astrid, Ivy, Dan, and Aria associate the experiences that they find addictive as ones in which there is either an explicit or implicit suggestion of a perceived lack or loss of control.

Zoe attempts to make sense of why she needs to spend "an hour" scrolling through Instagram and then FB before "being able to sleep":

> "It's kind of [short pause] complete addiction to the - the scrolling action…it doesn't make sense at all…I hate it. I want to stop it. I want to stop like going into bed and scrolling on Instagram and spying on people's lives. I don't know how I started this habit and when it came and I would like to definitely get rid of it because I think that's the dark side of all this

SM stuff - is like - when you become this really strange like wired machine and you can't stop yourself. That's the dark side of it…I'd like to stop it like I've tried - there were several attempts where I would not bring my phone into the bedroom with me." *(p.22)*

This form of loss of control gives rise to the "dark side" of SM - when you become a "strange" "wired machine" and "you can't stop yourself". Following this extract, she discusses her experience of scrolling in more depth and says she feels "addicted to it" (appendix 6.7, H1-3). As we explore how she experiences herself when in the process of scrolling, she notes:

"I still go back and refresh like let's say refresh Instagram multiple times although I just saw it. Why am I refreshing this? It's not me like I'm out of control. I really am…I can definitely say that I have felt like [short pause] completely out of control." *(p.22)*

She elaborates further:

"At some point your eyes hurt, you wanna go to sleep but you're still going and you're like why am I not stopping there's – it's – it's a loss of control. It is a loss of control…anything you resort to in order to lose control it's in – it gives you the same effect. So if I would rather like down a bottle of wine after work or just mindlessly scroll through SM, it's the same idea. Something in me needs to just let go of control and that allows me somehow to do that." *(p.23)*

Zoe offers some perceptive insight into the addictive part of her experience of scrolling as a loss of control in response to a need to "let go of control". Furthermore, she seems to de-identify with the experience when she says, "it's not me".

With regard to the research question concerning how he experiences his relationship to SM, Dan expresses that he feels:

"You can become psychologically addicted to it. I felt that at times, where it's like when I'm about to step out the door and I noticed on my email someone's commented on something.

> I'll look at it, what they said that?…like almost the whole time I'm away I'm thinking about that comment, I'm thinking about what I can say about it and it's almost like just completely distracting me from everything else in my life. I almost can't stop thinking about it until I go back home and I log back on and then I say what I want to say." *(p.10)*

When responding to the interview question regarding the chance to discuss any personal concerns they may have about their relationship with SM with a psychologist, Zoe, Astrid, Dan, and Ivy voice that they would like some help with the addictive part of their experiences online. Dan states that he would like help with the "addictive quality" (appendix 6.7, H6). He voices that he wants to be able to try to "shut that feeling off" and to have "control over whether" he "gives in" to getting involved in these "heated debates" or whether he can just "walk away for the time being or even walk away permanently". He expresses that he would be interested in "finding some techniques', especially in assisting him in "having the control" over this aspect of his experience online.

In reference to scrolling, Ivy states:

> "The scrolling thing is addictive and I feel like it's bad for your eyes, it's straining…like I don't wanna have to [short pause] to feel like I have to scroll everyday." *(p.35)*

Aria expresses feeling as though scrolling through her phone "becomes like an addiction", reporting that she feels it's like "holding a cigarette":

> "I really believe your brain is like - gets somewhat addicted…it's these automatisms…it's like an addiction. It's like a drug, like you finished your drugs but you're still looking for them." *(p.33)*

She parallels the experience to "oversmoking", noting that you can "lose control of yourself" and of the amount of time you spend scrolling. The loss of control of the self echoes the feeling of passivity that some of these participants associate with the experience of scrolling, an experience that they describe as "automatic" (Zoe), like a "hypnotic state" (Aria) or like a "trance" (Ivy). While some participants describe attempts to reduce their time spent scrolling, there was perhaps a sense that once within the experience itself, they may no longer feel like they are in the driver's seat.

3.5 Theme: Double-edged Sword

The above theme captures a broader representation of participants' experience of and their relationship to SM. As has been perceived above, participants often expressed conflicting and polarised experiences of SM and with this came contrasting feelings about the positives and negatives of SM. Thus, SM becomes a double-edged sword – both good and bad but with the disadvantages and dangers of SM being acknowledged.

Some participants dichotomised their experiences on SM as a whole by using the terms "good" and "bad". While these participants voiced varied reasons as to why their experiences online were both "good" and "bad", there was an overarching presence of experiencing a duality; a sense of an emphasis between the good versus the bad, the light versus the dark and perhaps even for Ivy and Aria, the vices versus the virtuous sides of the self. Some participants' accounts seem to suggest that the online world allows you to experience the extremes of these dichotomies (appendix 6.7, l9-14) and at the same time blurs the distinction between the different polarities.

Dan explicitly refers to his relationship with SM as a "double-edged sword" (appendix 6.7, l5, l7 & l8) where he reports experiencing a constant "struggle" and a "push and pull" between the "good" versus the "detrimental and "deceptive" aspects of it as he represents SM as two opposing characters in the animated fantasy film *Frozen*. When asked what her representation of SM would be as a character or personage, Aria expresses that it would be "another version of us", just "filled" with "more vice":

> "…other versions that live in this dimension where vices are amplified…it's a person who feels more free to live these vices and because they're doing it in an environment that…actually promotes those vices." *(p.54)*

She states that she feels the whole connecting aspect of SM is "good" and that "it's an amazing tool, I love it" but follows this with:

> "There's a whole different part which I dread…these vices they're – they're brought to life…there's a light that's shed on them as if they're beautified and then you lose the notion of what's right, what's wrong, you know like demons start having blonde hair with red lipstick, they start becoming beautiful…it's just another form of expressing things but sometimes, it's - it's a very ugly form." *(p.56)*

Aria reports that she experiences vices and things that are “ugly” as “beautified” on SM because people are so “distracted” by an “entertainment filter”. Hence, there seems to be a blurring of the distinction between what’s right and what’s wrong as vices become beautified. Amy echoes a similar idea, as she highlights the following concerning how she experiences SNSs:

> “It's easy to blur the lines between what – kind of like - what is good for you and what isn’t - what's healthy for you and what isn't.” *(p.34)*

On a number of occasions, Aria brings in the concept of good and bad:

> “Anything good or bad is within us but when you’re within this virtual world, it’s just people are more comfortable – things come up, they surface more…you have more freedom…in the virtual sphere, there’s a lot of lee way, people are free to go off track.” *(p.18)*

Aria reports that it’s the idea of “morality” and that in the virtual world, someone promoting something “bad” will always have a base and followers for whatever they’re promoting, which can encourage the person to keep doing it (appendix 6.7, I1). Thus, for Aria, there is something about the environment of SM that allows vices to more easily emerge. There is a sense that perhaps the boundaries between the good and the bad are vague and that the space of SM gives rise to some sort of moral ambiguity. While she brings in the metaphorical figure of a demon, one could speculate that this may be another way of indicating that the ugly or bad aspects of the self more easily come to the surface, becoming beautified due to the preoccupation with the entertainment side of SM.

She expresses that she experiences SNSs as spaces where people let out “perversities”, where you can go and “let things out” - things that they wouldn’t be able to say to your face. She shares an experience where she received an insulting comment on a photo she posted from an anonymous profile, reporting that it’s possible it could have been someone she knew. She highlights that in the real world, you wouldn’t go around swearing at people in the streets but that in the “virtual sphere”, people often go on other people’s profiles and insult them. She proposes that perhaps this kind of behaviour might function as a form of “release” akin to a “punching bag” but that it can “hurt” people.

In response to the question concerning the chance to see a psychologist and discuss any personal concerns she may have about her relationship with SM, Ivy expresses that she would like to discuss her habit of “looking at things that I don’t want to see”:

> "I will deliberately go and look at something that I don't wanna see and it's like why am I doing that…it's like the addictive part of your personality that's the destructive part of your personality, part of your personality that wants something bad. We all have it…what is it called…it's like a scientific thing like when you're - when you like [short pause] cut an apple and…you know that you're about to cut your finger and then you cut it anyway…it wants this bad thing. It's like a vice…and I always find myself looking at things like I don't wanna see…it's a negative thing. And that's my main problem with SM." *(p.33)*

Ivy expresses that the things she goes looking for make her "feel negative" and "ruin her day" but that despite this, she still goes looking for them (appendix 6.7, I15). Thus, similar to Aria, Ivy brings in this notion of a vice, exemplifying it as part of the personality that "wants something bad", that leads her to look at things she doesn't want to see. The destructive element is emphasised in her attempt to explain what it is by illustrating that you know you're going to cut your finger but you cut it anyway. In a sense, Ivy might be indicating that the concerns she has about her relationship to SM is that it is bringing out this "destructive" side of herself; where she will intentionally go looking at things that she knows will make her feel negative.

Both Aria and Ivy also bring in the idea of SM creating "obsessions" (Aria) or making people's personalities "obsessive" (Ivy), with Ivy stating:

> "It's like we can now contact anybody we want, anyone is accessible - it's great. Like people that I never thought I'd ever work with I DM (direct message) them…it's so amazing in so many ways. But the part of it that's obsessive is what's disgusting to me and it's obsessive and it's - it's making people's personalities obsessive and…dependent on approval…dependent on image, umm dependant on making their lives look a certain way. Umm they have to keep up with the story that they've created on their feeds." *(p.11)*

The above extract illustrates the contrast between the double-edged nature of experiencing SM. Similar to Ivy, Aria speaks about how she feels SM can create obsessions and make you start to obsess over things that don't actually matter yet you begin to think they matter because you see them everyday such as people's profiles you follow.

When asked if she could represent SM as a character, Ivy says it would be “Maleficent”, the villain from the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty:

> “She went through like the death of innocence and I think people when they start on SM, they go through a death of innocence…because of how much they're exposed to it and how much that takes from their - their innocence and turns it into darkness. It really, really, really does…SM is the most complex, dark place on the history of the planet. There's never been a darker place.” *(p.36)*

Once again, the dichotomies are demonstrated above, as Ivy describes how “amazing” SM can be in the previous extract, to describing it as the darkest place on the planet. When I ask Ivy what the innocence represents to her, she says:

> “It’s representing light, it’s representing goodness of heart rather than manipulation and calculation…I do feel like a part of my like care - carelessness and effortlessness was taken away by SM. And effortlessness is something that's childlike and childlike is something that's innocent and a part of that child was taken from me. So in that sense I became more like Maleficent in the way that I became stronger and almost darker.” *(p.38)*

Her extract seems to suggest a positive association to these childlike characteristics, pointing to a contrast between the inner dark and light aspects within and perhaps even the virtuous sides of the self (goodness of heart, innocence). She even perceives herself as becoming “almost darker” after a part of her childlike innocence was stripped away from her by her experiences on SM. Ivy highlights that her experiences on SM have become “super calculated”, because there is so much thought that goes behind and after everything she posts, because she feels “everyone is watching” and “everything is being judged”. Overall, she acknowledges that despite its attractions, it has a dark undertone and so becomes a “paradox” (appendix 6.7, I17):

> “I see it as a very dark space - a dark space that brings out darkness in people… everything about the personality that feels that it's lacking something, whether it's appearance, whether it's personality, whether it's charisma, whether it's uh- their wellbeing, whether it's their health, whether it's their uh wealth - whatever it is that they feel that they lack in the smallest sense is amplified by one million…and that's what it represents…but it’s beautiful too. Like

she's beautiful Maleficent. She looks, she's actually a beautiful like character but she's a dark character. So you look at SM you're like oh wow like it's so exciting and it's so flashy and shiny and like I'm attracted to it because it changes all the time…but umm it's dark. She's beautiful but she's dark. And it's - it's amazing because I mean it sounds negative like I keep saying negative things about it but SM in some ways is very [pause] it's beautiful in some ways and like in good ways because of the way that - of the connectivity that it allows." *(p.39)*

Indeed the majority of participants were associating the positive aspects of SM to the connectivity that it offers. I notice a paradox, as Ivy describes it, an antinomy between darkness and beauty. While Ivy indicates that the "element of darkness is so overpowering" (appendix 6.7, I16), she also portrays the almost magnetic or seductive side of her experiences of SM. Similar to Dan's notion that SM "brings out the worst in us" and Aria's description of SM representing a version of us filled with more vices, Ivy's extract illustrates that it "brings out darkness in people". So much so that Ivy describes herself as becoming "darker", having gone through her interpretation of the death of innocence. In the above extract, she elaborates on the darkness, in the sense that whatever it is that one may feel they are lacking about themselves and their lives becomes magnified or intensified on SM. She reports that she feels SM represents that part of us that's "rooted in lack". Overall, the double-edged nature of SM manifests in various personal, complex yet somewhat intertwined ways for these participants. A summary of some of the commonalities of the double-edged nature of their experiences running throughout the themes and sub-themes will be presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Overview

This chapter brings together all of the research findings of this study for discussion within the context of the wider existing literature, drawing from the resonances and divergences arising within the discourse of counselling psychology. The discussion chapter begins with a brief summary of the key findings that will be presented in relation to the central theme, 'double-edged sword'. This will be followed by a discussion of the themes with a consideration of the various meanings and implications that these experiences may hold for these participants. The potential implications for treatment and the recommendations for future research for the field of counselling psychology will also be explored. In addition, various findings in relation to the experience of the self in cyberspace will be discussed by drawing upon concepts used within self psychology, including the potential implications for clinical practice. Finally, the strengths and limitations of the study will be critically evaluated and a reflexive discussion will follow. In line with a phenomenological epistemological position, the basis of the insights, which arose from the analysis, will be explored to illustrate how the participants made sense of their own experiences.

The participants held diverse, unique, and deeply personal narratives relating to their relationship to SNSs as well as how they experienced themselves and other people on these platforms. Themes representing patterned meaning throughout their accounts helped elucidate key commonalities within their experiences. Strictly speaking, one cannot generalise from small-scale qualitative research studies (Willig, 2013) such as this. However, it could also be reasoned that if "a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalization" (Haug, 1987, p. 44). Willig (2013, p.94) asserts that although we do not know which or how many individuals share a particular experience, "once we have identified it through qualitative research, we do know that it is available within a culture or society".

4.2 Summary of Findings

Overall, the participants' experience of and their relationship to SNSs can be described as a 'double-edged sword'. Although they experience positive aspects to SM, including positive ways of connecting to others, all participants' narratives of their lived experience included negative consequences of engaging in the use of SM. Interestingly, there were some participants who held strongly polarised perceptions of SNSs that captured the tension of this double-edged sword theme. Ultimately there was a sense that the impact of participating in these sites entailed several noteworthy 'costs'.

When considering their relationship to themselves and others, there appeared to be a double-edged

sword manifesting in the sense that while SM offered them connectivity and access to people and information, some of the participants experience the process of accessing this information as repetitive scrolling. In this way, it is experienced as passive, numbing, 'addictive', and for the most part, negatively stimulating. While some participants described the experience of scrolling as a form of passive entertainment (Aria and Zoe), when it came to viewing personal content about other people, many participants felt that scrolling would often lead to negative social comparison. Furthermore, several participants reported that they felt that the primary motivations behind posting content, and in particular posting personal content related to the self, involved a need to be recognised, validated, affirmed or acknowledged. Nonetheless, they questioned whether these needs could be fulfilled within the context of SNSs. Finally, although many participants voiced that they would feel lonely and/or more isolated without access to SM, reflecting on a life without SM revealed there would be potential benefits to this. For example, there was the idea of gaining more time for the self, re-establishing old hobbies (e.g. reading books), being more connected to 'mother earth' (Ivy), being more interactive with family (Ella), connecting with 'the present' (Dan and Zoe) and having more time to engage in physical outings.

With regards to how they experience other people, the double-edged sword manifested as a contrast between being connected to more people but, for some participants, feeling that this connection was shallow or lacking in depth. For some, the nonexistence of the physical presence of others meant that they could be more expressive on SM, yet the absence of embodied signals meant that there was more potential for misinterpretation. Connecting with others virtually – where the body and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions are absent - means that the sensory experiences that emerge when connecting with individuals in person are missing. These sensory experiences were voiced as important aspects of feeling connected to and developing relationships with others.

The majority of participants experienced SNSs as spaces where they could engage in self-presentation and which offered more control in the presentation of the self. This is consistent with research demonstrating that individuals have more control over their self-presentational behaviour on SNSs than they do in face-to-face interactions (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Krämer & Winter, 2008). Some participants held certain perceptions about others who were oversharing private and sensitive aspects of themselves and their lives on these platforms. Within this sub-theme, what seemed to arise for some was a gap around feelings of intimacy in connecting with others through the content they were receiving from users' public posts. There was perhaps a sense that receiving information through these sites, however personal and private, is not the same as genuinely connecting with someone. This reinforces the implicit suggestion that for some participants, SNSs are experienced as spaces that may not facilitate interpersonal depth or intimacy.

4.3 Virtual Communities

Research has shown that the connectivity afforded by SNSs can generate a bridge between individuals, complement current relationships and assist in constructing a greater sense of community (Whittaker & Gillespie, 2013). The findings arising under the 'bridge versus loss of connection' theme reflected this, shedding light on the unique nature of these platforms in operating as multifaceted connectors for these participants. This aspect seemed to function as a primary benefit and a powerful motivator for the continued use of SNSs among these participants. Thus, although some participants' accounts suggested that they experienced these sites as spaces that were surface-level; they can still act as a gateway to relationships, offering them convenient access to others from anywhere in the world. Some participants voiced an awareness of the absence of a physical community around them that met the breadth of their virtual community, reporting that without access to a global network of people, they would have no choice but to merely maintain connections with those who where physically around them. Driskell and Lyon (2002) assert that the latest candidate for regaining community is the digital environment of cyberspace. Indeed, the notion of defining communities in terms of space such as neighbourhoods has shifted to defining community in terms of social networks (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

Throughout evolution, humans as social beings have always resided in a community. With the higher rate of migration to cities, these traditional communities have declined (Griffiths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014). While in recent decades, a more individualised way of living has developed, the need for a predictable community life remains the same (Griffiths et al., 2014). Griffiths et al. (2014) highlight that people who have lost their traditional communities make various efforts to compensate for this loss; social networking activities would be among these since these sites offer a predictable communal space. This phenomenon is illustrated in Zoe's account, as she reported that her "social circles" have become "so dispersed", "all over the world" that "your community no longer is related to where you are". She expressed that for her, "it's becoming more necessary to use SM to stay connected to a community and feel like you're part of a community". She saw her continued use of SM as a primary way to connect with her virtual community and thus, the need for a sense of community seemed to be a driving force for her ongoing use. She described SM as an "antidote to a transient lifestyle", expressing that without it, she would be a lot more "anchored" to a "familiar space" and "less open to moving around".

Research has indicated that having a sense of community is typically cultivated through building strong social ties among members who know each other and exchange information primarily through face-to-face interaction (Chen & Lin, 2014). This assists in generating feelings of membership by providing mutual affective connection and a sense of influence (Chen & Lin, 2014). Conversely, a sense of virtual community is not directly formed through conversing and exchanging information through face-to-face communication, which results in diminished social cues and lower social presence and this can seemingly reduce the quality of the relationship (Chen & Lin, 2014). While the absence of the physical co-presence

of others emerged as an important aspect limiting the level of depth some participants experienced online, many participants' accounts suggested that without SNSs, the ability to network internationally and form transnational communities would never exist.

The theme 'bridge versus loss of connection' indicated how participants would feel without access to SNSs, with some predicting that a life without SM would lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Ivy for example, expressed that she felt she would lose her sense of "safety" and "place in the world" and questioned how she would make friends. Her extracts suggested that it was difficult for her to envision an alternative way to connect with others and maintain relationships with her network of friends. She described that a life without SM would look like: "a deserted beach. You're just on your own". The interviews indicated that several participants did not feel they had an analogous substitute for the sense of virtual community and global connectivity that it offers. Zoe expressed that by not engaging in this new "language of sharing and community", "you're not speaking the same language as the rest of the world. You become disconnected". Without access to SM, she felt she would be communicating with a "few people very rarely". These excerpts suggest that the virtual world of SM is fulfilling an important social function for these participants. When considering the research question concerning participants' relationship to SM, the findings of this study highlight an important reality, which is the modern-day sense of global community that SNSs can generate. In reflecting upon the potential clinical implications, this research points to the significance in exploring a client's use of social networking, in order to better understand the ways that these sties might be utilised to build community and connection with others (Gowen, Deschaine, Gruttadara, Markey, 2012). For example, Gowen et al.'s (2012) findings suggested that young adults living with a mental health condition were more likely to utilise SNSs to build a supportive community than to strengthen an already existing one.

The theme also highlighted SM's potential to operate as a bridge that allowed participants to find and connect to like-minded others. The extracts indicated that these platforms can expand one's reach by facilitating access to an increased number and diversity of individuals from all over the world. Zoe voiced that when she is using SM more "intentionally", her SM use feels more "valuable" as it: "allows me to meet others that are like-minded…it opens up space to actually meet them physically". She went on to say: "…because otherwise I can't just like walk down the street and look for people who are like-minded…on the Internet…people do put themselves out there and then you find them through mutual interests". Zoe then described a "very close" friendship that she had developed with an individual she had met after participating in a FB group based on a mutual interest. While they initially met through FB, they were then able to meet and develop their friendship in person. Ella expressed that some of her "closest friends" were initially formed through SM and that if she didn't have access to SM, she would have still felt like an "outsider" and a "socially awkward person that like kept to the side".

Such statements represented within the theme may align with the concept of twinship as it refers to our need to belong, to feel a sense of alikeness with another and to feel connected to other people who are experienced as similar to the self (VanderHeide, 2012). This can foster feelings of belonging and facilitate a sense of connection to a wider group (Marmarosh & Mann, 2014). Philips (2016) states that the immense rise in popularity of SNSs validates Kohut's notion of twinship and the need to be part of humankind. Lessem (2005) asserts that in adulthood, twinship experience emerges as an aspect of a sense of belonging and affiliation and this can be derived from being part of collegial groups. FB offers the opportunity to create and join groups based on shared experiences and interests. Thus, while several participants voiced that the loss of nonverbal cues limited the quality of their connections online, there was another dimension to their interactions. The theme 'bridge versus loss of connection' illuminates how interacting with these platforms may potentially function as a modern-day contender to facilitate twinship experience. In this way, SM can operate as a bridge to facilitate access to similar, like-minded others and this may create an opening for a potential twinship experience. Within a clinical context, this form of intentional use of the platforms may be important to consider when an individual's sense of connectedness wavers, which can activate twinship needs (Vanderheide, 2012). However, in relation to the findings, a significant aspect to consider is how these potential relationships are then nurtured and whether they are maintained offline.

4.4 The Absence of Nonverbal Cues in the Digital World

Developing research is illustrating that the importance of nonverbal dimensions of interaction is far greater than many of us may recognise (Robson, 2015). This is occurring at a time when online communication, particularly among young individuals, is predominantly taking place through the digital realm of messages (Robson, 2015). The majority of participants' accounts suggested that interacting with others on SNSs is a primarily written-based, more 'mental' form of communication that lacks the sensory aspect of connecting when in the presence of others. Balick (2013, p.88) asserts that: "online communication is largely a cognitive phenomenon" and states that regardless of the fact that online interaction invites an emotional response, online space can lack a sense of embodiment. Research has shown that relating to each other via the five senses of seeing, smelling, hearing, touch, and even taste are sensory pathways that help us communicate and bond (Suler, 2015). Furthermore, aspects of nonverbal communication such as our facial expressions, body language, and eye contact are rich in meaning and essential to reading emotions (Suler, 2015). Balick (2013) asserts that social interactions through SNSs can be rather limited when compared to the multitude of relational cues and the wealth of information offered by face-to-face communication.

Baym's (2010) research demonstrated that social cues as described by participants such as hearing

someone's voice and seeing someone's reactions were key indicators in relation to perceived intimacy when communicating with others. She stated that media with fewer social cues raises concerns that relationships, interactions and identities will become progressively inadequate and shallow. Similarly, Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch (2011) questioned whether electronic interaction via SNSs can meet individuals' deeper needs for relatedness; given the significance of nonverbal communication. Robson (2015) also underlines the importance of nonverbal cues; he asserts that deep interpersonal connection necessitates both the physical co-presence of individuals as well as near and active face-to-face interaction between them.

Boddy and Dominelli (2017) state that although online interactions may be embodied with congruence between body and mind, one cannot see the reactions of others and is therefore unable to receive instant feedback from them, generating an element of disembodiment. For some participants, the fact that their face and body were not being perceived offered a certain freedom to express themselves as the focus shifted away to the manner in which they used language or even emoticons during online interactions. In relation to this, Ella stated that she was able to express herself more on SM than in person, since others are unable to see her and she is unable to see "what the other person's reaction is". She stated that if other people were looking at her as she was trying to express herself, she would start to shake and stutter. She described herself as "shy", stating that the increased confidence she experienced through "hiding" her "face behind the screen" has helped her make friends. Ella voiced that if it wasn't for SM, she would still be that "socially awkward person", "that kept to the side". McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) point out that 'gating features' such as shyness and stuttering can inhibit individuals from forming positive social relationships with others due to their strong influence on first impressions, which can impact the later progression of friendships. Yet because of the absence of these features in online interactions, they do not hinder potential relationships from "getting off the ground" (McKenna et al., 2002, p. 11).

Both Alrai (2015) and Hammond 's (2017) qualitative findings among a group of adolescents similarly indicated that many participants experienced more freedom to express themselves as well as gained increased levels of confidence on SM. In Baker and Oswald's (2010) study, the authors found that FB supported the social life of shy individuals and assisted them in finding friends. Yet the findings also indicated that FB use did not seem to assist shy individuals to transfer the feelings of comfort whilst interacting with others online to their interactions offline (Price, Jewitt, & Brown, 2013). Similarly, Vossen and Valkenburg (2016) stated that while SM may facilitate the development of new friendships and connection with others, this does not necessarily translate into improved social skills offline. Likewise, both Ella and Zoe made reference to the notion that the increased confidence they experienced through SM did not necessarily transfer to offline settings (e.g. Ella: "I still lack confidence in offline situations"). Ella voiced that if she had a chance to discuss any personal concerns with a psychologist, she would want to learn techniques to help her feel more comfortable socialising in person.

The results highlight the potential for practitioners to think about how clients are able to actualise the confidence they develop online in real-world situations; if they express they are experiencing a discrepancy. Another consideration would be to explore whether a client who feels more comfortable interacting and developing friendships online devotes less time to face-to-face interactions. Research has shown that while SNS use can help certain users feel more at ease when interacting with others online, users who report feelings of loneliness may still experience loneliness if they are not interacting with others face-to-face (Ahn & Shin, 2013; Baker & Oswald, 2010). These clinical implications can also inform the development of tailored interventions. Seemingly, the ease in online relating (in comparison to face-to-face interactions) may attract certain users who gravitate towards the type of relatedness that SNSs can offer. These sites allow users to interact with others while at the same time, diminishing the social or emotional risks that can accompany offline relating (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Clinicians may need to reflect on a client's style of relatedness on SNSs, as it has the potential to become a substitute as opposed to supplement to offline relating. This reflection may be required to assist a client transfer the social confidence they experience online to offline settings so that SM becomes a transitional space for innovative interactions and a gateway to meet others (Li, 2016).

4.4.1 Revisiting Empathy

Balick (2013, p. 89) asserts that the absence of "full-bodied awareness" can foster an "ungrounded feeling", "a relational experience that feels as if it is going on in the head rather than in the heart". Orbach (2009, p. 79) points out that there may be dangers associated with an absence of embodiment in cyberspace, stating that this absence "dematerialises" an individual's "existence". Under the sub-theme 'virtual versus sensory connectedness', Ivy contrasted her experiences of connecting with others online and offline, reporting that in "real life", there is a "material sensory existence" (appendix 6.7, C1). For Ivy, this material sensory existence is what she voiced permits her to see someone from a 360-degree perspective, allowing her to "feel more", to "relate more", to "empathise more" and to be more "compassionate" in face-to-face interactions when compared to interacting online.

Ivy felt that SM "makes you less compassionate towards people" but she acknowledged that if she encountered the same people she does online in "real life", she "would be compassionate towards them". This suggests that she is experiencing herself as less compassionate on SM platforms. Dan described his experiences of getting into "nasty" disputes with others on FB - some of whom were friends that he thought he "knew well" - as a result of potential misinterpretations of the things he says. He explained that had he been talking face-to-face, it would be much less likely that people would have misunderstood him "that badly". Notably, this lack of face-to-face context was also highlighted as a key contributory factor to online debates and arguments becoming insulting and uncivil by the participants in Fox and Moreland's qualitative (2015) study. Dan also reported that he experienced others as "less selfish" and "more sensitive to others", when "the world was forced to interact more in person". He stated that he feels there

is a “general lack of understanding” of one another that is on the rise due to our increased reliance on communicating with each other through SNSs. With regard to in-person versus online interactions, studies have shown that the absence of nonverbal and contextual cues can facilitate the misinterpretation of feelings and foster insensitive behaviours (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). Furthermore, Veenstra (2014) highlights that listening in face-to-face exchanges necessitates far more sensitivity and work when compared to online interactions.

As presented in the literature review, Konrath’s (2013) notion that the lack of nonverbal cues in the online environment may hamper one’s ability to understand and experience the feelings of others might connect to Ivy and Dan’s experiences; as they highlighted the significance of face-to-face communication in eliciting empathy, compassion (Ivy) and sensitivity (Dan). Konrath (2013) contends that due to the complexity of interpersonal interactions, we may require a combination of different signals (auditory, visual, tactile, chemical) to encourage sensitivity, kindness and induce compassion towards each other. Support for this is provided by Robson (2015, p.128) who states that “face-to-face interaction is absolutely necessary for full-spectrum, genuinely empathic communication with others”. Evidence from the cognitive neuroscience literature demonstrates that the development of empathy also requires eye contact in order to activate those parts of our brain that permit us to process another individual’s intentions and feelings (Senju & Johnson, 2010; Turkle, 2015).

Some of the above research point to potential interconnections between the experiences of Dan and Ivy within the theme ‘virtual versus physical presence’ and the sub-theme ‘virtual versus sensory connectedness’. As there is a scarcity of qualitative studies within this topic, there are potential gaps in how multidimensional concepts such as empathy and compassion become measured in the context both of positivist science and the perspective of individual experience. The mixed findings in the literature warrant a further reflection from the perspective of users’ experiences with regard to these phenomena. This would allow those who engage in SM to voice their own perspectives and understandings of the potential impact that the absence of nonverbal cues might have on the quality of their relationships.

The findings provide an understanding of the way that a lack of nonverbal communication contributes to certain changes in the way these participants experience interpersonal communication dynamics online with respect to feelings of compassion, empathy and sensitivity. In addition, they offer contributions to the literature by exploring the various perceptions articulated by the participants; regarding how they felt that this absence shapes both their experience of themselves and other people. Many participants’ noted that this impacted the quality of their relationships online and the ability to form deeper connections with others. The results open up avenues for future research and contribute to the basis for a further exploration of the insights detailed within the analysis.

From a self psychology perspective, this opens up important questions to consider about the potential

challenges for mature selfobject experience and the fulfilment of selfobject needs within the context of SNSs. Rubalcava and Waldman (2004) highlight that a crucial aspect of the self-selfobject relationship is the impact on individuals of being or not being empathically understood by others. A mature selfobject experience entails that the individual partake in using and nurturing interpersonal relationships with others to meet selfobject needs (Hagman, 1997). Teicholz (1999) states that empathy facilitates one's capacity to provide selfobject functions for another. Furthermore, mature selfobject relating occurs within what Wolf (1980) terms the 'empathic selfobject ambience' (Harwood, 1998). Similarly, Hagman (1997) claims that mature selfobject experience entails a sense of empathic connection that involves a concurrent recognition of the self and other, along with mutual understanding. In addition to relationships, the findings raise a discussion about the potential implications for online therapy, as within some of the emerging research and in the way these participants articulate their experiences, there is an absence that is felt. The absence relates to the various facial and bodily cues and multi-sensory experiences - which are normally drawn upon within everyday offline interactions - potentially limiting the ability to build rapport and foster empathy and sensitivity. This requires a more in-depth reflection on the use of different strategies to enhance engagement.

While online counselling is rapidly expanding, questions have been raised around whether there is potential to recreate the significant qualities that are embodied in a face-to-face interaction which facilitate change (Fletcher-Tomenius & Vossler, 2009). Lachmann (2008) for example, highlights the importance of empathy in a face-to-face encounter, proposing that transformation of self-experience in the therapeutic context takes place as an extension of empathic attunement. This involves both verbal and nonverbal communication arising within an implicit interaction between the dyad (Lachmann, 2008). Consistent research has illustrated that empathy is one of the most powerful predictors of therapeutic progress across every therapeutic approach (Watson, 2016). In a grounded theory study with online therapy practitioners, the results indicated that the loss of nonverbal cues made it more difficult for practitioners to express empathy towards clients (Simpson, 2016). Self psychology in particular, considers empathy to be fundamental to the therapeutic process and a primary tool to understand and respond to our clients from the 'inside' (Lessem, 2005; Sorter, 1999). The experience of being empathised with creates an environment of acceptance and safety, fostering self-exploration; allowing the client to feel recognised, understood by and connected to their therapist (Lessem, 2005). Furthermore, empathy provides the required condition for the development of selfobject transference reactivation of a client's unfulfilled selfobject needs; this reactivation is considered the most primary change agent for the strengthening of the self (Lessem, 2005).

Lachmann (2008) suggests that is it still possible to promote empathy towards individuals who are not physically present; a notion that is highly pertinent to online counselling as well as the question of SM's potential to transform (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Indeed transformation of experience from the perspective of Kohutian self psychology can occur outside of the therapeutic context through the formation of healthy adult relationships characterised by a sense of empathic connection that foster such a transformation to take place (Hagman, 1997). The use of imagination is proposed as a method that can

facilitate an empathic understanding; by allowing one to look within one's own internal world to discover experiences that may be analogous and use this understanding to experience empathy for the individual who is not physically present (Lachmann, 2008; Lessem, 2005; Stolorow, 1993).

Murphy and Mitchell (1998) recommend a range of techniques to be used within online counselling termed 'presence techniques' that support empathy and nonverbal communication in text. Emotional bracketing is one technique where a therapist outlines the emotions that accompany a text in brackets following the text (Murphy et al., 2009). For example, a counsellor might write "I am wondering how you have been doing since I have not heard from you in a few weeks [feeling concerned]" (Murphy et al., 2009). Murphy et al. (2009) note the value of this technique, stating that without bracketing, a client may misconstrue the statement, perhaps perceiving it as a message conveying negativity (e.g. disappointment). This resonates with the findings in the present study, where some participants highlighted the potential for misinterpretation and misunderstandings in the absence of nonverbal cues.

Despite the current debates in the literature concerning the absence of nonverbal signals and the potential impact on empathy; emerging research has revealed unique aspects of the medium of online counselling that assist in developing the online therapeutic relationship and subsequent therapeutic change (Fletcher-Tomenius & Vossler, 2009). For example, in Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler's (2009) qualitative IPA study, the process of typing arose as a distinctive aspect; through the process of typing, the typist was engaged in their feelings and thoughts in a manner that was unique to the method of communication online. The process of writing may be cathartic and therapeutic in converting emotional experiences into words; the typist is in control of the content, the pace, and the depth of the written word (Sheese, Brown, & Graziano, 2004). This may possibly offer a sense of psychological safety (Sheese et al., 2004). However, within the context of SNSs, several participants' experiences revealed an absence of sensory connectedness due to a primary reliance upon a written form of communication; which potentially limited the formation of a deeper connection with others.

Zoe in particular voiced that that there is a lot more to relationships than just the process of written communication. She expressed that there is also the "feeling of being physically with someone" as well as eye contact that are very much part of building relationships and the experience of the self. Dan also stated the significance of vocal intonation, highlighting that on SM, he does feel "the disconnectedness" as all people have to go on "are words themselves…you cut off the whole person, physically". Similarly, in Simpson's (2016) qualitative study with online therapists, the lack of a physical presence emerged as a subcategory that challenged the development of the therapeutic relationship. In line with the present study, the absence of facial expressions and tone of voice meant that words through written text could be interpreted as harsh or abrupt when this was not intended (Simpson, 2016). This points to the significance for an online therapist to develop sensitivity to the written word, by interpreting the 'tone of text' (Simpson, 2016). One way that this could be achieved is through paying attention to stylistic aspects

of a client's communication; for example, the length of sentences, the use of emoticons and whether the client changes the colour, size or front of text (Simpson, 2016).

The extracts underpinning the theme 'virtual versus physical presence' and sub-theme 'virtual versus sensory connectedness' along with the supporting literature, point to a need for future qualitative research to continue to identify and investigate strategies to enhance communication online. This form of research can provide various ways to support the quality of the relationship in an environment void of nonverbal communication. While the loss of nonverbal cues has been the centre of discussion in the literature on online counselling (Richards & Viganó), Suler (2004) contends that it is this loss that can lead to a process termed 'disinhibition'; a distinctive effect that can offer both advantages and disadvantages within cyberspace.

4.5 The Online Disinhibition Effect

The results of the current study suggest that several participants perceived SNSs as fostering environments that bring out the 'negative' or 'dark' aspects of the self. This finding may be in line with what has been termed the online disinhibition effect, which refers to the notion that in cyberspace, people tend to do and say things that they would not usually say or do face-to-face. Suler's (2004) research indicates that people self-disclose or 'act out' more intensely or frequently online than they would in person. Aria also highlighted this as an aspect of her experiences of other people on SNSs, reporting that people often say things (e.g. "perversities") that they wouldn't be able to say to your face as represented under the central theme 'double-edged sword'. Suler (2015) asserts that people feel more uninhibited and express themselves more openly online. Yet he points out that the disinhibition effect functions as a "double-edged sword" as he compares and contrasts what he terms toxic and benign disinhibition (Suler, 2015, p. 96).

Suler (2015) uses the term 'toxic disinhibition' when referring to the actions of using harsh criticisms, conflicts, hatred, rude language and threats online. Some participants spoke about their own as well as other people's experiences of trolls and cyberbullying on SM, or in Dan's case, of getting into heated arguments with others online, including people he knew. He expressed that he finds there are many people who "almost enjoy antagonising" others on SNSs and that he has had to increasingly "block" more people. He stated that he feels these sites "expose" the "bad side" of people and can "bring out the worst in us". Ivy on the other hand, voiced that SM "brings out darkness in people", while Aria seemed to be articulating some sort of moral ambiguity that plays out in online spaces, voicing that she feels SM "amplifies" and "promotes" "vices" within people. She described her experiences of other people who use offensive language and insults, expressing that she experiences this as commonplace on SNSs and "a way for people to release something". Suler (2015) distinguishes this type of disinhibition from benign

disinhibition, where people share personal information about themselves such as disclosing hidden emotions, wishes, and fears, which appears to reflect a need to connect with others and better understand oneself.

A process termed ‘moral disengagement’ may provide a perspective of what has been noted above. When people’s actions appear at odds with their own moral standards, moral disengagement can permit them to distances themselves and thereby evade certain unwanted emotions such as shame and guilt that typically accompany moral transgressions (Bandura, 1991; 2001; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996; Runions & Bak, 2015). This process occurs by reframing the way one views and makes sense of their behaviour, the target of the behaviour, their responsibility and the outcomes (Runions & Bak, 2015). This can be achieved through deploying several processes such as moral justifications, perceiving harmful outcomes as providing benefits for the target or advantageous comparisons (Runions & Bak, 2015).

SNSs can offer a number of affordances that may facilitate cyberaggression (including cyberbullying), by modifying the norms of particular behaviours online and this might be facilitated through the mechanisms of moral disengagement (Runions & Bak, 2015). For example, on SNSs, the temporal and physical distance afforded by cyberspace and the inability to observe the recipient’s reactions can facilitate cyberaggressive behaviour and create an emotional gap (Runions & Bak, 2010). This enables the perpetrator to discount the consequences of the aggressive acts and even generate an illusion that no real harm was caused (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, & Bonanno, 2010; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Runions & Bak, 2015). Other affordances that might support the process of moral disengagement are persistence and the ability to share and spread content (e.g. photos, videos) to a large audience (Runions & Bak, 2015). For example, sharing content that can be offensive (e.g. an embarrassing video) can facilitate displacement and diffusion of responsibility as bystanders can play a part by spreading the content (Runions & Bak, 2015).

With reference to the online disinhibition effect, the findings of this study suggest that one of the potential contributing disinhibiting effects emerging within some of the participants’ narratives may be the absence of the physical presence of others, including the lack of nonverbal cues in the online environment. For example, Aria experienced SNSs as spaces where vices become amplified, where things “surface more” because you feel “no one's looking at you”. This reflection echoes Suler’s (2015) finding that despite one’s identity being known, the chance to be physically unseen could augment the disinhibition effect. Moment-by-moment responses in the form of body language, eye contact, facial expressions and verbal utterances moderate what individuals are ready to do or say (Suler, 2015). In the absence of such feedback, individuals tend to go off on tangents (Suler, 2015). More specifically, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) found that the absence of eye contact was the strongest factor contributing to toxic disinhibition including online ‘flaming’ behaviours such as insulting others.

Literature has indicated that diminished social cues can result in a reduced impact of social norms and restraints (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984) that can lead to anti-normative behaviour (Joinson, 2007). Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) assert that the absence of visibility and the distinctive form of social presence characteristic of online interaction can result in 'deindividuation' (Suler, 2004), a decreased state of self-evaluation, which facilitates online disinhibition. Aria offered an interesting perspective with her perception that in an online world, people are "more free to live these vices" and "free to go off track":

> "In the virtual world, no one is there to police you and say 'hey you're bad'
> …because it's another dimension, it's as if it's not real." *(p.36)*

Suler (2015) asserts that a contributing factor to toxic disinhibition is minimisation of status and authority online. In line with Aria's extract, he expressed that people might feel as if their online persona, along with those of others online, exist in a "not-quite-real, even dreamlike dimension" distinct from the demands and responsibilities of the real world (Suler, 2015, p.103). Some perceive the online world as a space with "rules that do not apply to everyday living"; once they return to their daily lives, they abandon responsibility for what occurred in this seemingly fabricated realm (Suler, 2015, p. 103). Perhaps there is an element of this notion that may link to some participants' accounts, particularly concerning the suggestion of a moral vagueness that Aria seems to experience as taking place on these sites.

Hinduja and Patchin (2008) claim that disinhibition is likely when the consequences of behaviour are unforeseen. Concerning her experience of trolls on SM, Zoe expressed that when "you're behind the computer", "you're not held accountable", "who is going to get you?". In relation to an experience she had with cyberbullying, Ella voiced that people who do these things online have "got that shield over them", reporting that they can get away with things without being "identified". When reflecting on her experience of accessing updates about other people's lives on SM, Astrid reported she can be "voyeuristic" into the lives of other people "without having to take any responsibility for them". These extracts appear to reinforce the notion that SNSs operate with ambiguity when it comes to moral standards and regulations in comparison to the offline world, particularly when it comes to accountability.

Zoe, Ivy, and Leo noted a similar notion of experiencing SNSs as not quite real. Zoe stated that she often experiences a "disconnect" between what is real and what is not real in the virtual world and that at times she can "start to mistake it for reality". Leo expressed that the "world" of SM is "not real", whilst Ivy described the online space as a "parallel universe" that "doesn't exist". Similarly, in Fox and Moreland's (2015, p.173) qualitative study, several participants suggested that FB was not "real" and criticised people who were confusing it with "real life". Yet those same participants all shared narratives about experiencing negative feelings such as offline arguments in part due to FB's affordances. The authors state that this

reinforces the idea that while many users conceive the online and offline worlds as distinct, offline and online experiences are intricately intertwined.

Some of the important implications that emerge here relate to the idea that experiencing disinhibition has the potential to work in both positive and negative ways depending on how an individual engages with SM. For example, researchers have indicated that benign disinhibition can allow greater self-expression among individuals who may be introverted (Orchard & Fulwood, 2010), shy, socially isolated or among those who stutter or have social anxiety and are typically reluctant to self-disclose offline (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). In this way, it can facilitate the development of friendships and relationships online (Megele, 2017). This may resonate with Ella, who stated that on SM, "I'm able to be me", but offline she found it more difficult to express herself. It can also lead to an exploration of novel experiential or emotional areas of one's identity as well as social ramifications such as providing emotional support (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). Yet the double-edged nature suggests that these sites can foster an environment that facilitates a reduced regard for behavioural inhibitions and boundaries that can lead to toxic disinhibition (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). The present study offered unique perspectives based on the experiences of several participants who indicated that these sites can bring out aspects of the self that were perceived as negative.

A consideration for practitioners is that the disinhibiting aspects of SNSs may reveal valuable insights about a client that can be significant to explore and work with in therapeutic settings. Disinhibition through SNSs can lead to the emergence of different facets of the self such as those aspects of ourselves that we normally keep fairly hidden (Gackenbach, 2011). A somewhat similar notion was commented upon by Ella, who indicated that on SM, people in her network are able to "access" "that hidden bit of me", "that side" of herself she wouldn't be able to express in offline interactions. The SM realm may provide an arena where this can be played out without the same inhibitions as the offline world. Several researchers have indicated that on SNSs, the boundaries between the front and backstage become blurred (Vitak & Kim, 2014).

Similar to Ella, Aria highlighted this hidden aspect of her self. She expressed her interest in transgressive art and described her experiences of looking at "provocative" profiles of artists she follows on Instagram, many of whom have had their artwork censored. When she finds herself going "deep" and finding "really weird" profiles on Instagram, she noted that she feels she can "turn on" things that she "shuts off" within herself. As she is browsing their private profiles, it can feel as if she has developed a "secret circle", as if they "let me in". This world exists somewhere different to her everyday life in Morocco, where she reported that there aren't that many people who "get it". Back home, she feels "zero connection to this world" but is transported when she eventually connects to SM. She noted that in Morocco, "it's a difference of culture, completely different". Subsequently, she can feel "alone" in her "zone", "like it's a secret", "looking at things…in this…like private circle" on Instagram. There is a disparity and she voiced that it can feel like a "completely double life"; as she reported that there is an absence in talking about this kind of art openly in Morocco. For Aria, Instagram becomes a portal to connect her to another world that is not part of her

cultural norm. Aria's extracts illustrate the significant role that culture plays in shaping the experience of the self online. Overall, the results underline the potential that various sides of the self may emerge on these sites that may not normally emerge offline due to the unique affordances and distinctive aspects in the way these spaces are experienced.

A wider implication for society is the potential for SNSs to foster the adoption of alternate moral standards (Charaschanya & Blauw, 2018). People may no longer follow the same social norms as they do offline, making it more likely for some to experience a decline in responsibility, where legal and moral constraints become suspended (Hu, Kumar, Huang, & Ratnavelu, 2017; Suler, 2004). Future research focused on how the virtual environment of SM may differentially afford moral disengagement can also be a vital stepping stone towards developing prevention and intervention approaches aimed at diminishing cyberaggression and supporting cybersafety (Runions & Bak, 2015).

Previous research on the online disinhibition effect has focused primarily on anonymous environments in cyberspace, whilst the current study demonstrates the potential for these effects to emerge within various SNSs. The study offers unique contributions through an exploration of how these dynamics impact the way participants' experience themselves and other people on SNSs. A discussion of the double-edge nature of participants' engagement in particular, highlights the numerous complexities intertwined within the SM world. The originality of the findings are also demonstrated within an analysis of the extracts that seemed to suggest that for some participants, an ambiguity emerged in how they experienced the SM realm. There was a sense that the distinctions between dichotomies that appeared to manifest as good versus bad, healthy versus unhealthy or right versus wrong can become blurred. These understandings can orient a therapist to some of the potential challenges that can be encountered online, particularly when considering the impact of disinhibition within the SM environment. The findings emphasise that future in-depth research to further our understanding of the disinhibition effect in less anonymous spaces like SNSs is particularly warranted. Prospective research should aim to expand our understanding of how people's experiences on SM are shaped in relation to this effect with different groups of participants. This will provide greater insight around the micro dynamics that arise and build on what has already been undertaken in this research, offering either resonance or new insights. This can provide diverse ways of thinking about how people can be supported when they encounter difficulties on SM.

4.6 Ambivalence

The central theme 'double-edged sword' may also be related to the psychological concept of ambivalence. Ambivalence is considered to be a fundamental aspect of human experience and has taken a prominent role in various approaches within the field of psychology, including developmental, cognitive, sociological and psychoanalytic (Sincoff, 1990). Ambivalence has generally been defined as overlapping

approach-avoidance tendencies that manifests on a cognitive, behavioural or emotional level; directed toward an experience, individual, object or set of objects (Sincoff, 1990). Being caught within an approach – avoidant conflict can lead one to be both repelled by and attracted to a single object or experience; for example, an individual can alternately resist and indulge in a problematic behaviour (Weingardt, 2000). While Bleuer first devised the concept in 1910, it has been strongly linked with the work of Freud (Weingardt, 2000). Although Bleuer considered ambivalence to be potentially pathological, he also perceived it to be a universal phenomenon (Bowker, 2010).

In classic psychoanalysis, ambivalence is viewed as emerging from individual intrapsychic processes based on the ego, id and superego interacting within the individual to bring about intrapsychic conflict (Weingardt, 2000). Freud's definition of ambivalence was restricted to unconscious feelings towards people (Sincoff, 1990). In Kleinien theory, ambivalence was perceived to manifest through the inability to endure opposing emotions, exhibited by their lack of fusion and disintegration (Holder, 1975; Sincoff, 1990). Different psychoanalytic theories vary over the degree to which they consider ambivalence pathological (Sincoff, 1990). A distinction is generally made between individuals who are able to tolerate coexisting ambivalent feelings with those who experience conflict but find pathological resolutions (Holder, 1975). Unconscious ambivalence, which may suggest the failure to endure contrasting emotions, is often viewed as more pathological than conscious ambivalence, where the person may wish to confront and reach some form of resolution (Sincoff, 1990). The recognition of ambivalent conflicts and the movement towards accepting and resolving them constitutes a primary therapeutic task (Sincoff, 1990). Many psychoanalytic perspectives have tended to focus on the characteristics of ambivalent individuals, whereas within sociological perspectives, ambivalent conflicts are viewed as situationally defined and not perceived as necessarily aberrant (Sincoff, 1990). Furthermore, sociological perspectives focus on ambivalence arising not only from processes occurring at an intrapersonal level but at the level of the wider social structure (Weingardt, 2000).

In relation to the 'double-edged sword' theme, the experience of vacillation - of being 'of two minds', may generate a dialectic (Weingardt, 2000) as the participants experienced both a push and pull towards their engagement with SM. The participants were able to articulate their dilemmas whilst expressing their polarised feelings towards SM; there was a desire to participate and also a struggle with the various aspects of their engagement and this may produce an internal conflict. The experience of scrolling in particular appeared to be tinged with both a pull to engage and a desire to resist this engagement and this might generate an internal tension, which may manifest as ambivalence. Zoe in particular, noted an internal conflict in indulging in the habit of scrolling but also hating it and hating that she's doing it ("I hate it. I want to stop it", "you also hate that you're doing that").

For some participants, the polarisation experienced might also generate a sense of ambivalence that displays itself as an oscillating relationship with SM. The experience of a push and pull can be illustrated

in Dan's representation of his relationship with SM through the fantasy-animated film *Frozen*, inspired by the fairy tale 'The Snow Queen'. Dan represented himself as one of the female protagonists who undergoes a constant struggle between two male characters. The struggle for Dan as symbolised through the actions of these two characters is between what he experiences as good and what he experiences as detrimental, deceptive and even hurtful about SM (appendix 6.7, I6). In thinking about these dynamics, the psychodynamic interpretation proposed by Kowalski and Bhalla (2018) of the film *Frozen* demonstrates a representation of various intrapsychic conflicts along with ambivalent relationships, including the illustration of their successful resolution. It is striking, therefore, that Dan uses this same metaphor to illustrate his relationship to SM as similar to that of a struggle between opposing characters, which, these authors would suggest, represents ambivalence.

When reflecting on the narratives of participants, one could speculate that a potential manifestation of ambivalence through the 'double-edged sword' theme can be perceived not as a pathological state but perhaps as part of the human predicament shaped by this new collective field. The participants' narratives illustrated how the world of SM can offer something unique, whilst also simultaneously take something else away; with each reward there seemed to be an associated cost and it was therefore perceived to be composed of both attractive and problematic features. Therefore, an engagement with SM might produce ambivalence for the participant because of the difficulty to reconcile its costs with its rewards, being unable to decide which is dominant or being unable to let go of one or the other.

Some of the clinical implications around ambivalence entail an exploration of how a participant relates to SM including the polarities that can emerge; in order to attain a deeper underlying sense of how the client feels about themselves and their engagement with SNSs. It means being open as a therapist to look at the inconsistencies and to focus on what the person gains in their involvement rather than concentrating solely on the deficits. In working with a client who appears to be struggling with a sense of ambivalence around their experiences within these platforms, it would be important to validate as opposed to pathologise their experiences. A therapist may also chose to validate the numerous intricacies that are embedded within the phenomenon of SM, that may induce both approach and avoidance tendencies. Allowing a client to gain an enhanced perspective can involve providing them with a space to reflect on the complexities; looking at the push and pull dynamics, which then allows them to gain clarity on their tacit understandings and to work through some of the tensions that may be ensuing.

If an individual inhabits an ambivalent scenario on a daily basis, the question that then arises is: what are the implications for the individual's experience of and sense of the self? For example, several participants became aware of shrouded aspects of their selves and others that emerged within the virtual realm (Ivy: "destructive part of your personality"). In response to the interview question of whether Ivy feels there is a difference in how she experiences herself online in comparison to offline, she stated: "Yeah…I don't like my online self". This may produce a certain level of discomfort with how she may feel within herself and

this leads to questions around how the different facets of the self are experienced and integrated. Exploring the dynamics of an individual's involvement with SM entails a focus on underlying dynamics, which may operate as dilemmas; and initially these may just skim on the surface. However, there is the potential to feel entrapped in the dynamics and this may generate further discomfort; so a space to articulate polarised thoughts and feelings can bring these into awareness; so that approaches to unpack and resolve what is arising can be worked through.

4.7 Directing Attention to Specific SM Activities

4.7.1 Passive Use

Recent research has indicated that the impact of the use of SNSs on users' mental health depends more on 'how' SM is used as opposed to 'how much' (Primack et al., 2018). The findings of the present study support the recommendation that in order to better understand the emotional effects of SM use with a view to providing clinical recommendations, research should focus on the effects of specific SM activities (de Vries et al., 2018; Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Wright et al., 2013). The majority of participants made distinctions in the manner in which they utilised SNSs by separating their experiences into 'active' or 'passive' use. Previous research suggests that SNS usage can be dichotomised into passive and active forms of use (Deters & Mehl, 2013; Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, & Buxmann, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015). Studies have shown that passive patterns of use involve observing people's photos and statuses on SNSs primarily without attempts to socially interact or connect with others (e.g. scrolling through news feeds) (Tosun, 2012). On the other hand, active use involves actions that enable direct interactions and communication with others such as posting photos and updates (Verduyn et al., 2015). Participants held similar perceptions in terms of what they felt represented more passive and active uses of the platforms, with the majority associating active use with actively posting content online. Thus, while SNSs consist of communities of individuals and are designed to facilitate interpersonal interaction, an engagement with these sites can be a one-person activity and not necessarily a relational one (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016).

The sub-theme 'recognition - social comparison' helped illuminate some key experiences that fell under these dichotomised uses of the platforms. Similar to studies by Haferkamp and Kramer (2011), Chou and Edge (2012) and Fox and Moreland (2015), the findings of this study illustrated that the majority of participants engaged in social comparison. Many participants also expressed an awareness of a positivity bias on SNSs, where users have the ability and tendency to present the most positive aspects of themselves and their lives (de Vries, Möller, Wieringa, Eigenraam, & Hamelink, 2018; Lin & Utz, 2015; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). On numerous occasions, these participants highlighted that people only post the "positive" (Zoe) or "good" (Aria) aspects of their lives. Through the process of scrolling and looking into the lives of other people, they would begin to compare themselves to others, which could lead to

negative self-evaluation and/or dissatisfaction with their lives. These findings were reflected in the literature, which has similarly shown that as a result of the positive self-presentation bias on SNSs, these sites are infamous for giving the impression that other people have better and happier lives (Chou & Edge, 2012). Due to this, de Vries and Kühne (2015) and Lee (2014) have found that SM users, particularly those who engage in passive uses of SNSs, may experience negative social comparisons, leading to negative perceptions about the self.

Appel et al. (2015) and de Vries and Kühne (2015) indicated that upward social comparison is almost inescapable because the information presented on SM platforms is positively skewed. As a result, individuals who use SNSs passively may experience social comparisons that are harmful to their perceptions about self-esteem and self-worth, which can elicit negative emotions (Jordan et al., 2011; Lee-Won, Shim, Joo, & Park, 2014). Similar studies have also shown that those who passively use SM are more likely to make poor self-evaluations (Chen et al., 2016), and feel that others are doing better as well as feel inadequate (Jordan et al., 2011). The results of this study are in line with the growing research literature that has associated passive use of SNSs with negative implications on self-esteem, self-evaluation and moods**.** Furthermore, certain patterns were noted based on several participants' experiences, opening up a new perspective of how this form of involvement with SM induced a sense of passivity within themselves.

The potential detrimental impact of engaging in social comparison through a passive use of the platforms may be of particular significance when considering those individuals who have difficulties regulating self-esteem. From a Kohutian view, such difficulties are a result of injuries arising from experiencing repeated selfobject failures (Lessem, 2005). Muchnick and Buirski (2016) presented an anecdotal case of a client who started to use FB after separating from his wife. They noted that his experiences of monitoring other people's profiles, including a former partner, had triggered archaic feelings of being unlovable and feelings of worthlessness. The pictures made him feel as though everyone had been successful in their lives and that his unsuccessful relationship along with his current feelings of loneliness were evidence of a sustained inadequacy (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). The authors note that FB has the potential to perpetuate an individual's painful organising principles and affective states that remain unintegrated (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). When working with a client with a vulnerable self- structure, as indicated by difficulties with self-regulation such as maintaining self-esteem (Lessem, 2005), it would be of value for the therapist to be curious about the client's use of SM. In particular, one avenue of enquiry would be to explore whether the client uses SM passively as this may provide an insight into any potential negative impact that this form of engagement might be eliciting on the client's self-esteem.

What is interesting in the findings is that despite the awareness that many participants had regarding a positive self-presentation bias on SNSs, they would still experience social comparison. Aria asserted that this can happen to the "strongest" because it's "constant" with SNSs as there are so many images coming

at once. Findings in the literature have indicated that continuous engagement in passive use may result in feelings of annoyance, exhaustion, overload, and irritability (Koroleva, Krasnova, Veltri, & Günther, 2011; Maier, Laumer, Eckhardt, & Weitzel, 2012). Experiencing feelings of annoyance while scrolling through SM resonated with both Zoe and Astrid. The notion of 'information overload' also emerged within the narratives of two participants in relation to their experience of scrolling, where they reported that they would often feel overwhelmed with the amount of content they were viewing. For example, Zoe described the process of passively consuming content as "information overdose", whilst Ivy voiced that it's "too much information everyday…it's overwhelming". She reported that there is always going to be a "negative trigger" while scrolling because "you're consistently bombarded with events, people, places, and things…you're bombarded with every single sensory thing on the planet".

Sagioglou and Greitemeyer (2014) found that continuous passive SNS use could incite feelings of not doing anything meaningful, which can lead to negative moods. Within the sub-theme 'numbing versus stimulating' participants described their experiences of passive use as "mindless" (Zoe), numbing and a waste of time (Astrid, Aria, Zoe), with some participants expressing a desire to replace these activities with ones that were more rewarding, creative or inspiring. Overall, there was a strong sense in some of the participants' accounts that for the most part, passively using SNSs was not perceived as a valuable or meaningful use of their time. The perception that these activities were not meaningful and a waste of time could further contribute to the negative emotions that these participants described experiencing during or following passive use of these sites. This expands on recent research that has illustrated that it is not the frequency but rather the quality of SNS experiences that places users at risk for negative mental health outcomes (Davila et al., 2012; Feinstein et al., 2013).

Brown's (2014) research addressing numbing behaviours explores the line between comfort or pleasure and numbing. She highlights that when people are feeling low, alone, anxious, or disconnected from others, endless time spent online can feel like comfort when in reality, it can often represent a type of numbing out. Zoe expressed that her habit of "mindless scrolling" would be coming from "the need" to "numb" her brain, whilst also being fed by certain situations in her life where she felt "dissatisfied", "lonely", and was "not having interesting or stimulating experiences". She described using SM in this way as a "self-sabotaging tool", highlighting that "it doesn't allow you to escape it" (your current state) but "just reinforces it". Astrid expressed that if she had a chance to see a psychologist to discuss any personal concerns about her relationship with SM, she would focus on her "time wasting" related to scrolling and observing content on SNSs. She described the process as a "numbing rhythm" of taking in a lot of information that "doesn't feel like genuinely comforting" and that is either "fed by a sort of depressive" feeling or "leads" to her feeling "depressed".

Zoe and Astrid's reflections open up an important point of consideration concerning the likelihood that passive use and subjective wellbeing have a more complex relationship than the simple unidirectional

relationship previously reported in a number of quantitative studies. While Shensa, Sidani, Dew, Escobar-Viera and Primack's (2018) study among a group of adults found that more passive forms of SM use contributed to depressed mood, the results of Wang, Gaskin, Rost, and Gentile's (2018) study showed a reciprocal relationship between passive SNS use and subjective wellbeing. The authors state that individuals with negative moods might use SNSs passively as a means to escape their difficulties. Both Zoe and Astrid's experiences point to an intricate relationship between negative feelings leading to passive use as well as passive use resulting in negative feelings.

Zoe indicated that when she is in a "good" or "creative place" her use of SM "changes"; "the mindless scrolling decreases" and she starts to become "a little bit more intentional" about "content creation" and using the platform for "spreading content" in a targeted manner. Thus, there is a suggestion that her use of SM becomes more active. Wang et al. (2017) stated that passive use could initiate a negative cycle; they suggest that becoming more engaged and active on SNSs might help mitigate this cycle. While similarities have been found with positivist studies, this study highlights the various complexities interlinked within the relationship between passive use and negative experiences. The findings offer an original contribution as they reveal the numbing effect associated with passive use and how this shapes these participants' experience of themselves. The extracts suggest that while some participants report experiencing negative moods as a result of passive use (e.g. social comparison, information overload); they might also be motivated to use SNSs passively in order to escape negative feelings or to even induce a numbing effect (Zoe). Within a counselling context, an awareness of the potential of this type of activity to induce or reinforce negative moods or feelings is highly recommended. Furthermore, the results highlight that the therapist should have a wider awareness of the underlying rationales driving this type of behaviour. It may induce or reinforce negative moods or feelings, particularly through the process of social comparison, however as illustrated in the accounts of several participants, there may also be other rationales existing at a deeper level needing to be explored.

4.7.2 The Experience of Scrolling

For some participants, experiencing a loss of control also manifested with regard to their passive habit of scrolling, which they reported experiencing as addictive. Similarly, LaRose, Lin, and Eastin (2003) interpreted perceived addiction as a sign of habit formation; a sense of losing control over one's behaviour online. Despite the negative stimulation they experienced whilst in the process of scrolling, many participants wondered why they continued to pursue this habit (e.g. Zoe: "it doesn't make sense at all", Ivy: "I always come back to it - why I don't know"). The literature indicates that SNSs can have addictive properties (Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014) and studies have shown that it is well established that individuals participate in behaviours that are experienced as addictive regardless of their negative effects (Verduyn et al., 2015).

Participants who experienced scrolling as addictive used words such as “trance” (Ivy) and “hypnotic” (Aria) to describe their experiences. Prado (2016, p.19-20) asserts that scrolling offers a repetitive action that can have an almost mesmerising effect on the user; with the downside being that he or she is dedicating time that might be better used on something else. He notes that the ‘act of scrolling’ is an activity in itself, yet there is an endless nature to such experiences; with a constant flow of content being continuously added to the feed, there is no chance for even a momentary sense of satisfaction (Prado, 2016). The absence of a sense of satisfaction within the experience brings to mind several participants’ descriptions of scrolling as mindless and numbing.

Research has shown that one of the indicators associated with potentially problematic SNS usage is mood modification, which refers to the subjective experiences individuals report as a result of SNS use (Griffiths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014). Mood modification is when an individual engages in activities as a means to stimulate mood alterations or paradoxically a feeling of “escape” or “numbing” (Griffiths et al., 2014, p.121; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The notion of mood modification may resonate with Zoe’s experiences, as she describes engaging in scrolling as a means to numb her brain as well as in order to “escape” certain aspects of her current reality. All participants who experienced scrolling as addictive voiced that they would like to focus on this aspect of their experiences online if they hypothetically had a chance to speak with a psychologist. Astrid reported that she would want to discuss her time-wasting via passively scrolling and consuming content on SNSs; and how “maintaining a numb inactive” state through these activities “stands in for anything else” she could do instead.

Research has demonstrated that there is a fine line between regular non-problematic habitual use and problematic and potentially addictive use of SNSs (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Nonetheless, when referring to an ‘addiction’ terminology, it is important to take into account the controversy arising within the research field regarding the possible ‘overpathologising’ of everyday living including the increasing classification of engagement in a extensive range of leisure activities and common behaviours as potential behavioural addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). The findings of this study demonstrate the importance of understanding participants’ own perceptions of their experiences of those specific SNS activities that they describe as “addictive” or that they report feeling “addicted” to. Understanding their world from their perspective enable us to locate them within their unique ecological environment and gain important insights into their individual choices and how these operate within their lifestyle. Within a counselling context, the results raise an important consideration when working with clients who may express concerns over problematic SNS use; to focus on what it is that a particular SNS activity might represent. For example, Zoe compared her habit of mindlessly scrolling with downing a bottle of wine, expressing that when something inside her needs to let go of control, scrolling somehow allows her to do that. This recommendation supports existing research that emphasises the primary importance of investigating specific activities that occur on these sites when exploring potential problematic SNS usage (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

In line with the previous findings indicating the negative implications of passive use, this study expands on

the existing research by offering unique insights from several participants into their specific experience of scrolling. One result of this study is that it provides an understanding of the numerous ways that scrolling can be perceived as a major phenomenon. The extracts reveal that there was a persistent pull towards scrolling and a noted difficulty in resisting this activity. While scrolling was providing some form of numbing, it was also inducing a sense of passivity and eliciting negative emotions. This research highlights that the experience of scrolling warrants further investigation within a counselling context in terms of its potential to develop into a mechanism that might be utilised in a maladaptive way; such as to induce a numbing effect and/or as a form of escapism in a manner that is experienced as negative and/or addictive. There is a need for future research to investigate scrolling in more depth using qualitative methodologies as this is a primary activity that is taking place on these sites. Qualitative research can provide further explorations focusing on other people's motives and experiences of scrolling. A greater understanding of this form of SM interaction can then be obtained.

4.7.3 Active Use

Research has shown that active use of SNSs may be advantageous for users in terms of developing and maintaining relationships as well as decreasing feelings of depression, loneliness or stress (Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Lee et al., 2013). Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012) stated that active posting of photographs and information on SNSs can meet users' needs for self-presentation as well as a sense of belonging. Burke et al. (2010) found that in contrast to users who viewed other users' profiles but did not provide content themselves, those who were actively engaged with FB and posted frequently had higher social capital. Ella voiced that on SM, she is able to present and express herself the way she wants to be, while Dan voiced that he liked to share unique experiences such as his holidays, by updating his social network through photos and status updates. This was in contrast to some of the other participants who reported that they were not regularly actively posting content related to their personal lives online.

While Ella experienced an increased ability to express herself online, she also highlighted several concerns in relation to her active use of SM. She voiced that her "biggest fear" was of any photo of herself "going viral". Ella expressed feeling "nervous", "very scared" and "very reluctant" to send any pictures of herself through SM to even her "closest friends" without her headscarf. This was due to a fear that they might accidently send it to someone else and that it could go viral. Due to this, she continues to make an active effort to ensure the accessibility to her profile is "very limited" to only those she trusts and posts no pictures of her face. Despite these efforts, she revealed a fear still remains that a photo of her could go viral and therefore she would be exposed publicly. She stated that she would like to address these concerns with a psychologist. Furthermore, Ella highlighted a number of times that she "can't explain why" this fear still remains despite taking numerous precautions ("I've explained to myself – like there's no way of anything going viral…you've stuck to people you can trust – but there's still that fear in me").

Ella also noted that she worries that something about her political or religious views might also somehow

be revealed and then interpreted online in a “negative way”. Unlike Dan, she has held back from expressing her political or religious views on SM, as she fears she may be perceived as an extremist because of her cultural background. She has a heightened trepidation about being labelled a fundamentalist Muslim due to what is taking place in the wider political context. Ella is a woman but gender is not just a single category; she is also shaped by her ethnicity, social class and religious outlook within a series of intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1989). These schemas can be brought into the SM realm and may influence this participant’s experience of herself in relation to other people, along with her engagement with these sites.

Another issue Ella raised was around the ability to recover posts (“if I post something, it’s gonna stay there forever – people can access it anytime”). Similar to Ella, several female participants pointed to the persistence affordance by noting that they were uncomfortable having their opinions online for anyone to access at anytime. Ella correspondingly highlighted that she does not want to feel any “level of vulnerability”, by allowing people to “attack” her online. As a result, she has held back from expressing anything that could be construed as contentious on SM and “avoids posting anything” she knows will place her under “cyber danger”. Due to the wider cultural context, Ella appears to be monitoring herself more consistently and making adjustments around how she engages with these platforms. For her, there may be an underlying sense of feeling a need to be ever alert and perhaps a sense of self under threat, despite her ongoing efforts to take extra precautions. The question that arises is how this then shapes her actual experience of herself and how she feels within herself. Meanwhile, Dan, who is a white Canadian male, was often engaged in lively debates online and felt the need to “stand up for” his political beliefs and ensure his voice is heard, perhaps fearing far fewer ramifications. There is a clear contrast between Dan and Ella in terms of how they communicate and express themselves on SM. These differences indicate the need to consider the gender and cultural dynamics that can influence the experience of the self in relation to others within the context of SNSs.

When it came to the expression of one’s views on SM; most of the female participants stated that they were uncomfortable expressing their political views online. Although there has been some research indicating that men are more likely to express their political opinions on SNSs (Lutz, Hoffman & Meckel, 2014; Vochocova, Stetka & Mazak, 2016), other studies have found no gender difference (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014). Research has shown that on SM, social maintenance tends to be especially valued by women, whereas men may find more worth in attaining information (Bode, 2017; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Political engagement online is not dependent solely on a political motivation, as it can also be based upon maintaining interpersonal relationships; those deemed integral within SM (Bode, 2017). Studies have shown, that some people are offended by political content and dislike political debates on SM (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). Women may have a tendency to post less political content to avoid political confrontation in order to sustain their relationships with significant others in their social network (Bode, 2017).

In the analysis, it was noted that the majority of female participants avoided expressing their political views because they wanted to avoid getting into any public arguments (Astrid: "I feel kind of blocked by a fear – about what might come back to me – like even if it's in a space that's all my like liberal peers – like I don't want to get into an argument online about something"). In contrast, Dan voiced that he has blocked people due to engaging in political arguments online, to the point where he has "lost friends on FB". He noted recently that he has had to block people he knew "distantly" as well as friends he thought he "knew well" due to arguments over Brexit and Donald Trump. Rainie and Smith (2012) state that a reoccurring theme on SM is that users are 'unfriended' because friends in their networks find their posts objectionable. The above discussion highlights that any desire to post an active expression of opinion potentially requires being balanced against how others may become offended by its content. Whilst it may be empowering to vocalise the self as Dan does, there may also be numerous ramifications to relationships as a result. The findings along with the literature, highlight how cultural context and gender can influence a user's way of relating and engaging with these platforms, as well as how a user's very sense of self can be shaped differently depending on these factors.

Recognition emerged as an important sub-theme concerning how participants experienced the functions and motivations behind active uses of the platform; helping to illuminate the intricacies involved in their perceptions and experiences of engaging in the process of posting content on these sites. From a relational psychoanalytic perspective, Balick (2013) states that the underlying motivation to relate on SNSs and in real life is a desire for recognition. While the concept of recognition is multidimensional and can hold various meanings, the term 'recognition' and the notion of being active on SM for 'recognition' were represented in the findings. Indeed the desire for recognition is not unique to the environment of SNSs. Benjamin (1988, p. 15) states that recognition is an overarching concept fundamental to human existence and which appears in many forms:

> "To recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar…love."

When considering the verbs in the excerpt above, Balick (2013) asserts that we can start to sense the significance of recognition within the context of SNSs: each verb can be seen to be activated, mediated, pursued, denied, and returned across these sites. For example, the simple click of the 'like' button can be used to validate, acknowledge, affirm, accept, find familiar and appreciate (Balick, 2013) – several qualities of the mirroring self-object function (Li, 2016). The mirroring selfobject need refers to the need to feel recognised and affirmed, to feel appreciated and accepted, particularly when displaying something valued about oneself (Lessem, 2005). Kohut understood the need to exhibit and that to be mirrored, one needed to be seen (Philips, 2016). Displaying and sharing content about oneself is commonplace on SM, making this form of use appealing for an individual attempting to glean validation and mirroring selfobject

experience in an effort to affirm one's value and make one feel recognised (e.g. by posting content to accumulate 'likes' and favourable comments) (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Several participants conveyed that their motivations to post content on SM were to attempt to fulfil a need to be recognised, validated, affirmed or acknowledged. Yet the analysis demonstrated that these participants displayed caution with regards to the value of this fulfilment within the context of these platforms. Balick (2013, pp. 22-23) asserts that it is the ease and effortlessness of the click of the 'like' button that offers access to experiences of recognition, yet at the same time, "risking narrowing the emotional bandwidth of the very materiality of recognition". He states that recognition is being "traded like a commodity" across SNSs and it is evident that the drive for recognition is built into the very purpose of these sites (Balick, 2013, p. 23).

Amy felt that "the type of environment" created on SNSs was "very much based on the validation of others" and that the "functions" that these sites give you are "created to encourage that kind of behaviour". Yet she emphasised that "seeking validation from others" online is something she now tries to "stay away from", describing it as "numbers driven" (based on the number of 'likes'), a "slippery slope" and a "dangerous concept to your own self-esteem". Amy expressed the danger in this process; in particular, depending on receiving 'likes' and comments online in an attempt to boost self-esteem. She stated that when you step back to think about "the value" that you "assign" yourself "through the number of 'likes'" you receive, you realise that "it doesn't really mean anything". She conveyed that this used to have a stronger impact on how she feels about her self but latterly, now: "you try not to let it affect you".

Amy expressed that when she sees users posting content of themselves for validation and for the "sake of boosting their self-esteem", she tries not to "feed that need to boost self-esteem" through SM. She offered an example of a friend's younger sister who progressively began to get "really skinny" and ended up developing anorexia. As she was getting slimmer, 'likes' were accumulating on her existing photos and she began to "upload loads of photos of herself". Amy noted that "you could see where this all came from" so she chose not to add to "that kind of cycle" by liking her photos. She expressed that she thinks, "a lot of people online decided not to like that…not to feed the idea that how she is right now is healthy or a good thing". From a self psychology perspective, this form of engagement with SNSs that Amy outlined and viewed as an attempt to bolster self-esteem, may point to an underlying search for selfobject mirroring experience. Yet looking at this more deeply, this process may be accompanied by an element of uncertainty and unpredictability due to the way those who provide feedback respond to a user's post. For example, as in the above example, Amy noted that several people she knew decided not to 'like' this user's pictures and found them problematic.

Under the theme 'perception of control versus loss of control', several participants noted that they experienced a loss of control in relation to how other people might respond or react to a post.
When it came to posting content of herself online, Amy noted: "you can't control who is going to perceive you or how they're going to perceive you". She contrasted this with showing aspects of herself to others

offline: “you very much consider the person first and you choose the person…and you almost anticipate how they might react or…consider you as a person.” Other people’s reactions and responses cannot be easily predicted online and a reliance on boosting self-esteem through posting content on SM in the hope of obtaining favourable responses can be a risky strategy. Kaufman (2005) provides a clinical case study of a woman whose use of a profile she created of a more sexual version of herself online illustrated her efforts to integrate disavowed sexuality and attempts at self-esteem regulation; which had oscillated dependent on the responses from others. There appears to be an interplay between the intentions of the individual poster and how these are made sense of by others in a constant dialectic, which cannot be foreknown.

Ivy stated that her motivations to post incorporated a need for validation, which she labelled as “very dark”, reporting that the “validation that you get when you get good comments and ‘likes’ on your page - it means nothing”. She highlighted that the kind of validation that is provided on SM doesn’t last long. The fleeting nature of experiencing validation and affirmation through SM was similarly reflected in Hammond’s (2017) qualitative study under the sub-theme ‘transient happiness - long lasting distress’. Several participants voiced that the effect of the positive experiences of validation and affirmation through the ‘likes’ and comments they received did not last long, especially when compared to the impact of the negative experiences they encountered on SM.

On reflection of the above findings, a search for affirming and validating self-experience on SM can link to a healthy striving to relate to and be recognised by others (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Muchnick and Buirski (2016) state that whilst the intentions for in-person and online pursuits can stem from similar selfobject needs, the processes differ qualitatively. By drawing on a relational perspective, an attempt to be seen in the absence of the fullness of face-to-face affective experiences may assist a user to soothe some difficult emotions by providing a short-lived ‘boost’ of validation (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Nonetheless, they state that the impact of being validated on SM can quickly dissipate, as there are hidden parts of the self that still long to be understood and transformed. Transformation of experience arises within a “rich relational context” where an individual’s affect states and core organising principles can be empathically attended to and understood so that old patterns of expectations are challenged and new self-experience can be actualised (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016, p.148).

Miller (1992) notes that validation that takes place outside of a valued selfobject relationship is often transitory, offering momentary self-enhancing value and may not provide the potential for strengthening the self. Amy outlined that her use of SM has changed over time; as opposed to posting photos in an effort to obtain validation from her social network, she now feels she looks to her close friends offline more, “to you know – get that validation from them”. Amy’s extracts may suggest that obtaining validation from intimate friendships is more fulfilling. There may be some parallels from the above literature with the current findings in the sense that Ivy and Amy may not be deriving meaningful value from the validation

they receive through responses to their SM posts.

As shown in the analysis, Zoe felt that the motives behind posting personal content of oneself on SNSs were to fulfil a desire to be affirmed and recognised yet she voiced that ultimately, she did not think it's fulfilling in that way. She outlined the more intimate interactions she experienced when sharing updates about her life tailored to a specific person, contrasting this to sharing with a broader audience on SNSs, many of whom were not close to her. She noted that unless you have that "personal connection" with someone, "people are judging you". Like Zoe, Ivy highlighted her concern that an audience will judge the content you offer about yourself, noting: "you have to be very cautious about everything you put out for people to see", because "people are going to judge you". Therefore, each post is mediated by an audience who interpret it within their own frameworks and this leads to the likelihood of the post being judged. This is very much linked to the lived experience of the self as many users share private aspects of themselves and their lives with a public audience on SNSs with varying levels of friendship and these self-presentations are made vulnerable to judgement.

As mentioned, some research has highlighted the advantages of being active through posting content on SNSs. Yet when it comes to the underlying motivations behind posting personal content, there is a suggestion that some of these participants' needs are not perceived as being fulfilled through SM. This was not necessarily the case for every participant, however; for example, Ella's accounts suggested that her self-expression and self-presentation were key motivating factors that precipitated her to post content. The findings under the sub-theme 'recognition – social comparison' open up certain questions about the value that is derived from attempting to attain validation and mirroring experience within the context of these platforms. This requires thinking about in relation to the current findings and Muchnick and Buirski (2016), who state that while an effort to attain validation and mirroring experience online can offer momentary relief or a fleeting 'boost' in validation, it is non-transformative. They argue that the self-experience acquired from FB can be potent but is transient, if the relationship is not pursued offline. The transitory nature of the validation experienced online was noted by both Ivy and participants in Hammond's (2017) study. This opens up an avenue for future research to further explore drawing upon a qualitative methodology.

In addition, several participants in the present study also raised various points that provide an insight into their need for recognition and validation, whilst these needs may also remain unfulfilled within this form of interaction. These included their perceptions around social judgement, as Zoe stated: "when you put yourself out there to be recognised, there's that aspect that people are gonna judge you". There was also a loss of control around how an audience might respond to anything that is posted, which might generate unpredictability concerning the type of feedback that might come back. For example, Ivy described posting a photograph of herself next to some elephants whilst she was on holiday, which triggered numerous unanticipated hurtful comments relating to her role in promoting animal abuse. She stated that

her initial intention was to show that she spent time with these animals and how beautiful they were but that the photos were taken out of context. This was because people were unaware of how the elephants were being treated. Ivy stated that certain people will always find something to get offended about when you post something publicly on SM.

Another consideration arises in relation to individuals who have suffered from repetitive, traumatic selfobject failures with regards to the mirroring need. The self psychology model holds that these individuals may exhibit a primitive grandiosity which results in a need for continual mirroring experience and a hypersensitivity to any indications of criticism or disapproval (Lessem, 2005). Certain individuals who have suffered from frustrations in this critical selfobject need may look to the realm of SM in an effort to fulfil unmet mirroring needs. The absence of nonverbal and contextual cues in cyberspace (including the potential for misinterpretation), along with the potential element of being on the receiving end of a social judgement may mean that certain forms of feedback provided (or lack thereof) can be perceived as a sign of rejection. According to self psychologists, such individuals are prone to react to any signs of rejection or criticism with rage and shame (Summers, 2014). This indicates that an exploration of the SM environment within a clinical context may inform the practitioner of another path that might be leading to frustrations in the fulfilment of this selfobject need.

The findings raise some considerations in relation to the potential implications for the transformation of experience. While several participants were aware of their needs behind posting content, some of their extracts highlighted the contrast in their experiences of sharing with a diffuse audience with sharing within a targeted, one-to-one intimate exchange. The findings point to a number of unique facets that arise within a SM realm creating a distinctive ambience. This can be reflected on to contrast the dynamics of this space from the validation and recognition that can be attained within an intimate friendship or a therapeutic relationship. This potentially poses some challenges to consider in relation to SM's transformative potential when exploring this form of interaction.

The reflections with reference to the findings point to the need for further explorations of these ideas within a qualitative framework, as they remain speculative. With additional research, other vistas can be opened up and looked at in relation to some of the questions raised in this study around validation and mirroring experiences within a SM context. This is warranted in order to gain an enhanced understanding around how users experience the process of posting personal content on these sites. Several of those same participants also expressed that they valued privacy or identified themselves as private people. This raises important considerations concerning the rewards that people may or may not experience when sharing private aspects of the self in the public realm; highlighting the need to bring to light the transformation of existing experiences of intimacy and privacy within the context of SNSs.

4.8 Public Intimacy

In the technological age of SM, intimate lives are increasingly displayed and expressed through SNSs (Martos, 2013). Recent research has shown that the higher ones concerns for privacy, the fewer self-disclosures made on SNSs and the less social capital gained (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010; Krämer & Haferkamp, 2011; Stutzman, Capra, & Thompson, 2011). Under the sub-theme 'perception of oversharing', participants seemed to be negotiating and navigating their feelings around privacy, intimacy and disclosures on SNSs. Zoe stated that she still resists publicly sharing private information about herself on SM, as the privacy of intimate moments is a "value" for her. Yet she expressed that not doing so does make her feel "kind of socially isolated" from her online community. She acknowledged that on the rare occasions when she shares information that is a bit more personal, it "sparks more conversation and connections" from people in her network that "reach out" to her. However, she stated that it can also feel like she's just putting herself "back on the map", voicing that being more active through posting more personal content is also a way to "stay on the radar" of her online community. This brings to mind the "social pressure" she reported feeling in relation to keeping up with this "new language" of "sharing" in order to continue to communicate with her virtual community.

Petronio (2002) asserts that the choices made with regard to a privacy-related decision, such as whether to disclose information or not involves a risk-benefit calculation. The degree of openness on SNSs entails a consideration of the anticipated benefits (e.g. relationship development) (Kezer, Sevi, Cemalcilar, & Baruh, 2016) and risks (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Literature has suggested that in order to gain relational benefits from SNSs, active disclosure beyond filling in one's profile is essential (Ellison, Vitak, Steinfield, Gray, & Lampe, 2011). Baym (2010) asserts that on SNSs, self-disclosure is necessary and encouraged as a means to promote and sustain existing relationships as well as to develop new relationships. Moreover, Vitak and Kim (2014) state that on SM platforms, users are encouraged to participate in one-too-many public forms of self-disclosure more so than private one-to-one disclosures.

Research has shown that despite the proclaimed benefits, there are risks associated with self-disclosure, particularly within SM contexts. These include impression management risks, loss of privacy (Ma, Hancock, & Naaman, 2016) and interpersonal-based risks (e.g. social rejection) (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Self-disclosure on these platforms are further complicated by 'context collapse' (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), which can be problematic when disclosing to an unintended audience (Ma et al., 2016), as different social contexts offer different norms of behavior (Martos, 2013). In a qualitative study by Vitak and Kim (2014), participants underlined how the risk of social rejection including complaints of oversharing could impede on disclosure decisions, particularly those linked to interpersonal relationships. The present study offered perspectives from the experiences of recipients, with findings indicating that some participants experienced negative emotions (e.g. annoyance) in response to users who disclosed intimate information in the public realm.

Zoe, Astrid, and Ivy's experiences may resonate with the experiences of participants in Fox and Moreland's (2015) study. The findings suggested that in terms of minor negative experiences in relation to visible posts, participants experienced aggravation with other users perceived misuses of FB. Their reactions to what they perceived as inappropriate content ranged from annoyance (e.g. in response to negative posts from a sulking friend) to shock (e.g. hearing significant news through an impersonal medium like FB) to disgust. Moreover, many of Fox and Moreland's participants endorsed the notion of 'natural boundaries' that exist in relation to how much people should be sharing on FB and commented on their standards concerning what they judged as appropriate self-disclosure (Fox & Moreland, 2015). Some of the assumptions underpinning the sub-theme 'perception of oversharing' also seemed to suggest that the content that is appropriate to share on SM should have boundaries (e.g. Astrid). However, studies have shown that the boundaries of what is appropriate to self-disclose on SNSs can often become blurred due to context collapse (Vitak & Kim, 2014). While context collapse can decrease the costs in relation to interacting with a large audience, it can also increase the risks associated with making a disclosure (Vitak & Kim, 2014).

In terms of disclosing aspects of one's private life on SNSs, Vitak and Kim's (2014) findings indicated that participants often struggled to balance the front and backstage performances as described by Goffman (1959) and that the boundaries were not as clearly defined as they were offline. Anders (2018) highlights that while SNSs offer more controlled self-presentations, the user is unable to take advantage of the expressions that are generated during face-to-face communication. The degree of regulating social feedback diminishes significantly on SM, which may increase the propensity to 'overshare' information (Anders, 2018).

Bazarova (2012) indicates that it is not merely the content of a disclosure that forms interpretation but additionally the context in which it happens. Several participants in Fox and Moreland's (2015) study spoke about violations of context appropriateness. For example, some participants reported feeling stunned and hurt due to hearing important news such as a close friend's engagement through the medium of FB, believing that they should have received private contact from the person themselves. Furthermore, since FB affords broadcasting posts to one's network and connectivity does not differentiate between strong and weak relations, some participants felt that SNSs were an impersonal way to share certain information (Fox & Moreland, 2015). This, too, was reflected in the current study. For example, Zoe expressed that something gets "very lost" "in the "human-to-human connection" when close friends post "public announcements" through FB, where private moments in their lives are shared with an audience consisting of members with varying levels of closeness. She voiced that she would get "annoyed", as she interpreted this as a lack of care on their part to reach out to her privately to update her about their lives, and as such it was not strengthening her friendships. This finding may relate to Bazarova's (2012) findings, which argue that an important factor impacting whether people make judgements about disclosure and intimacy on SNSs is disclosure personalism. This refers to the degree

to which receivers feel the content has been disclosed to them exclusively (Jones & Archer, 1976).

SNSs offer contexts where users can disclose intimate information either nonexclusively (e.g. public wall posts) or exclusively (e.g. one-to-one private messaging) (Bazarova, 2012). In Bazarova's (2012) study, it was found that private disclosures fostered increased perceptions of disclosure intimacy and increased inferences of relational intimacy when compared to public disclosures through wall posts and status updates. The author concluded that private contexts heighten perceived disclosure and relational intimacy, while a public FB context, which allows information to be available to others, diminishes them. Liu and Kang (2017) and Vitak's (2012) studies reported similar findings, where participants perceived public disclosures as less intimate than self-disclosures targeted to someone specific. Similar perspectives were offered by some participants in the current study under the sub-theme 'perception of oversharing'. For example, Astrid voiced that she experiences one-to-one interactions as more intimate and meaningful than seeking support through public disclosures on FB.

Bazarova's (2012) findings also indicated that public intimacy could backfire and diminish social attraction for a discloser, as intimate disclosures in public contexts were perceived as less appropriate than those in private settings. Bazarova and Choi (2014), Bazarova, Taft, Choi, and Cosley (2013) and Utz's (2015) results corroborated these findings. While disclosure is a precursor to relational intimacy, Bazarova (2012) highlights that relational bonding and intimacy may be harder to attain through FB public exchanges due to their reduced intimacy, as judged by a recipient. Comparable findings were depicted in the present study, where some participants' extracts suggested that disclosing to a public audience did not promote any interpersonal intimacy between the sharer and themselves as receivers. For example, Astrid highlighted that when scrolling on her SM feed; she can "know too much about people" in her network but that "really it's not bringing us any closer". Yet an important limitation of Bazarova's (2012) study was that participants did not know the users featured in the fictitious FB profiles that the researchers created. This highlights that future research should consider how the strength of relational ties might moderate the findings (Bazarova, 2012). The present study expands on the findings by Bazarova (2012), offering in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and experiences of disclosing and oversharing among users who are part of their social network.

Togashi (2009, 2012) highlights how the process of self-disclosure as a means to facilitate the capacity for one to find oneself in another can be a significant twinship experience (Kottler, 2015). However, Muchnick and Buirski (2016) note that the sense of twinship that a disclosure through a FB status can offer may be incomplete and transient (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). For example, a user with a vulnerable self-organisation who feels lonely may feel a sense of belonging and connectedness when seeing the digital depiction of the struggles others relay through a FB status (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). An individual may also come across representations of other people's experiences on SM that generates a sense of personal resonance (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Yet in line with the findings, a person's

experience posted in a status update may lack the personalisation that is needed to strengthen a connection between two individuals. A status is often designed to be a generalised comment to one's online community, making the experience not truly a two-person one, since "one-half of the dyad is unaware of the other" (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016, p. 148). The authors highlight that this counters the principle value in twinship, which entails feeling understood and known in a particular space, where there is a sense of relating authentically and a perceived familiar similarity of oneself in a significant other (Muchnick & Buirski (2016). As such, a user trying to have this need met might feel unsatisfied (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016).

Some of the above points may resonate with Zoe, in terms of the contrast she experienced in receiving disclosures through a FB status which she termed a "public announcement", with the experience of disclosing within a targeted, one-to-one context; which she described as entailing mutual sharing along with genuine and spontaneous reactions to one another. As noted, Zoe felt that something gets very lost in the "human-to-human connection" when she sees her close friends posting public announcements of private moments in their lives. This public form of disclosure was not perceived as strengthening her relationship with the discloser.

Zoe described her experiences of scrolling through advertisements and intimate moments that friends were sharing on the same platform, noting that: "there's no way this place allows me to have a deeper connection with myself or other people". She also stated that she feels her scrolling habit increases during times in her life where certain circumstances were contributing to feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction. However, an engagement with SM through the passive observation of other people's public disclosures did not seem to enhance relational bonds for Zoe and potentially even for Astrid; if the relationship is not pursued offline or nurtured through a targeted, one-to-one context entailing reciprocity. In fact, it appeared to elicit negative emotions towards the discloser (e.g. annoyance, anger), as Zoe expressed: "I get annoyed because…I don't wanna post on your public FB post to congratulate you on something as intimate as your baby…or whatever it is".

Similarly, Singh (2018) notes that self-disclosure in a one-to-one context is often reciprocated and can function to enhance relational bonds between people. This is contrasted to disclosing something very personal to an audience on SM, which he notes may be perceived as an impersonal behaviour. Furthermore, online communication is largely asynchronous, which diminishes the context within which a user can reciprocate and reciprocation is not as immediate and direct as in face-to-face interaction (Singh, 2018). Astrid however, discussed a time when she chose to disclose something "somewhat personal" that was upsetting her in a FB status, which elicited a response: "It gave me a sign that someone was showing me attention in some way which kind of made me feel a bit better in the absence of being able to speak to my friend…but like nothing really grew out of that". She then distinguished this from speaking to her friend about what was really upsetting her: "I just think I want something that's more

immediate…although you know we think that SM responses are immediate - I mean immediate and intimate…it wasn't the same as when I actually got hold of a friend on the phone…I almost contented myself with a SM response…so it almost became a kind of response gap". While the response she received in the absence of being able to reach her friend may have offered her some form of comfort, it was not the same as whenshe spoke directly to her friend in a one-to-one context. Singh (2018) reports that public disclosures are more in line with a "broadcast mode of communication" and as a result, are less linked to reciprocal sharing to generate a feeling of connectedness (Singh, 2018, p.125).

The results of Bazarova and Choi's (2014) content analysis of self-disclosure goals indicated that public posts directed at general others were motivated by self-expression and relief from distress as well as social validation; where the reward pursued was the validation of one's self-concept through seeking support and approval from others. This finding chimes with the present study in terms of the reported motivations to publicly post personal information as a means to gain validation. On the other hand, Bazarova and Choi (2014) found that relational development was the main goal of self-disclosure directed at a specific target such as through private messaging. The authors assert that communication through public status updates is more 'self' than 'other' oriented in comparison to targeted wall posts or private messages, as disclosers wish to validate and express themselves more than to connect with others. This finding may further contribute to the notion that relational bonding and intimacy may be harder to attain through public posts on SNSs. When thinking about twinship experience, this opens up a space to reflect on some of the potential challenges that may arise in the fulfilment of this need through this form of interaction, even where some momentary relief is offered.

The results of the present study lend support to and reinforce findings in the literature concerning the potential to experience public disclosures as lacking the personalism of private, targeted interactions in a way that may not promote any relational intimacy between the sharer and receiver and may even result in negative reactions (e.g. annoyance, anger). The common practice of sharing private experiences through public posts where "you have an audience all the time" (Zoe) raises important questions for practitioners to consider in relation to understanding how intimacy, norms, and boundaries are navigated in the online world.

Some participants discussed their experiences of members of their social network who would publicly post content about their problems or more highly sensitive content such as "confessing their suicidal thoughts or their eating disorders" (Astrid). Astrid reported that her "natural tendency" would be to think "very carefully" about whom to share such "intimate vulnerable details with". For Astrid, revealing such vulnerable content openly within the context of these platforms was perceived as destructive to the self. She metaphorically represented the 'devil' in the film *Legend* as the "material at risk of being exposed" publicly on SM; highlighting that she would want to "protect" herself from feeling "shame", "at risk", "vulnerable" or "under attack". This suggests an awareness of the potential risks she may associate with

sharing through public posts online. Research has similarly indicated that increased vulnerability is one of the negative risks linked with self-disclosure on SNSs, particularly in relation to context collapse (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Vitak & Kim, 2014). Aria similarly held reservations about disclosing personal problems publicly and voiced that she does not experience SM as a space to share "problems", "once you start telling people about your bad stuff, no one's interested", "it's not a platform for that".

Several of the female participants' narratives suggested greater caution over sharing personal content with a wider audience online; where concerns were highlighted around the potential risks associated with online disclosure including social judgement. In contrast, such concerns rarely arose in the male participants' recollections. Hew (2011) notes that by divulging on SNSs, users become vulnerable to potential privacy risks. When referring to the literature, some studies have found that women have more concerns over their privacy on SNSs and higher privacy-seeking tendencies when compared to men (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Hoy & Milne, 2010; Pantazis, Lauer, Wiese & Samuels, 2014;Tifferet, 2019). Research has indicated that some of the roots of the gender differences found in privacy concerns can be linked to studies indicating that women have a higher level of risk perception (Gustafson, 1998; Hoy & Milne, 2010; Thelwall, 2011). In Taipale and Farinosi's (2018) study examining self-disclosure and gender differences in Italian university students, the female participants were more concerned than the male participants about revealing any kind of personal information or content.

These findings stand in contrast to gender differences that have emerged in the literature on self-disclosure in face-to-face contexts. In this context, several studies have indicated that women tend to disclose more so than men (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Dolgin & Minova, 1997; Kleman, 2007; Petronio, 2002). Some authors have attributed this variation offline with how men and women are socialised; for example, women being more socialised to be open and expressive (Petronio, 2002). In addition, this variation has also been linked to research indicating that men and women tend to use different criteria in controlling and defining private information (Petronio, 2002). In contrast to the above, other findings examining gender differences in self-disclosure on SNSs have been mixed (Rollero, Daniele, & Tartaglia, 2019). The concept of self-disclosure is complex and multidimensional with several factors becoming important to consider within a SM environment. In addition to gender, this includes thinking about culture, motivation, risk, the type of disclosure made (e.g. basic contact information or sensitive material) and the nature of the relationship to the target(s) of disclosure (Sheldon, 2013; Waters & Akerman, 2011).

Ziegele and Reinecke's (2017) findings suggest that users are less willing to respond to negative public posts than positive ones and favour responding to these negative posts through a private channel. Buehler (2017) asserts that publicly pursuing emotional support on FB may be perceived as inappropriate as doing so regularly violates implicit FB norms in relation to oversharing. In a qualitative study by McLaughlin and Vitak (2012), FB users often signified that posting statuses or wall posts that are too emotional was a violation of implicit norms. Such posts were likely to be interpreted as too much

information or appearing emotionally needy and several participants wished that those friends would seek comfort outside of FB. Liu and Wei's (2018) findings indicated that seeking support publicly on FB shifted participants' attribution of support-seeking goals to perceptions associated with social validation, self-presentation and attention seeking. Some participants in the present study had comparable perceptions regarding people who overshared and disclosed their problems publicly, experiencing it as "too much information" (Ivy) and as a form of negative attention seeking (Astrid and Ivy).

Whilst research has indicated that SNSs may be a desirable channel within which to seek social support (Li, Da Xu, & Zhao, 2015), studies have shown that in order to obtain quality emotional support through FB, users need to engage in effective support-seeking strategies and understand the norms that dictate appropriate behavior within that context (Buehler, 2017). Buehler's (2017) qualitative findings presented in the literature review demonstrated the various support-seeking strategies that participants engaged in as a means to avoid violating implicit norms. Future research would benefit from exploring the effectiveness of such strategies including the use of more diverse samples (Buehler, 2017). This type of research would contribute to the growing literature on attaining social support on these platforms. Given that people with mental health difficulties are increasingly turning to SNSs to seek support and advice (Naslund, Grande, Aschbrenner, & Elwyn, 2014; Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016), this area of research can assist users in attaining the psychosocial benefits that these sites can offer, whilst also understanding and navigating the potential risks. This bears important implications for the field of counselling psychology.

4.9 Key Implications for Counselling Psychology, Research and Wider Society

The findings of the study offer some important insights into the role of SM within these participants' lives, providing a potential guideline for other therapists and researchers to build upon. The results bring to light the vast complexity of individual and relational experiences that are taking place on SNSs and thus, highlight the potential value in exploring the experiences of clients' who utilise these sites within a therapeutic setting (Deschaine et al, 2012). The significant insights into the inner world of participants who are engaged in SM can provide a way of conceptualising a therapeutic intervention by orientating the therapist to potential issues that may emerge with individual clients' experiences.

The findings provide in-depth insights into participants' perceptions of oversharing intimate information in the public realm of SM. As previously discussed, literature has shown that self-disclosure plays a fundamental role in the development and continuance of relationships (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Rains, Brunner, & Oman, 2016) including generating feelings of intimacy (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006). In addition, social support and relationship satisfaction have been found to be important outcomes associated with self-disclosure (Foynes & Freyd, 2013). Nonetheless, consistent with several studies, the results of this study reveal potential counter-effects from the perspective of recipients when

intimate disclosures are shared with a public audience. Self-disclosure that takes place through the public context of SNSs has distinctive aspects in comparison to disclosing in one-to-one settings (Lin & Utz, 2017). While there has been much research looking into the impact of public self-disclosure from a discloser's point of view, less research has explored this phenomenon from a recipient's perspective (Lin & Utz, 2017). The present study paves the way by offering an enriched understanding from the experiences of a number of recipients, including the impact that this type of sharing may have on their interpersonal relationships and their experience of intimacy.

The findings also indicate that while SNS affordances offer a user efficiency and accessibility in reaching one's entire network, when it comes to close relational ties, alternative mediums or more tailored interactions may be more appropriate for communicating certain types of private and intimate experiences. SNSs permit the opportunity to announce important personal experiences or events to both strong and weak ties, yet this form of active use may be counterproductive (Fox & Moreland, 2015). It can be perceived as too impersonal from the perspective of those friends who feel they have more intimate ties with an individual who are then incorporated within a public announcement. As a result, public disclosures may not hold the same implications when it comes to strengthening interpersonal relationships as private disclosures**.**

Burke and Kraut's (2016) findings indicated that receiving targeted, personalised communication from strong relational ties was linked to enhanced improvements in wellbeing, while observing broadcasts made to diffuse audiences and receiving one-click responses ('like' button) were not. They assert that people are more likely to derive relational benefits from online communication if it has been tailored specifically to them. Although disclosing information is necessary as a means to obtain social support (Petronio, 2002), disclosing negative content too frequently or too excessively may lead individuals in a user's social network to retract from offering support (Park et al., 2016). When considering the implications for practitioners working with clients, the potential risks associated with disclosing too much information online and the consequences this generates are important factors to consider. There is a requirement then to think about how to initiate safe boundaries around disclosing sensitive material.

The present study lends support to and expands on existing findings concerning social comparison as a process underlying negative affective consequences of observing SM content (de Vries et al, 2018). While social comparison is not unique to SNSs, it appears that SNSs foster an environment that facilitates continuous opportunities for social comparison (Clark, Algoe, & Green, 2018). As evident in the literature and the research findings of the current study, making comparisons of one's lived experiences with other users curated self-presentations can contribute to a number of negative outcomes (Clark et al., 2018). Given that studies have indicated that social comparison within SNSs is a significant risk factor for anxiety and depression (Feinstein et al., 2013; Lee, 2014; Lup et al., 2015; Steers, Wickham & Acitelli, 2014); raising awareness of the potential negative effects of continuous social comparison through passive use

has significant implications for both practitioners and SNS users.

The results bring to the fore the significance of passive engagement in the form of scrolling as detailed in the accounts of the participants and how this generates negative feelings. In reflecting upon the key findings around scrolling; these are innovative within academic research as the various rationales are discussed from a qualitative understanding and there is a paucity of research investigating this activity in more depth. In thinking about the significance of this finding, it highlights that it cannot just be dismissed by a therapist as problematic without looking at what role it plays in the individual's life. This could include an understanding of whether this activity provides some form of relief. For example, Zoe noted that she was unable to make sense of why she has to have an hour of scrolling through Instagram and then FB before "being able to sleep". She expressed that it is somehow "unwinding" but at the same time "you're registering stuff and having negative reactions to it…I don't know - I haven't made sense of it – I'd like to stop it". Within therapy these dynamics require carefully exploring, in order to understand a client's spur to passively scroll; where seemingly on the surface, participants described it as mindless. Underneath the surface however, deeper currents may be uncovered. On this basis these insights provide a platform for therapists to explore what appears mundane, to look beyond what is being initially presented in order to open up a space to assist the client in gaining more awareness.

The extracts under the theme 'bridge versus loss of connection' indicated that several participants felt that terminating SNS use was expected to lead to feelings of loneliness and/or isolation. According to Kohut, individuals seek to establish a subjective sense of belongingness or 'being part of' a wider community as a means to avoid feelings of seclusion and loneliness (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The pull towards SNSs can stem from a healthy desire to maintain connections with current friends, enhance one's social life and feel a sense of being part of a virtual community (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). Given that SNSs have become an integral aspect of many people's lives, in terms of experiencing activities on these platforms as problematic, the results support recent recommendations that rather than terminating SNS usage, therapy should centre on establishing a controlled use (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). In a qualitative study by Morris and Cravens Pickens (2017), participants described various positive experiences from brief 50-minute sessions of 'unplugging' from the use of different forms of technology including SNSs in the morning or at bedtime. Several participants in the present study reported that their smartphones were their primary source of access to SM and conveyed several attempts to try to stop or decrease their time spent scrolling by keeping their smartphones away from them. There is the potential that exploring controlled use could be used in sessions in the form of therapeutic goals or interventions when certain activities on these sites are experienced as problematic (Morris & Craven Pickens, 2017).

When considering wider societal implications, it is important to move beyond the headline-grabbing and growing 'common sense' assumption of perceiving SM or smartphone addiction as a whole and instead focus on specific SNSs activities that may be experienced as addictive or problematic. The fundamental

aim of research should be to avoid overpathologising common behaviours but rather to raise awareness of potential problematic use and to conduct better quality research to underpin therapeutic practice (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Ongoing research can also assist clinicians in integrating psychoeducation into treatment plans or develop prevention programs in order to educate users to recognise problematic use (Frost & Rickwood, 2017), along with promoting more positive ways of utilising these platforms.

Drawing on a Kohutian stance, an important area of exploration within a clinical context can involve differentiating between SM use that may be experienced as 'addictively organising' and potential transformative use (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). As can be seen in the findings, certain online experiences such as scrolling can be extremely compelling and may perhaps provide a way to unwind, or as some participants noted, a form of numbing. In the case of scrolling, this activity was experienced as addictive and by maintaining a passive position, it becomes a solitary experience and not a relational one (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016). In this way, it can prevent the potential for the transformation of an individual's self-organisation (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016) and may hold negative implications for the experience of the self (e.g. social comparison).

Emerging research continues to explore what can be perceived as compulsive use of SNSs (e.g. Andreassen et al, 2016; Cheak, Goh, & Chin, 2012; Sofiah, Omar, Bolong, & Osman, 2011). Within a counselling context, this can be reflected on to think about what selfobject needs may be underpinning these forms of engagement. The 'antidote' dimension of the transference in the analytic dyad may help shed light on SM use that is experienced as problematic or compulsive. The antidote can be thought of as an experience that temporarily provides a needed response to the individual but offers no alteration in one's self-organisation (Buirski & Haglund, 2001). It functions to deflect painful affect states and can act as a psychological anaesthetic (Sullivan, 2017), by searching for counteracting experiences whilst maintaining the current organisation of experience (Buirski & Haglund, 2001). Since the antidote does not transform painful affects but momentarily offsets them, there is an ongoing need for it and this may be experienced as addictive (Buirski & Haglund, 2001). An important clinical consideration is that the soothing generated by the antidote may shroud the search for genuine selfobject experience that could provide new understanding and the integration and regulation of affect (Muchnick & Buirski, 2016).

A discussion of the findings was undertaken drawing on the theoretical lens of self psychology, including some of the potential clinical implications to consider in relation to selfobject experience within the realm of SM. Individuals are never fully independent of selfobjects, particularly during times of loss, dissatisfaction or extreme stress (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). Adults with a cohesive self-structure can still experience heightened needs for an external provision of selfobject functions in an effort to maintain their self-cohesiveness (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). Since injuries to the self and selfobject experience predominantly take place within a relational setting (Buirski & Haglund, 2001), SNSs can be an important arena where selfobject needs are sought as they can provide convenient, increased opportunities to seek

selfobject experiences. Within a clinical context, a rich amount of revealing information may be missed if a therapist chooses not to explore the meanings linked to a client's relationship to SM and with the technological devices they use to access these platforms (Kaufman, 2005). A therapeutic exploration of a client's SM use might provide insight into a client's selfobject needs and reveal any potential frustrations leading to unfulfilling experiences that are emerging in relation to these needs within the SM environment. Through working together around a client's style of use, strategies and approaches can be devised to make changes and to reflect on ways to adjust the client's use of SM, if needed.

This research explored how the unique aspects of SNSs influenced the participants' experiences of themselves and their interactions with others within these platforms. These distinctive aspects of cyberspace interlinked with the features SNSs offer (e.g. 'like' button) introduce entirely new ways to think about selfobject functions. In the literature search, there was a noted scarcity of research exploring selfobject needs within SNSs, including SM's transformative potential and this is a significant research gap. Muchnick and Buirski's (2016) relay their view that interacting with SM can organise but not recreate the transformative potential of an authentic relational encounter. In contrast, Mann (2019) for example, opens up a space to discuss the possibility that virtual experiences may offer a transformative potential; when they are seen to recognise and respond to the needs of the self. The current study opened up a preliminary space to explore these ideas in relation to the research findings. This included some of the potential challenges that some of the participants were relaying concerning the fulfilment of their needs for recognition and validation and the development of deeper connections with others through this medium. Nonetheless, several participants noted that being connected to SM enabled them to interact with a wider community and connect to like-minded others, helping them to move beyond the constraints of their immediate physical world. In thinking about what has been noted, there is a need for more qualitative research drawing upon Kohut's ideas of selfobject needs with users who are engaging with these platforms. Self psychology appears to be a promising avenue for future research as SM is becoming more encompassing within everyday life and it is continuously evolving and being reshaped as a result.

The findings hold important implications for the field of online counselling and there was an exploration of both the potential challenges and distinctive benefits of interacting through cyberspace. While SNSs and online counselling are distinct, they share several features unique to the medium of the virtual world. For example, an absence of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of responding, disinhibition, and anonymity have been identified in both contexts. This study depicted the potential opportunities (e.g. freedom to express oneself) and drawbacks (e.g. misinterpretation, impact on compassion, empathy and sensitivity, lack of sensory connectedness) afforded by the absence of nonverbal cues in the virtual world. The loss of visual cues also led to a discussion about the disinhibiting aspects of SNSs and how this can lead to the emergence of hidden aspects of the self, which may reveal valuable insights about a client to explore within a clinical context. This implication of the findings is important to consider within an online counselling context. While the disinhibiting effects of SM appear to contribute to the propensity to

overshare, disinhibition can offer a key advantage in the field of online counselling (Suler, 2004). For example, in Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler's (2009) study on online counselling, 'processes of disinhibition' emerged as a sub-theme, where clients seemed to disclose issues more willingly and more regularly in comparison to face-to-face therapy. Stigmatised issues like eating disorders and self-harm appeared to be divulged more often than in face-to-face therapy (Fletcher-Tomenius & Vossler, 2009). Reduced inhibition and the loss of visual distractions can mean that core difficulties are divulged and expressed more openly and freely (Ojo, 2012).

The theme 'virtual versus physical presence' highlighted how the absence of the physical presence of another person allowed certain participants to experience increased confidence and more freedom to express themselves online. Ella in particular, revealed that there was an aspect of safety, which she experienced in being behind a screen. She noted feeling more at ease because others were not "watching" her while she was expressing herself and she was unable to see the reactions of others. Her extracts suggested that she felt more self-conscious expressing herself in the presence of others (e.g. stuttering). In Dunn's (2012) qualitative IPA study with university students and online therapists, low self- confidence and increased self-consciousness were often mentioned as the chief motivation for pursuing online over face-to-face counselling. Participants also discussed how they were thwarted by a sense of shame and fear in engaging in a therapeutic encounter offline. However, accessing therapy in the virtual world offered them anonymity and a sense of security that appeared to assist them in overcoming this (Dunn, 2012).

Ella also voiced that online interactions felt safer since others could not see her with her headscarf, which carries the risk that she might be judged. Liebert, Archer and Munson (2006) assert that the lack of nonverbal communication can be an advantage for those individuals who are sensitive to the presence of others. This may be due to being sensitive to certain social cues that may suggest they are being judged, as this can act as a barrier when seeking face-to-face therapy (Richards & Vigano, 2013). The fear of judgement, social factors that might hinder pursuing professional help (e.g. physical appearance) and the social stigma linked to traditional counselling appear to be reduced online (Efstathiou, 2009). Online counselling may therefore offer particular advantages for certain presentations and clinical populations, however further research is required to investigate the types of presentation issues that would be most suitable for online counselling (Simpson, Bell, Knox & Mitchell, 2005). Nonetheless, the findings of the present study indicated that certain participants felt that the comfort and ease they experienced in interacting with others online did not necessarily translate to offline settings. For individuals who are sensitive to the presence of others, this highlights the potential benefit in considering the use of online therapy as a gateway to facilitating a move to face-to-face counselling when a therapeutic alliance is more established.

The current findings reinforce debates in the literature regarding the potential impact that a loss of nonverbal cues can have on the quality of the relationship. However, the results also indicated that there

are special gains that can be attained through virtual interactions. For example, Zoe could express herself in ways that she was not able to "perform" face-to-face. The use of emoticons facilitated certain expressions for her, allowing her to put someone at ease and exhibit a more "bubbly" personality. In person, she felt she came across as a lot "more serious" and "more intimidating". The present study supports recent recommendations that online counselling should focus on where distinctive advantages can be achieved (Schultze, 2006). As such, the use of advanced technological interaction such as webcams may counteract some of the gains that have been found (Dunn, 2012). Indeed some have argued that online counselling can be considered a new form of therapeutic intervention that requires a distinctive theoretical framework from traditional counselling (Richards & Viganó, 2013). As opposed to perceiving it to be a substitute, where the focus is on how technology influences and mediates the therapeutic processes associated with face-to-face counselling; online counselling could be viewed as an innovative, creative and flexible approach that can support and supplement other forms of intervention (Richards & Viganó, 2013).

For counselling psychologists, it is important to explore when a client's experiences on SNSs may be contributing to his or her presenting issues (Morris & Cravens Pickens, 2017). Practitioners may therefore need to reflect on their clients motivations for engaging with these sites and to then help the client bring to the fore the positive and negative dynamics that result from their engagement. This can assist in approaching their use of these sites in a more beneficial and intentional way, while working with the client to minimise their downsides (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Radovic et al., 2017). Several participants experienced positive aspects to SM, which included positive ways of connecting with others such as maintaining social relationships with others from around the globe and feeling like they were part of a virtual community. Caution should be exercised in assuming that SM primarily has negative implications, at the expense of finding out the positive attributes of SM use for the individual. As such, a constant awareness of the notion of 'double-edged sword' is important as it directs the practitioner to consider both the potential benefits and drawbacks of a client's engagement.

With the growth of SNSs, there is a growing interconnection between people that can cut across the social, cultural and geographical boundaries, as people draw upon a commonality to connect with others (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), individuals are shaped by the ecological environments they have grown up within, but there is also a transcendental position where they can connect beyond cultural norms to likeminded others (Kim et al., 2011; Park & Jun, 2003). However, this commonality can dominate the fact that online interaction does not take place in a cultural void (Kim et al., 2010). It is dependant upon the cultural and social environment where people attain the central norms and values that influence their social behaviours and their experiences in relation to others (Halavais, 2000; Kim et al., 2010; Recabarren, Nussbaum, & Leiva, 2008). In the present study, participants' heritage varied and some of the cultural and gender differences within their narratives were explored. These were drawn upon to help make sense of the findings, highlighting the variances in how some of the participants utilised

specific cultural frames. Culture and gender differences require an exploration and cannot just be assumed; as growing research indicates that users' online experiences and the motivations guiding the use of SNSs and online communication can differ across cultures and gender (Boyd, 2008b, Kim et al., 2010).

In early 2015, over two billion individuals globally had active SNS accounts (Kemp, 2015), highlighting the role of connectivity arising across transnational boundaries. In line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, consideration should be given to the role of SM when exploring the wider systems. Within a therapeutic context, clients' experiences on these platforms and their online presence can be utilised as a valuable and important additional layer to explore. If SNSs are to operate as useful tools that promote nourishing relationships, future researchers in the field of mental health should concentrate on exploring further psychosocial benefits, whilst also thinking about the potential maladaptive behaviours that can emerge through participation (Clark et al., 2018). It is vital to distribute this knowledge to inform policy development and continue to widen our understanding of this area of research.

4.10 Strengths and Limitations

There were several strengths and limitations of this study that are worth mentioning. This research was experiential as it focused upon a small sample in order to gain insight into certain individual experiences; concentrating upon a particular depth to explore a phenomenon. Due to the small sample size, the ability to make wider generalisations is limited. However, the aim was not for these eight participants to be representative of the SM experience. While quantity is sacrificed for depth, this approach offers an enriched understanding, allowing new insights and perspectives to emerge. In terms of individual experience, the social backgrounds of each of these participants shapes how they view and make sense of the world and each individual operates within their own frames of understanding. Participants were recruited from several sources and thus, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity and social and cultural backgrounds. Due to heterogeneous nature of the sample, caution should be exercised when considering the applicability of the results.

My aim throughout the analytical focus was to try to stay true to the participants' words, whilst also exploring potential implicit meanings emerging from the accounts. This allowed me to become aware of and reflect on various antinomies (Billig, 1996) in how individuals made sense of their online experiences (Willig, 2013). Clearly, participants did not have linear thoughts on an issue as they vacillated between polarities. As I became aware of this, I realised I needed to highlight these polarities and account for divergences by exploring how the themes and sub-themes played out in different ways for several participants. These nuances and intricacies among research participants are often unaccounted for in more positivistic queries (Anderson, 2010). However, alternate explorations of the data could have included an IPA approach, as this would allow for more divergence to be accounted for by focusing on the

unique characteristics of each participant in more depth.

Due to the nature of qualitative analysis, variable interpretations will exist (Dollarhide et al., 2012) and the results of this research represent a particular way of making sense of the data (Willig, 2013). Therefore, a limitation is that the data was analysed through my own interpretative lens. In helping me through this process, my research supervisor offered a secondary lens, asking questions about my interpretations of the data and how I could support my findings. This style of questioning helped me work through different variations of my interpretations. To ensure good quality research, several guidelines were followed by Elliot et al. (1999), Williams and Morrow (2009) as well as Yardley (2000), each provided me with a structure and this can be seen as a strength.

In terms of my interviewing style, I had developed an open-ended inquisitive and somewhat naïve style of engaging with individuals, facilitated by embarking upon my therapeutic training. While I was mindful that the interview process is not like a therapeutic session, I had undertaken a person-centred (Rogers 1959) approach within the interviews, which entailed drawing upon warmth, empathy and a non-judgemental attitude. I felt this provided participants with a comfortable space to open up and articulate their experiences with depth, while also potentially minimising any power imbalance.

A final consideration is the transitory nature of human experience, which exists within certain time frames that are always in a process of transformation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted, people are caught up within their own unique ecological systems and these are also shaped by the chronosystem or the role of time as well as by how cultures shift and adapt. As an analysis of experiences, this is both a strength and a weakness as it explores a certain depth when analysing each participant's perception but this is also subject to change and transformation. As such, the results displayed here become a time capsule; marking a distinct period of time in these participants' lives.

4.11 Reflexive Statement on the Research Process

When I first commenced this project, my objective was to efficiently navigate the research process in a 'linear' mode. However, I came to realise that the qualitative research process is 'messy' and without formal structure, whilst still having its own internal structure. The more I fixated upon trying to impose a linear approach upon qualitative research, the more taxing the research process became, as its method became elusive, leading to self-criticism and self-doubt. It was then that I finally learnt to let go and embrace the formlessness of phenomenology as I embarked upon as a "voyage of discovery" (Finlay, 2011, p. 194). The journey was into the unknown, the consciousness, perceptions and experiences of the participants. At this juncture, I realised it was going to take considerable self-reflection to submerge

myself into the world of these participants. In retrospect, it was a gradual immersion into their perspectives and experiences as I learnt to let go of uncertainties by degrees.

As I engaged in the research process, I became aware of my personal weaknesses; in being able to have the confidence to express myself whilst remaining mindful and cautious in representing the participants' voices. This meant balancing my writing and thinking to generate a synthesis that represented my understandings of what was emerging from the research. It was then that this research project began to dominate my social as opposed to just my educational life. I dove deep into the world of qualitative research, exploring numerous debates in the literature. This was followed by the recognition of a new inner strength to vocalise my experiences and reflections, learning more about the depth of phenomenology and other aspects of qualitative research. From this I was able to express these internal understandings and draw upon these when thinking about how to undertake an analysis of the transcripts. It meant visualising the connections between the participants as well as noting the antinomies that arose within each transcript, as nothing was linear. By undertaking this approach, I moved into a deeper analysis of the transcripts and began to gain significant insights into the worlds of these participants. To obtain these insights entailed diving into an unknown, rather than engage with what I already believed to be true. This allowed their voice to emerge as paramount. These are some of my reflections on the overall research process, after looking back to the start of the journey.

4.12 Concluding Comments

This was an exploratory study into a significant contemporary realm: the world of SM and how it shapes perception along with the experience of the self, and the experience of relating to others in a world that does not physically exist. Its objective was to allow participant-generated meanings to be heard. Fox and Moreland (2015) recommend that future research should explore how individuals assess the psychological and interpersonal costs along with the potential benefits of engaging with these platforms. This study offers an in-depth analysis that reflects on this balance; it is a common thread that runs throughout the themes through the double-edged nature of participants' experiences.

This study does not aim to detail any causal claims about the impact of SNSs on mental health and wellbeing. Rather, it seeks to open the dialogue in the field of counselling psychology regarding the complex and varied personal and interpersonal experiences that are occurring within this realm. There are no claims that it encapsulates the total SM experience but what it does do is outline a signpost for practitioners to think about SM no longer as an adjunct to everyday life. It has become central to how people define normality as people either engage within its parameters or reject involvement in immersing themselves within it. The SM field represents a plethora of opportunities as well as pitfalls and minefields. Moreover, instead of passively consuming the media, there is a potential to engage and shape its

agenda. SM offers a major cultural revolution; any therapist working with clients in the 21st Century may find it difficult to avoid SM dynamics as increasingly it has become integral within human identity. The hope is that this research has opened up avenues for future exploration and has contributed to the discourse within the field of counselling psychology in a meaningful way.

5. References

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6. Appendices

6.1 Ethics Approval

Psychology Research Ethics Committee
School of Arts and Social Sciences
City University London
London EC1R 0JD

11th October 2016

Dear Dana Jammal and Marina Gulina

Reference: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 10

Project title: The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Networking

I am writing to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted approval by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Period of approval

Approval is valid for a period of three years from the date of this letter. If data collection runs beyond this period you will need to apply for an extension using the Amendments Form.

Project amendments

You will also need to submit an Amendments Form if you want to make any of the following changes to your research:

(a) Recruit a new category of participants

(b) Change, or add to, the research method employed

(c) Collect additional types of data

(d) Change the researchers involved in the project

Adverse events

You will need to submit an Adverse Events Form, copied to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee ([redacted]), in the event of any of the following:

(a) Adverse events

(b) Breaches of confidentiality

(c) Safeguarding issues relating to children and vulnerable adults

(d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues (a) and (b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than 5 days after the event. Issues (c) and (d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Kind regards

Hayley Glasford
Course Officer
Email: [redacted]

Martin Conway
Chair
Email: [redacted]

6.2 Information Sheet

Title of study: The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Networking

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is interested in examining our experience of ourselves in cyberspace as well as our experiences of how we relate to others on social networking sites.

Upon completion, the results of the study will be submitted as part of a doctoral thesis required for the completion of the Professional Doctorate in Counseling Psychology (DPsych) programme at City University London. The duration of the study will take place over the course of two years.

Why have I been invited?

Inclusion criteria include participants who are:

• Over 18 years old

• Has not been diagnosed with a psychiatric diagnosis and is not currently receiving treatment for a psychiatric problem(s); is not taking any psychiatric medication (this did not include medications for general health concerns)

We are looking to recruit up to 9 participants for this study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw at any stage, without being penalized or disadvantaged in anyway. You are not required to answer any questions that you may feel

are too personal or intrusive. If you are a student, please be assured that participation in this study will not have any impact on your grades.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

- *You will be asked to come in on one occasion for an interview*
- *The research will take place over the course of two years*
- *Please be prepared to come in for 1.5 hours*
- *You will be coming in for an interview which will include obtaining information about you through open-ended questions*
- *The research method used will be an open-ended interview*
- *The research will take place in a room reserved within the City University campus*

Expenses and Payments (if applicable)

- *You will be compensated £9 for your time*

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to come in for an open-ended interview on one occasion. Once you arrive, you will be asked a series of questions about yourself, including questions related to your experience of yourself as well as your experience of others on social networking sites.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no risks involved in the participation of this study.

Possible side effects include:

• Personal discomfort as a result of information you choose to disclose during the interview

Any potential psychological side effects are expected to be minimal without any lasting or prolonged effects.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participation in this research study can potentially offer insight into your own experience of yourself in cyberspace as well as allow for a deeper understanding of how you engage with others on SM sites.

Indirect benefits include contributing more knowledge in this area to the field of psychology by advancing our understanding of the powerful impact that cyberspace has made on our understanding of identity and the ways in which we engage with the world and others.

What will happen when the research study stops?

Only the researcher and researcher's supervisor will have access to a participant's data. When the research stops, all audiotapes, transcriptions of the participant's interviews, consent forms and any other information concerning the participant will be kept on a hard drive that is password protected within the researcher's home. Only the researcher will have access to this hard drive. Confidentiality relating to participants will be maintained.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- The researcher and researcher's supervisor will have access to a participant's data
- Participants' names will be replaced by a code
- Access to any data related to the participant will be stored on the researcher's personal computer which will be password protected and thus can only be accessed by the researcher
- Confidentiality relating to the participant will be maintained by the use of pseudonyms during the write-up and submission of the dissertation
- Participants will be asked specific permission for the use of direct quotes
- Participants have the right to ask for the destruction of all or part of the data that they have contributed

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Anonymity will be maintained throughout the write-up of the dissertation as well as after the submission and potential publication of the dissertation.

A copy of the thesis will remain on campus at City University London. There is also the possibility that the research project will be published in psychology journals.

If a participant is interested in receiving a summary of the results or a copy of the dissertation, please contact the researcher directly on [redacted] to request this.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at anytime without explanation or penalty at any time.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Networking.*

You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: [redacted]

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City University London Psychology Research Ethics Committee, PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 10.

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Dana Jammal

Email: [redacted]

Research supervisor: Marina Gulina

Email: [redacted]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

6.3 Consent Sheet

Title of Study: ***The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Networking***

Ethics approval code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 10. Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: • Being interviewed by the researcher • Allowing the interview to be audiotaped	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): To answer the research questions. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.	
4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Note to researcher: to ensure anonymity, consent forms should NOT include participant numbers and should be stored separately from data.

6.4 Debrief Sheet

The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Social Networking

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

The aim of this study is to examine the experience of the self in cyberspace as well as to understand the functions underlying our interpersonal interactions on social networking sites. Participants were asked to take part in an open-ended interview on one occasion in order to better understand how they experience themselves online and how these experiences relate to the ways in which they interact and engage with others on social networking sites. This type of research aims to further our understanding of the impact that cyberspace may have on our identity as well as the manner in which social networking sites may encourage us to draw upon certain aspects of our identify more so than others.

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Researcher: [redacted]

Supervisor: [redacted]

Should you feel the need to contact any counselling services, please see a list of suggestions below:

SLAM NHS and Community Mental Health Team - Provides information on all NHS services available, including local community mental health teams, 0800 731 2864, http://www.slam.nhs.uk/our-services/service-finder

MIND, various locations - Provide extensive information on any local mental health services available, 020 7501 9203, https://www.mind.org.uk

The Samaritans - Emotional support on the phone 24 hours/day and 365 days/year 116 123, www.samaritans.org.uk

Waterloo Community Counselling - Low cost counselling in English and various other languages. 020 7928 3462, http://www.waterloocc.co.uk

Ethics approval code: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 10.

6.5 Recruitment Advertisement

Department of Psychology
City University London

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN: The Experience of the Self in Cyberspace: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study on
how we experience ourselves in cyberspace as well as how we experience our social interactions on social networking sites

You would be asked to take part in an interview.

Your participation would involve 1 session,
which will last approximately 1.5 hours.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive

£9

For more information about this study, or to take part,
please contact:

Researcher: Dana Jammal

or

Research Supervisor: Marina Gulina
Psychology Department
at
Email: [redacted]

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
through the Psychology Research Ethics Committee, City University London PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 10.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: [redacted]

6.6 Braun and Clark's (2006) 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for a Good Thematic Analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed - interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other - the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done - i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

6.7 Table of Themes and Sub-themes with Additional Quotes

A	Theme: Bridge Versus Loss of Connection
Ella	1. "It's kept me updated about what's going on around the world like Instagram you know instantly what's happening in another person's life." (p.1) 2. "Even though she lives like millions and millions of miles away or whatever I feel like she - because of SM I – I - I've built that connection with her." (p.32) 3. "Less friends, less knowledge of the world…more isolated and to myself." (Without SM) (p.29) 4. "Although I can say that my life could be more negative like with the isolation, less friends and stuff I feel like it could also be better as well like I would be more interactive with my family." (Without SM) (p.30)
Dan	5. "So what I also found is FB became a way of keeping up with current events, of being informed on things that I didn't know about through various shared articles and stuff and likewise being able to pass on what I've found…also for my own personal - umm like professionally it is a way of sharing you know what I've been up to...latest jobs, you know what they are and where people can see it and whatnot. So there's a bit of advertising there. Light advertising…I do like to see the developments of my friends, you know I like to see when someone gets married, when someone has a kid, when someone graduates…it's nice to know what's happened to people…I like receiving at least some things that they post you know articles or - or something - I learn through them…there's been many articles uh about issues that I didn't even know about that I got through FB uh even like major world events when say some famous person dies. FB

	is the first time I hear about it." (p. 14 -15) 6. "The only thing that it has allowed me is – is – is really to communicate with umm a vast number of people. I've got friends in probably over a dozen countries now on there. People I haven't even seen for many years. Even – even people I met here who then moved somewhere else, some of them I haven't seen in like 10 or more years. But we're still Facebook friends." (p.17) 7. "And then it evolved into like finding people that I had lost touch with from my university days, my high school days." (p.2) 8. "More lonely and more isolated. It would be much more about you living in the present, which can be a good thing. But at the same time it would mean throwing everything, everyone from my past away who wasn't still currently involved in my life like immediately involved in my life. I would have more time on my hands for other things...I would have more time to read…more time to go out and you know, go out to eat out at restaurants, cinema, theatre, arts, events. Maybe I'd just simply have more time to relax and I wouldn't be so busy in my head. I certainly wouldn't be caught up with trying to reply to somebody or, you know as I said earlier, if I can't like be thinking about it all the time, I should be focusing on other things. I would feel a little bit more freed up. I wouldn't feel so chained to the computer or to my phone. But I would also be cut off from a lot of people that I wouldn't be cut off from. So it's such a double-edged sword." (Without SM) (p.18-19)
Amy	9. "Like you're not missing out…you still maintain some slight connection without actually going out and getting it [laughs]." (p.19)
Zoe	10. "Your community no longer is related to where you are. So umm it's becoming more necessary to use SM to stay connected to a community and feel like you're part of a community." (p.43-44) 11. "Some of my time would be taken back for me…you gain time for

	the self." (Without SM) (p.46) 12. "I would be reading books, I would be like calling people and I would be going umm to like physical - physically to events and things where I think that I would meet like interesting like minded people." (Without SM) (p.45) 13. I don't think I would be as umm open to moving around and ah like going to - living in new places by myself and I think I would be a lot more…anchored somewhere physically or anchored to a familiar space…I would be a lot more anchored to a physical community." (Without SM) (p.44) 14. "It just becomes something that you're faced with on a daily basis. So, it's almost like you get to a point where like [pause] this is the new language that's being spoken, now I must speak this new language in order to continue to communicate with this virtual community that I'm connected to you know…it's all just like developments on this language of community and sharing...and if you do reject it then you're not speaking the same language as the rest of the world you know. You become disconnected." (p.7) 15. "You're just sort of - you're lured into it umm by just by sheer virtue like the power of crowds and habit and society and culture and so [pause]…so yeah you just kind of feel like if you stay behind then you are no longer engaging in the conversation. So you are disconnected… you either end up talking to a few people very rarely or you continue to - you keep up with the crowd." (p.8)
Aria	16. "I mean you know I would have to go out every time. I mean that's what people used to do like travel to see stuff. Now I see stuff on Instagram and I filter and if it's really what I'm interested in, then I go see it live you know, it's like a shortcut." (Without SM) (p.11) 17. "Even art I mean it - it's connects you. For example, I can be in a museum tomorrow, I could watch an exhibition…it's a good thing

	because I can know what's happening here and there and it's a great thing for art but it's also - it makes you a bit lazy - lazy to connect with things you know in person and to actually feel things as they're happening you know with you - there's a screen." (p.15)
Ivy	18. "There are upsides to it. It's like we can now contact anybody we want anyone - anyone is accessible - it's great. Like people that I never thought I'd ever work with I DM (direct message) them and like suddenly it's like they're there. It's so amazing in so many ways." (p.8)
B	**Theme: Virtual Versus Physical Presence**
Ella	1. "I think SM is a confidence boost for me. It just the whole hiding behind the screen. It's not like hiding behind the screen in a negative way, it's like in a positive way…I'm just able to express myself more through text than I am face-to-face because I'm sacred of what the other person's reaction is going to be. But with SM like I don't know what the person's reaction is." (p.7) 2. "I still lack confidence in offline situations but I feel like it has boosted me and given me a kick a little bit in terms of friends and socialising." (p.31)
C	**Sub-theme: Virtual Versus Sensory Connectedness**
Ivy	1. "It makes you less compassionate towards people and less [pause] - which is terrible. Umm whereas like in real life, if you encounter these people you would be compassionate towards them…cause like - there's a – a material sensory existence so like you are able to see the person from like a more 360 degree perspective…you empathise more - you like relate more, you feel more, there's emotion, there's physicality…there's so many elements involved."

D	Sub-theme: Recognition – Social Comparison
Ivy	1. “I have never felt that and I have a positive mindset…I have never looked at Instagram and thought wow I'm so grateful for my life and for life itself. That's just unhealthy.” (p.17) 2. “If you don’t exist online, you don’t exist.” (p.23) 3. ‘That slipper moment [from Cinderella] reminds me of [pause] the validation that you get when you get good comments and likes on your page. It means nothing. It means it's - it's like that moment of okay for this moment I fit in and then in a few hours you'll start slipping back into insecurity and slipping back into this negative cycle of thoughts but for that one second the glass slipper fit, you fit in for that second because you got the validation that you wanted. But that validation lasts for how long? Not long.” (p.14)
Zoe	4. “This is - for example when I start to get negative reactions to like - it’s like - subconsciously I'm looking - I'm scrolling through things, they're pissing me off but at the same time I'm thinking like oh look at - you know everybody else is having such a blast in their life because people only put positive stuff on SM obviously. So you think everybody's life is going so well” (p.28) 5. “It is like feeding [short pause] a part of yourself [short pause] that's [short pause] - is there a word - is there like - is there a word for it - there's a part of yourself that needs – like affirmation.” (Posting personal content) (p.52)
Aria	6. “You know people are looking at you, you know you have an audience…it’s a way for people to feel you know like they exist.” (p.16)

E	**Sub-theme: Perception of Oversharing**
Ivy	1. "People overshare a lot…like one of my friends I don't even care to check up on her because there's so much information on her page that what else can we talk about. She just put everything out there. There's nothing - like now you can't sit and like catch up with people and be like oh this happened, this happened, this happened, this happened because it's all there on your SM page, on your private Instagram or on your snap chat. Everybody's been with you through the journey rather than you informing them about the journey and re-evaluating your experience to - to other people." (p.19) 2. "One of my friends just posted like their whole sexual health testing and like their results on each thing - it's like that's too much information…nobody wants to see that." (p.20) 3. "Like sometimes people will write things like oh like just for attention and it's like oversharing because they're venting and it's like I wanna die like you know it's negativity and whatever it's like they clearly want attention." (p.20)
Zoe	4. "It's happening with other people in my global community. But I - I resist. I don't know why but for me privacy - the privacy of intimate moments is like a value for me it's like something important to me. I - I grew up with it. It's like - I don't know why - why it's something important to me but it is and I guess that's why I'm resisting it or it angers me so much because there's no respect anymore for those private moments and you know it's kind of - everything up for display, everything up for consumption. It's not like - you don't respect - some moments are meant to be kind of sacred and shared with people around you. And there's no more respect for that…that's why I resist doing it and - and why it angers me so much when I see it." (p.40-41)

Astrid	5. "I'm like what do you want love? What do you want from this? What kind of attention do you want? Uh and why - why is it being asked in this very open way?" (p.20) 6. "I have some sort of people in my network who have a lot - who talk very openly about eating disorders, body image, sexual assault - all kinds of stuff or one who's just constantly posting his suicidal thoughts or possibly even two." (p.20) 7. "It's the kind of idea of like wondering, you know why that's okay for them or how that's okay for them…when my natural tendency wouldn't be to share that." (p.22) 8. "I think the devil is the material at risk of being exposed" (p.19)
F	**Theme: Perception of Control Versus Loss of Control**
Aria	1. "If you're gonna play the game you're gonna play it. At the end of the day you sign a contract saying you're giving you're information or whatever…the feed you get you think you control it, there's an algorithm - you think you're in control but you're not…they do it because they have their own motives – it's all about data. When you go on Instagram you agree for your information to be used. You lose control – you don't feel like you're losing control, it's done in a very subtle way." (p.27)
Zoe	2. "You can't control people's reactions." (p.55)
G	**Sub-theme: More Control in the Presentation of the Self**
Leo	1. "Everything that you're presenting on there you are controlling and filtering it and actually changing it via photoshop or whatever…you have more control over how

	that's presented up to a point obviously at some stage you lose control of it because people can respond to that." (p.10) 2. "Because at some point you lose control of the process obviously because somebody else can post something on your wall." (p.11)
Ella	7. "Like you can filter it, you can add in - you can change it, you can make it perfect. Just the way you want others to perceive it. But in real life we're unable to do that." (p.17)
H	**Sub-theme: Addictive**
Zoe	1. "It's like you're addicted to it but at the same time it's like annoying you." (Scrolling) (p.20) 2. "I feel like - addicted to the SM accounts that I'm connected to cause like - I always have to be checking them. They're like meaningless updates. And I don't care or anything." (p.50) 3. "I haven't made sense of what it is…why it's like every time I like go into bed, I have like an hour of scrolling through Instagram and then scrolling through FB and then being able to sleep." (p.48)
Astrid	4. "I just suddenly became a bit like am I getting addicted to some sort of dopamine hit? But that's not really a dopamine hit?" (Scrolling) (p.6) 5. "I keep thinking okay I should at least like - I should just charge my phone on the other side of the room." (About trying to avoid scrolling through her newsfeed) (p.7)
Dan	6. "The addictive quality. Especially when it comes to the - feeling like – the - the need to umm you know to umm reply to

	controversial or nasty comments or disrespectful ones. Like I would love to be able to just switch that off until a more appropriate time to come back to it. But it does bother me at times when I'm not able to reply or when I am able to reply, I carry on too long…I'd like to be able to try to shut that feeling off - feeling like you know I gotta reply." (p.19-20)
I	**Theme: Double-edged Sword**
Aria	1. "Someone promoting something bad whether you like it or not there's gonna be followers for that and if you have followers for whatever bad thing you're doing, it's gonna encourage you to keep doing it…in this virtual world you have followers, you're always gonna have a base, someone who is gonna support what you do." (p.35) 2. "It's just this question of barrier. I mean I don't like barriers but sometimes barriers are good you know - why do I need - why - why does this face – why do I have to look at someone's you know face everyday on my feed - why - why bring this obsession - why create obsessions you know." (p.15-16) 3. "It can become obsessions you know obsessing over things that don't actually even matter but they start to matter - they start to matter you know. Things that you think they matter because you see them everyday." (p.16) 4. "It's a good tool to come out of your shell. It can be used in the good way but it's just some people can abuse it – there's some dangerous – it can become dangerous – everything you post, people can exploit and it can go up to abuse like cyberbullying." (p.18)
Dan	5. "It's a double-edged sword. On the one hand I really cannot criticize it too much. At the end of the day I can't criticize it too much cause it has allowed me to reacquaint myself and, you know, re-friend myself with people that without Facebook I never would have heard from again." (p.4)

	6. “I think it's because it's always a push and pull you know. I mean Facebook has become both good and detrimental at the same time. So it’s like it’s - it's – it’s represented in both those male characters. Umm and I as the girl am like constantly having to struggle between the two of them - between what's good about it but then what’s also deceptive and - and umm - and even at times hurtful about it.” (p.8) 7. “I wouldn't feel so chained to the computer or to my phone. But I would also be cut off from a lot of people that I wouldn't be cut off from. So it's such a double-edged sword.” (p.19) 8. “But that in turn, double-edged sword, creates a barrier because you don't have that personal connection.” (p.11)
Ella	9. “There's a really happy, really positive and really good side to SM but there's also that negative, that scary side of SM and that's Phil's character.” (p.27) 10. “There's the negatives within that character and that's SM - like I think if SM is a person - there's a really good side of SM and there's also a bad side of SM…there's both sides there.” (p.27) 11. “It's that Phil's character can either make another person's life for the better or destroy it for the worst.” (p.28) 12. “It can make a person feel completely confident, completely happy... completely a different person but by getting - using the wrong straws of SM it can have the complete flipside. And that's what I meant by Phil - you're on his good side and you're experiencing all good but if you go on one negative with Phil and then that's it. It's all negative and that’s SM.” (p.28) 13. “You experience a good side and it's completely good. It’s not always gonna be good, it could have the ups and downs but the majority of

	the time with SM, you have a good experience with…but when you experience one negative experience with SM, I feel like it just progressively gets worse within the negative side." (p.29) 14. "Because when you're on a good side with Phil, you're gonna experience more good but as soon as you get to one negative straw within a tiny - then that's it - like that sticks…the good can't outweigh the bad, if that makes sense." (p.29)
Ivy	15. "They make me feel negative. They make me - they ruin my day…I still go looking for it. And it's not always the same thing [pause] sometimes you don't know that you're looking for it but you're looking to actually - you're actually looking for it. It's weird to put into words" (p.34) 16. "It's great because there's self teaching involved but there's - the - the element of darkness is so overpowering that I can't - I can't think of it - my first thought of it is darkness." (p.9) 17. "She's like the ice queen but she's a good person but she's also a bad person. That's what SM is literally like a paradox. It's the definition of a paradox. It's like a - an oxymoron almost." (p.32)

6.8 Coded Interview Transcript Samples

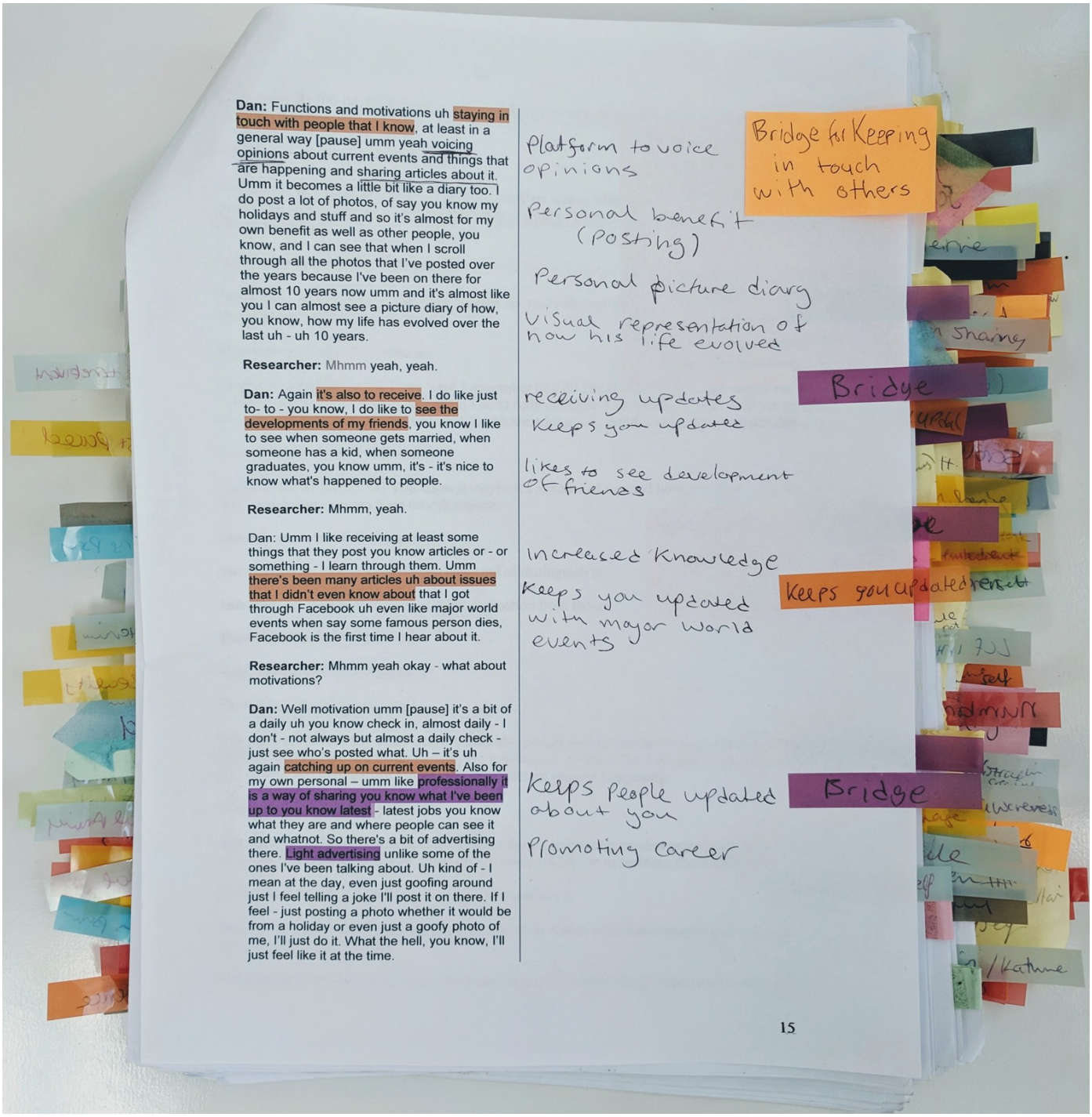
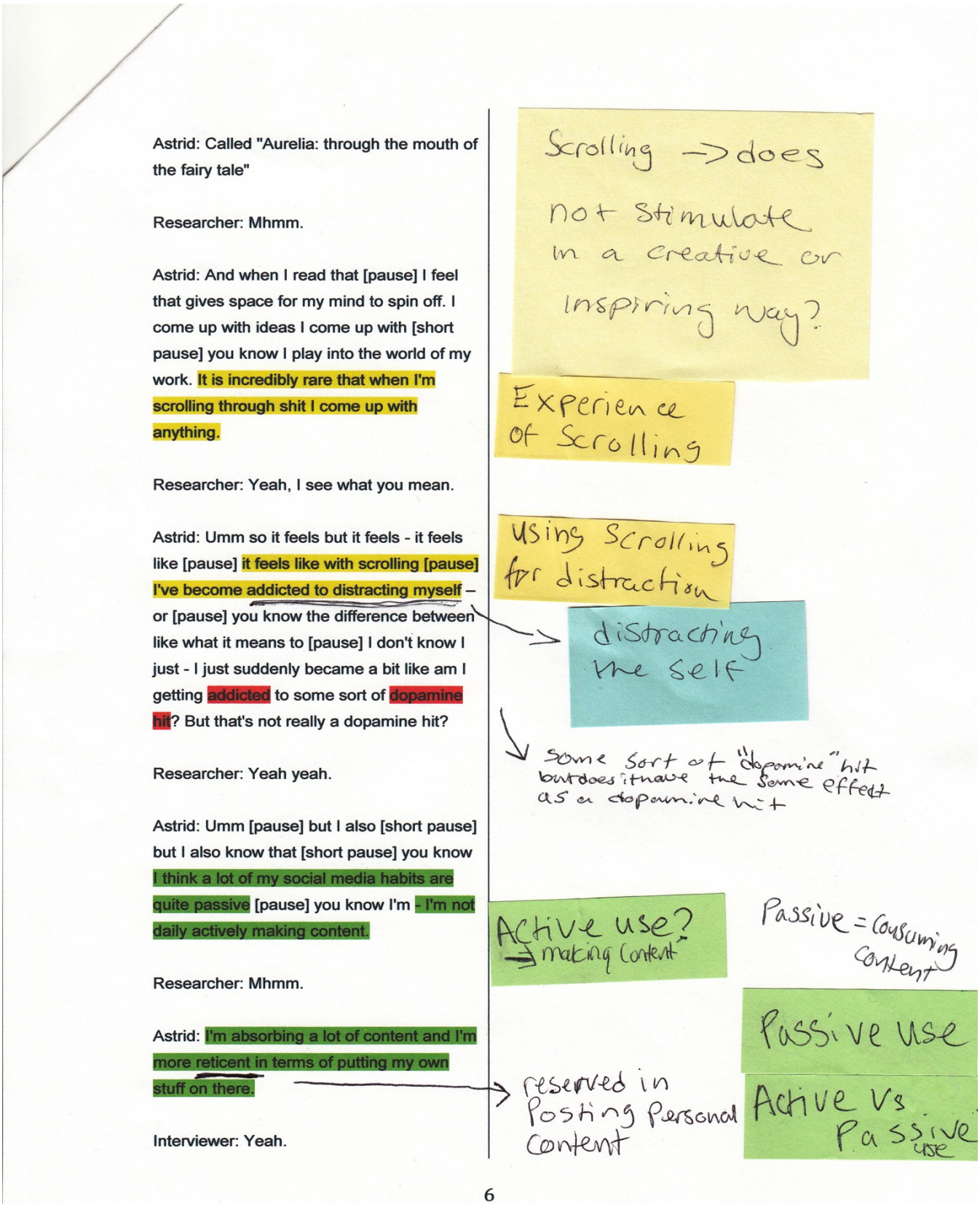


Photo of Dan's transcript demonstrating initial coding process



Astrid's transcript demonstrating initial coding process

6.9 Sample Tables of Initial Coding

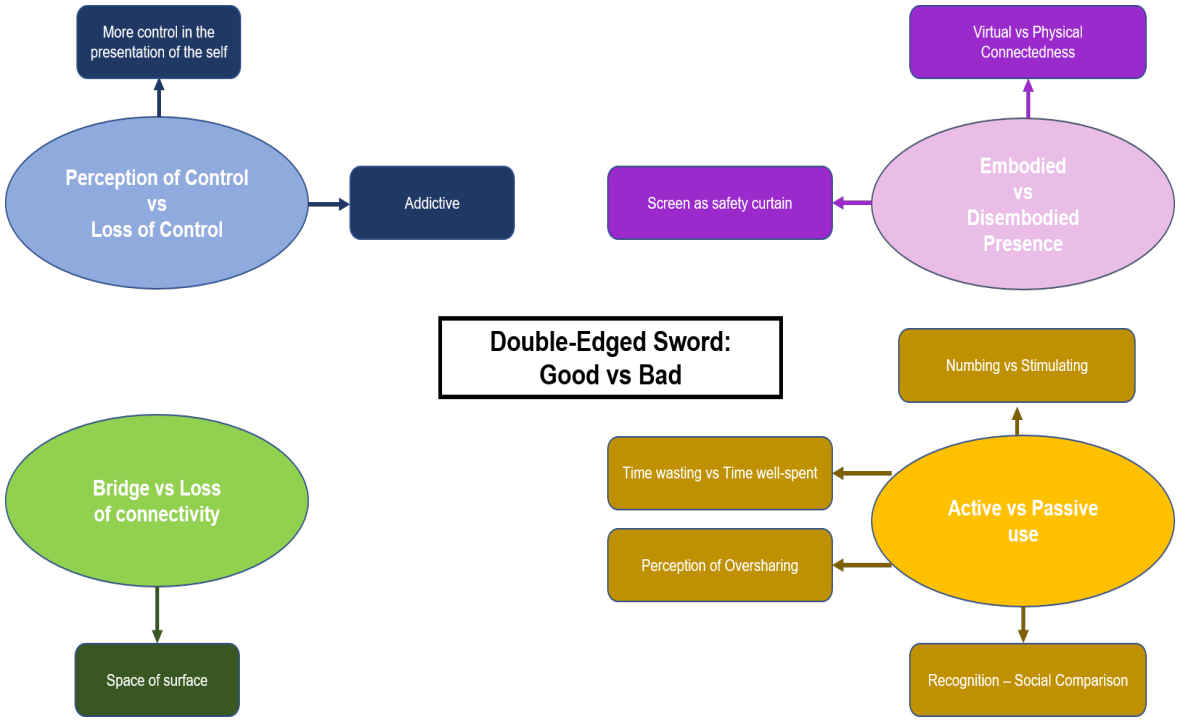
Participant --- Code	Zoe ----	Dan ------	Ella -----	Astrid --------	Amy ------	Leo -----	Aria ------	Ivy -----
Able to express self more online	P11 P12	P14	P6 P7 P16 P17					
Active vs. Passive Use	P27 P37 P41 P42 P50 P51 P56 P57 P65	P20 P24	P23	P6 P8 P10 P14 P18 P37 P51 P52 P57		P7 P9 P13 P21 P22 P23 P24	P30 P42 P45 P46	P29 P30 P35
Addictive/feeling addicted	P20 P22 P28 P29 P33 P48 P50 P53 P54	P10 P20 P22 P52		P6 P7 P51			P21 P45 P46	P45 P46 P49 P50
Authenticity of self-presentations	P13 P28 P68 P69			P17 P18		P16 P17 P18	P14 P39	
Behind the screen offering sense of safety			P32 P33					
Changing/managing/controlling the perception of how others see you	P2 P17 P41 P42	P4 P21	P17	P2 P17 P18 P25 P32 P39 P44	P24	P3 P10 P11 P15 P22 P34 P35 P36 P37 P39	P14 P17	
Connect with others	P9 P17 P68	P18 P27 P32	P10 P29		P14	P31	P22 P44 P49	P24
Control	P2 P3 P17 P23 P25 P41 P42	P4 P6 P21 P51	P18 P22 P60	P1 P11 P12 P16 P17 P22 P34 P45	P39 P40	P3 P22 P33 P34 P35 P36 P51	P4 P6 P10 P14 P17 P18 P19 P22 P27 P28 P35 P36	P5 P7
Darkness of SM	P9 P22			P10 P11				P3 P4 P14

	P23							P17 P24 P35
Easily say things wouldn't be able to perform to someone's face	P18 P20	P25	P25 P28 P31				P15 P17	
Escapism	P45 P53 P72					P42 P44		
Experience of Sharing	P10 P11 P25 P27	P3 P20 P28 P58		P30			P5 P6 P24	P1 P33 P40
Expression of yourself dependant on different SM platforms		P40			P28			
Fear of personal content going viral			P18 P19					
Filtering Online			P30 P31			P19 P20	P22	P48 P50
Freedom to be selective/offers selectivity in social interactions and access to information			P2 P25				P51	
Concerns over future direction of SM						P40 P41 P54		
Good vs. Bad		P14 P15	P34 P43 P44 P46		P7 P34 P45 P46	P2 P3	P56	P10 P51 P52
Increased Confidence	P17 P19 P23		P7 P23 P31	P8				
Increased Knowledge		P1 P2 P13 P44	P6 P18 P19 P49	P3 P7 P22	P3 P4			P12 P15 P16
Instant access to communication	P37 P42		P1	P12 P41		P1		P4
Judgement	P19 P20 P21							P7 P8 P22
Keeps you updated		P15 P16 P33 P34	P14 P15 P18 P19 P20 P33	P3 P4	P26		P2	P16 P17 P45

6.10 Mind Map


Active Vs Passive
Negative Moods
Recognition Vs Social Comparison
Active use (SMs not fulfilling needs)
Validation Affirmation Acknowledgement
Negative Self-Evaluation
Focus on Specific SM Activities
Perception of Oversharing
Zoe
Astrid
Annoyance
Anger
2. Boundries
Not reinforcing friendships
Destructive to the self
Negative-attention Seeking
Ivy
Light Vs Dark
Vice Vs Virtues?
Good Vs Bad
Aria
Ella
Dan
Amy
Double-edged Sword
Bring out the "Bad" side of us
Extremes
Moral Ambiguity
Virtual Vs Sensory Connectedness
Absence of Sensory experience
Limited depth
Connections "Reach"
Virtual Vs Physical Presence
Positives
1. More able to express self
2. Increased confidence
Sense of Safety
• Behind a Screen
• Person not in front of you
Transferability
Does not transfer to offline settings?
Addictive
Scrolling
Escapism
Information overload
Numbing Vs Stimulating
"Positive vs negative Stimulation"
Social Comparison (Upwards)
Numbing behaviours / mood modification?
2. Wasting time
Loss of Control → how people will react?
1) Being Cautious about what you put out (Ivy)
2) Everything being judged
1. More control in Self presentations
Implications:
1) Ella → present self to be Confident
2) Present Self in ways you can't in real life
3) Falsehood + Fabrication (Leo, Zoe)
More control in interactions Online
more control
less control
Perception of Control VS Loss of Control
Macro
Hidden agenda (Aria, Dan, Zoe, Leo)
Controlling negative feedback
People's Reactions

6.11 Revised Thematic Map



6.12 Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me what came across your mind when you read the topic of this study in the advertisement?

2. Can you tell me in what ways your experience of SM may have changed from when you first started using it up until now?

3. If you could think of a fairy tale that may represent your experience or relationship with SM, what would it be?

4. How do you feel you interact with other people through SM?

5. Do you find there is a difference in how you experience yourself online in comparison to offline?

6. How do you feel you experience other people on SM?

7. What do you think the functions and motivations of SM are in your life?

8. Can you tell me how much you feel you are able to express yourself or your views online?

9. Do you find that SM has contributed to the development of your personality?

10. If you could represent SM as a character or personage, who would it be?

11. If you imagine your life without SM, what would it look like?

12. If you were able to see a psychologist and discuss any personal concerns you may have about your relationship with SM, what would those be?