‘It’s just one big vicious circle’: young people’s experiences of highly visual social media and their mental health


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“It’s just one big vicious circle”: Young people’s experiences of highly visual social media and their mental health.

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ABSTRACT

Highly Visual Social Media (HVSM) platforms, such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok, are increasingly popular among young people. It is unclear what motivates young people to engage with these specific highly visual platforms and what impact the inherent features of HVSM has on young people’s mental health. Nine semi-structured focus group sessions were conducted with males and females aged 14 and 15 years (n=47) across five secondary schools in Northern Ireland. Thematic analyses were conducted, and a conceptual model was developed to illustrate findings. This study found that features such as likes/comments on visuals and scrolling through a feed were associated with the role of ‘viewer,’ instigating longer lasting feelings of jealousy, inferiority, and pressure to be accepted. To combat these negative emotions, young people turn to the role of ‘contributor’ by using filters, selecting highlights to post to their feed and adjusting their personas, resulting in temporary feelings of higher self-esteem, greater acceptance, and popularity. As users of HVSM are constantly switching between the role of viewer and contributor, the emotions they experience are also constantly switching between instant inadequacy and instant gratification. HVSM appears to trigger an unrelenting process of emotional highs and lows for its adolescent users.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The use of social media platforms (SMPs) has seen exponential growth with more than half of the world’s population now utilising at least one SMP (Chaffey, 2020). Figures indicate that 3.96 billion people around the globe use social media: a growth of 10.5% in the last 12 months (Global Digital Report, 2020). There has been a noticeable shift from traditional SMPs, such as Facebook and Twitter, to highly visual social media (HVSM) (Marengo et al., 2018) namely, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. It has been reported that on average, 95 million photographs are uploaded daily on Instagram, 10 billion videos are viewed daily on Snapchat and the video oriented SMP, TikTok, recorded 62 million downloads in January 2021 alone (Stout, 2021; Chan, 2021).

Alongside the proliferation of HVSM, there has been increasing concern over the growing number of young people reporting mental health problems (Winter and Lavis, 2022; Westberg et al., 2022;). The Children’s Society (TCS) in the United Kingdom (UK) report that 1 in 6 children have a mental health problem, with 50% of all mental health issues starting by the age of 14 (TCS, 2021). Precisely 9.7% of young people in the United States (US), aged between 11-17, have been treated for major depression, compared to 9.2% in the previous year (Mental Health America, 2021). A recent scoping review, exploring existing literature associated with social media and young people’s mental health, found disparities (McCrory et al., 2020). Noticeably, there is a paucity of research examining relationships between HVSM and levels of anxiety, depression and self-esteem amongst children and young people. Previous literature has focused on quantifiable results in this field, and although extremely valuable, this data may overlook some of the more nuanced aspects of young people’s encounters that can only be illuminated through dialogue with the individual.
This study aims to illuminate young people’s experiences with HVSM and their mental health by employing an inductive, exploratory approach.

1.1. What makes highly visual social media different from traditional social media?

Although traditional SMPs permit the uploading and sharing of photographs and videos, HVSM platforms place a greater eminence on the quality of image-sharing by offering user-friendly facilities that encourage digital enhancement of content (Varman et al., 2021). Most prominently, assortments of digital filters are integrated into HVSM platforms that allow an alteration of lighting shades, colours of pixels, and text/image overlay (Bell, 2019). Alongside digital filters, features such as ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ are available for use on traditional SMPs, however, when used with HVSM platforms, they are predominantly applied during engagement with more personal, image-based content as opposed to text-based posts. Research indicates that posted photographs receive 53% more likes than regular, text-based posts (Verlee, 2020). Images with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to generate comments than those without (Bakhshi et al., 2014). With such a phenomenon occurring, the extent of using the tools encouraged by HVSM, on the mental health of its users during the adolescent phase of life, warrants further exploration.

1.2. An overview of social media use and young people’s mental health

The associations reported between social media use and mental health are complex, varied and inconsistent (Orben et al., 2019; Johannes et al., 2022). The relationship between social media use and low self-esteem has been reported by multiple studies (Vogel et al., 2014; Woods and Scott, 2016; Jan et al., 2017; Samaha and Hawi, 2016; Andreassen et al., 2017).
Conversely, other investigations have associated social media use with increased levels of self-esteem (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Toma and Hancock, 2013; Wilcox and Stephen, 2013). In relation to HVSM, the use of Instagram has been associated with narcissistic traits, loneliness, anxiety, depression and poor body image (Jackson and Luchner, 2018; Pittman and Reich, 2016; Stapleton et al., 2017). A recent study reported that behaviours more commonly associated with HVSM, such as selfie-posting, were linked with enhanced self-esteem due to the reduction of body image concerns (Kim, 2020).

Turel et al. (2019) refers to the range of negative experiences as the ‘dark side of digitisation,’ a phenomenon associated with the fear of missing out (FoMO) (Budnick et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2021; Gupta and Sharma, 2021; Morford, 2010). FoMO describes an individual’s feelings of isolation or dismay that others are enjoying gratifying experiences in their absence (Long et al., 2019; Przybylski et al., 2013). Research has shown that the persistent use of social media is a trigger for FoMO and feelings of fatigue, anxiety and depression (Yu et al., 2020; Wolniewicz et al., 2018). Anxiety and depression have adverse consequences on adolescent development, including increased risk of substance abuse, lower educational attainment, compromised social relationships, and suicide (Copeland et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2011; Hetrick et al., 2016).

Further research is needed to explore how young people experience the darker side, the distorted reality and illusion of a perfect life that the newer HVSM platforms endorse (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022) through an array of built-in editing tools and various enhancement filters. This study aims to explore these experiences with HVSM and their impact on young people’s mental health, specifically aspects such as anxiety and depression but also less clinical mental health outcomes such as self-esteem and the associated positive and negative emotions experienced.
1.3. Literature review & theoretical perspectives

1.3.1. Literature review

Three areas of interest have been identified from current literature, namely (1) time spent using social media, (2) use of photographic filters and (3) user experience of social media.

1.3.1.1. Time spent using social media

OfCom (UK) reports that 99% of 12- to 15-year-olds spend 20.5 hours per week online (OfCom, 2019). These figures show a 256% growth in the time spent online, from 8 hours per week recorded with the same age group in 2005 (OfCom, 2011). The psychological impact of the amount of time spent on social media platforms is ambiguous, with literature containing varying results (Vannucci et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2014; Livingstone and Third, 2017; Orben et al., 2019). In one body of research that focuses on mainly over 18 year-olds, excessive use has been attributed to overall poorer mental health, specifically low self-esteem, and increased levels of anxiety and depression (Jelenchick et al., 2013; McCord et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2015; Woods and Scott, 2016; Pagnotta et al., 2018). Conversely, other studies report that spending more time on social media leads to increased self-esteem and feelings of relaxation, social connection, and acceptance (Weinstein, 2018; Elmquist and McLaughlin, 2017; Odgers, 2018; Betton and Woollard, 2019).

Existing research has shown that social media usage patterns can generate lasting effects on mental health (Verduyn et al., 2017; Tromholt, 2016). Passive use, scrolling and browsing without physical engagement, has had a reportedly negative impact on its users (Krasnova et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2017). Conversely, active use, spending time interacting directly with other users’ content, has a significant, positive relationship with wellbeing (Myers, 2000; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). In a study focused on HVSM, primarily Instagram, Trifiro (2018) report that neither passive nor active use determine mental health effects. Rather, the
data indicated that it was user intensity level that affected subsequent levels of self-esteem and wellbeing.

This study aims to explore the aforementioned inconsistencies by delving into young peoples’ perspectives as to why they are spending increasingly more time using social media, particularly HVSM, and whether there is any evidence of a relationship between social media usage patterns and mental health.

1.3.1.2. Use of photographic filters

Photo manipulation and digital filters are emerging as areas of interest. In several studies, it has been found that photo alteration can be associated with negative outcomes, including depression, disordered eating, and externalizing problems (Cohen et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2018; Lonergan et al., 2019; Kleemans et al., 2018; Vendemia and De Andrea, 2019; Harrison and Hefner, 2014). A report based on a new concept termed 'Snapchat Dysmorphia,' suggested that filtered images blur the line of reality and fantasy and could be a trigger for body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a mental health condition where people become obsessed with imaginary defects in their appearance (Rajanala et al., 2018). It has been reported that current generations seek to replicate the perfection of a filter in reality by seeking out treatments such as contouring cheekbones, straightening or reducing nose size, and slimming techniques (Ritschel, 2019). Research has found that social comparisons with peers’ idealised photographs on Instagram may contribute to such body dissatisfaction (Staniewski and Awruk, 2022). The manipulated images, thinness and altered body proportions are unnatural, and flawless skin and faces appear to be the expectation (Meier, 2013; Tiggemann and Slater, 2013). Instagram appears to implement the technological features that may increase users' social comparison and its effect on self-esteem. Individuals with a higher
social comparison orientation are reported to have poorer self-perceptions, lower self-esteem, and more negative feelings (Jang et al., 2016; Jiang and Ngien, 2020; Vogel et al., 2014).

It is uncertain as to whether the use of filters and therefore the embellishment of self-image is accentuated by the highly visual stage that these newer platforms employ and if social comparison acts as a trigger for the use of these newer platforms.

1.3.1.3. User experience

With online social media usage at an all-time high (Battisby, 2019), the emotional experience of engagement with these activities on young people’s mental health and wellbeing is also unclear, specifically engagement with attributes such as likes and comments. For example, the ‘likes’ feature on popular platforms permits users to effortlessly provide positive feedback on content at the click of a button (Sherman et al., 2016). Social reward is a powerful motivator of behaviour among young people (Foulkes and Blakemore, 2016). Receiving more positive feedback in the form of likes on content, particularly self-images, was found to motivate users to post even more frequently to receive a sense of gratification (Bell et al., 2018). Similarly, the ‘comments’ feature permits both positive and negative feedback which may impact a person’s self-esteem. The rise in cyber-aggression, namely derogatory comments on posts, is strongly linked with poorer mental health outcomes (Mishna et al., 2018). With HVSM platforms advocating the upload of visuals, this study is needed to explore the opinions and experiences young people have of likes and comments on such graphics.
1.3.2. Theoretical perspectives

Three theoretical perspectives inform this study – Fragile Self-Esteem, Social Comparison and Dramaturgy.

The concept of Fragile Self-Esteem posits that individuals’ positive evaluations of themselves are shallow, poorly grounded, and require continual validation (Borton et al., 2012). Research suggests that fragile self-esteem is a mechanism by which individuals may be vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Borton et al., 2012), as an individual’s feelings are unstable and tend to fluctuate (Kernis and Goldman, 2003). Individuals with fragile high self-esteem are believed to be preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their vulnerable feelings of self-worth (Zeigler et al., 2013). Validation is offered freely on such applications in the form of ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ on personal photographs, however, it remains unknown as to whether such properties of HVSM contribute to the volatility and fluctuation of emotions consistent with the concept of fragile self-esteem.

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) proposes that individuals seek those who are similar to themselves as the targets for comparisons in an attempt to assess their own self-worth and personal abilities (Yang, 2016). Due to the rise in social media use, social comparisons are taking place at an unprecedented rate and scale (Verduyn et al., 2020). With HVSM, the careful selection of images, the use of photographic filters, the meticulously curated comments, and the numbers of likes, make HVSM a fertile ground for social comparisons to take place (Verduyn et al., 2017).

Properties such as filters and digital alterations on photographs and videos enables consumers of social media to curate their online persona (Liu et al., 2017). Presenting different ‘versions’ of self to others depending on the situation, is affiliated with Goffman’s
dramaturgical theory. (Goffman, 1959). To apply Goffman’s theatrical metaphor to social media platforms, individuals are provided with an opportunity or ‘stage’ they can conduct themselves on, and tactically comply with norms and values they choose to affiliate with (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Ellison et al., 2006). The present study uses exploratory qualitative focus groups to explore how the graphical nature of HVSM contributes to young people’s presentation of self and the associated emotional impact.

1.4. Aims and objectives

This paper aims to explore young people’s experiences of using highly visual social media platforms and the impact this has on their mental health.

The following objectives have been identified:

- To explore why young people, aged 14-15 years old, engage with HVSM.
- To explore the features inherent within HVSM and understand how engagement with such features impacts young people’s mental health
- To develop a conceptual model based on these results that explains their actions and emotions.

2. METHODS

2.1. Sampling, recruitment, and data collection

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed resulting in the recruitment of five secondary schools within Northern Ireland (NI) (Patton, 2002). Informed consent was gained, and ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee panel prior to
data collection (Ref: blinded for review). Nine focus groups were formed, each comprising of 4-8 participants (total n=47) aged 14 and 15 years-old (female n=28, male n=19). In May 2020, focus group sessions were conducted by the principal author online using Microsoft Teams and were audio recorded using a handheld Zoom H2N device. Pupil consent was gained prior to each session. Due to the nature of online video conferencing software, basic tips were shared with all participants on how best to communicate. Each focus group session lasted 40-55 minutes. The format was semi-structured to help ensure that each group discussion stayed on track and directly addressed the overall research objectives. A general opening question was used to break the ice based on young people’s thoughts of mental health (e.g. “What does ‘mental health’ mean to you? Can you describe what young people’s mental health is like today?”) Following questions were aimed to explore young people’s reasoning for spending time on HVSM, (e.g. “Why do you use Instagram/Snapchat/TikTok in the first place? What attracts you?”), their experiences of image enhancements (e.g. “Talk to me about filters. What is your experience with them?”), and their experiences of the HVSM tools, (e.g. “Are likes important on photographs? Are comments a big deal? How do they make you feel?”)

2.2. Data analysis

The empirical work for this study was informed by an approach based in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consistent with Braun & Clarke’s six-step process, step 1 of analysis involved the transcription of audio-recorded data collected from all focus groups by the principal author. Transcripts were checked and re-checked to ensure accuracy. This process of ‘repeated reading’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the use of recordings to listen to data, resulted in data immersion and enhanced the researcher’s familiarity with the findings
(Fielden et al., 2011). Subsequently, all transcripts were uploaded into a computer software package, NVivo Version 1.3, to begin the coding phase (step 2). The principal author coded each segment of data that was relevant to the research aims or captured something interesting. A process of open coding was used as the author did not use any pre-set codes but instead developed and modified the codes as they worked through the coding process (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Codes were discussed and modified with the research team prior to step 3. Once initial coding was complete, the principal author clustered similar codes to create initial themes (step 3). Whilst undertaking steps 4 and 5 – reviewing, defining, and naming themes - frequent debriefing sessions were scheduled with the other two members of the research team. During these steps, members of the research team independently reviewed the coded data extracts for each subtheme to determine if a coherent pattern was evident. Coding conflicts were resolved through thorough discussion leading to refinement of the coding framework. Overarching themes were discussed, developed, and agreed during research team meetings. A second researcher carried out detailed checks relating to the accuracy of the transcribed data, codes and themes. Once the final themes were established, the researchers started the process of writing the report in accordance with step 6 of Braun & Clarke’s (2006) model.

3. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the focus group data yielded two overarching themes: Competitive Comparison and Designed Perfection. Each of these overarching themes had three sub-themes which are discussed below.
3.1. Overarching Theme 1: Competitive Comparison

This theme explores how two reiterated concepts of ‘competition’ and ‘comparison’ were prominent amongst discussions. This appeared to emerge from a constant process of self-appraisal when viewing information and comparing oneself to others in an online environment (“I feel like, with our generation, everyone is used to comparing each other and putting each other on pedestals,” [Female 4, FG1]). Figure 1 illustrates three sub-themes that emerged from this overarching concept of competitive comparison.

![Figure 1: Overarching Theme 1 and Sub-themes](image)

3.1.1. Sub-theme 1a: Quantity of Likes

When analysing this theme of competitive comparison, one factor that group members frequently expressed was associated with the number of ‘likes’ on their photographs. This is illustrated in the following opinion:

“People want attention and post photos to feel that, but they start to think, "oh, am I not doing this right cos other people are getting more likes than me." And you start to compare yourself to others and keep posting more and more photos to try and compete to get those likes.” [Female 2, FG8]

Elevated likes online appear to affirm acceptance. A number of participants alluded to this activity as all-consuming. (“It’s really easy to get obsessed after a while looking for other people’s
The impact of this behaviour on mental health is indicated in the opinion below:

“You are constantly waiting for something to happen. You could be sitting up to like three o’clock in the morning or maybe four o’clock, waiting for a certain number of likes on a photo you have put up and just scrolling through and through to refresh. It’s just an endless thing.” [Male 4, FG3]

Participants not only express the feelings of stress associated with accumulating likes, but they also proclaim the impact this process inextricably has on sleep patterns.

Participants in other focus group sessions accentuated the centrality of imagery as the medium by which young people seek such approval from their peers yet openly recognised and accepted that viewing unsatisfactory figures of likes on such images results in feelings of inadequacy. This is evidenced with the following comment:

“I feel better about myself when I find out that, “oh today, I’ve got this many likes on my photo” but sometimes, I put a photo up and I don’t get that many likes on it and I really don’t feel as good. It’s disappointing and I feel, I suppose, low and not as good about myself. I feel like I’m not good enough for people.” [Male 4, FG3]

The number of likes received on a photograph online appears to be regarded as an indicator of social standing. As one participant remarked, ‘Likes, it’s all to do with likes. I think social media can be one big vicious circle.’ [Female 5, FG8]

3.1.2. Sub-theme 1b: Quality of Comments

A recurring concept across focus groups concerns receiving comments. Unlike the use of ‘likes,’ this appeared less to do with quantity and more to do with the content. This is evidenced in the following opinion:

Female 2: “You want comments on your photos that are raving about you cos when you get nice things said about you, you feel good. Maybe for a short time but you still feel good and other people get to read them too.” [FG9]
The quality of the comments posted appeared as another form of social validation. Interestingly, much of this process seemed sycophantic in nature; telling others what they want to hear, rather than what is genuinely felt (“What I would do is, I would go on other people's posts and see what they say back and then I would just copy the same thing.” [Female 3, FG4]). Young people expressed feelings of pressure to participate in this process with the main intention appearing to be reciprocal in nature (“If I post a really nice comment on someone’s photo, it’s likely they will return the favour.” [Female 3, FG7]).

Despite an often-reciprocal relationship between posting and receiving comments, young people felt wary and anxious about receiving ‘hate’ comments. Prominence was placed on the negative side of comments and the associated feelings of pressure (“You are afraid that somebody will comment something bad and then everybody in school will laugh at you.” [Male 3, FG3]) and long-term unhappiness. This is illustrated in the following exchange between participants in focus group 5:

Female 6: “The hate comments always stay with you. When you get nice comments, for that minute or that second, you feel good about yourself, but when you get hate comments, they stay forever, you just can't get rid of them.”

Female 3: “I think it's very easy to fall into the trap of letting other people's comments, like the bad comments, overpower the good ones and letting that form your opinion of yourself.”

What transpired from discussions is the temporality of positive emotions associated with receiving affirming comments compared to the retentive negative emotions experienced from receiving either a lack of positive comments or any negative remarks. Discussions illuminated the levels of pressure and stress participants encountered both with the act of posting and receiving comments. Findings indicate that this process is viewed as integral to young people’s online interaction; a process they openly admit to continuing with, regardless of the associated levels of pressure.
3.1.3. **Sub-theme 1c: ‘Othering’ – Role of Peers, Celebrities, and Influencers**

Viewing other people’s selection of published activities online also emerged as a trigger for young people’s competitive comparison. There appeared to be two groups of ‘others’ that young people compared their own lives to – their peers, and celebrities/influencers.

Across multiple discussions, it was evident that a main motive for posting photographs on social media was to make their lives enviable to others. This is evidenced in the following example from focus group 8:

*Female 4: “People want other people to feel jealous. They want them to think that they should be living the life that they are living. So, say that somebody is on holiday somewhere in Spain or France and take photos there, they will post them to make others jealous. And other people are seeing these photos and liking them cos they want to be like them, and they end up feeling that they are missing out on the things their friends are experiencing.”*

One of the main factors connected to viewing others’ posts was this feeling of ‘missing out’ or being ‘left out.’ Interestingly, some young people commented how they deliberately checked their friend’s posts regularly to make sure that they had not been left out of any activities that their peers may have been involved in. This highlights a level of insecurity and lack of self-confidence which could reflect personal levels of self-esteem.

Celebrities and social media ‘influencers’ were cited as contributory factors to young people’s continued comparison of selves. One of the most mentioned features was with the comparison to appearance and the impact that had on how they viewed themselves. This is illustrated in the following opinion:

*Female 4: “I totally agree cos so many influencers show themselves putting make up on every day and just look stunning all of the time, like, perfect, and you end up thinking that that’s normal and you should look like that too and you should include that routine in your life when you wake up.”[FG5]*

In summary, this sub-theme clearly demonstrates the different ways young people compare themselves to their peers and to influential celebrities. For their peers, comparison is directed
towards social activities and ensuring they are either not missing out or are engaging in equally appealing events. In contrast, with celebrities/influencers, comparison is more focused on personal attributes that impact appearance, whether that be in the form of physical belongings or daily beauty routines that make them appear flawless.

3.2. Overarching Theme 2: Designed Perfection

This theme features the strategies that young people discussed implementing in an effort to compete with others online. Across all focus groups, the editing, staging and manipulation of images/videos was referred to, with many young people justifying this as their method of attaining flawless social media posts. As a result, this theme was termed ‘Designed Perfection’ as it encapsulates three areas where young people act as editors of their online lives. The three subthemes explore young people’s quest for designed perfection via the use of filtered photographs, showcasing only the best bits on their feed and using HVSM to adjust their personas (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Overarching Theme 2 and Sub-themes](image_url)
3.2.1. Sub-theme 2a: Filtered Photographs

The use of filters was mentioned across all focus groups. Young people seem to reach out to filters to edit their photographs prior to posting. It appears to be a quick and easy way to combat some of the feelings of inferiority that young people experience: “Oh my gosh, you know on snapchat, the facemask filter, I love it. I always use it cos it really only shows your eyes and I just love it. You can literally look like a rat and you put on this facemask filter and it’s so flattering. I have such a connection to using it.” (Female 1, FG1) It was generally felt, amongst the girls in the focus groups, that filters were necessary to use as they put make-up on, changed the shape of their face, gave them really nice cheek bones, made their nose look smaller and airbrushed their face for that “flawless look that everyone craves” (Female 3, FG7).

When asked how young people felt when they removed these filters from their photographs, the consensus was exceedingly negative: “When you take it off, you look sooooooo dusty, [Female 1,FG1]; “Taking off a filter makes me feel really ugly, really bad, I just end up not feeling good about myself”[Female 4,FG5]. It was acknowledged across multiple focus groups that the continual implementation of filters was due to the crave for likes – contributing enhanced photographs was seen as being more appealing to others and therefore would accumulate the number of likes that young people so desperately competed to receive. Interestingly, the majority of boys in these focus groups attested a dislike to using filters and attributed it as being a ‘girl thing.’ The indifference to filter-use with boys is evidenced in the following conversation from focus group 2:

Researcher: “What about filters - do you use filters?”
All: “No”
Researcher: “Why not?”
Male 3: “Because you just aren’t showing your true self”
Male 1: “I don’t really see the point. It’s a girl thing”
Researcher: “Why do you say that?”
Male 2: “Girls have bit more competition on the way they look”
Male 5: “Girls see how good they look in a filter and they don’t see that in reality without the filter. I just don’t see why they bother using them in the first place cos they are trying to be someone they are not and that’s a lot of pressure.”

In summary, this subtheme clearly demonstrates the power and influence of filters on the female population, and the emotional repercussions of their use/non-use. The main driving force for such modifications is rooted in the competitive comparison from Theme 1 and the feelings associated with greater likes; feelings of approval, feeling valued and feeling accepted by others.

3.2.2. Sub-theme 2b: Showcasing the ‘Best Bits’

Another factor that was cited as important in terms of designed perfection is the curation of a photograph’s content to ensure it is visually appealing to contribute to a social media feed. Participants described a ‘feed’ as ‘the most important part of your profile’ [Female 4, FG4] and ‘what everyone sees and goes to look at; it has to be perfect.’ [Female 1, FG8]

Discussions reflected the centrality of the ‘feed’ with its stature evidenced in the following excerpt from focus group 6:

Female 2: “I just love the idea of having a really nice-looking feed, one that’s really aesthetically pleasing, that is my main goal. I will spend ages setting up the perfect photos and will consider posting some of them, maybe at 4am when I’m scrolling for ages and looking at my feed, but then I will archive some of the photos to keep so that people don’t see them all in one go and then I will unarchive one of them maybe a week or a month later, just to use to make sure that I keep up a nice feed.”

There are three interesting factors that have emerged from these discussions surrounding the feed. Firstly, the extent to which young people appear to invest time and imagination in staging their photographs. Young people admitted to spending time ‘setting up the room,’ ‘picking particular backgrounds,’ using additional items in their photos to make them look good such as ‘designer clothes’ or ‘the latest phone in a selfie,” all because they “want people to look at your feed and go, ‘wow, he/she is living their best life.’” [Male 3, FG9]. This
seemingly ingrained need to exhibit a ‘best life’ links with the second interesting factor regarding the feed – the highly selective nature of what is depicted to others. Young people across focus groups self-confessed to engaging in this process, “I know it’s totally unrealistic, I get that, but my feed is all about the good things in my life, that’s what I’ll only post” [Female 4, FG4]. When challenged as to why this was the case, young people referred to their aspiration of getting more likes, getting glowing comments and the desire to make others feel jealous. Their rational for craving these targets stemmed from the emotional reaction they experienced, which they elucidated through expressions such as feeling ‘satisfied,’ ‘happy for a short time,’ ‘feeling better about myself,’ ‘makes me smile,’ ‘feeling popular,’ ‘accepted,’ and ‘proud of my life.’

Nevertheless, many young people acknowledged the hollowness and insincerity of the feed. This is illustrated in the following comment from focus group 3:

Male 4: “People use their feeds to show another life, they only show the highlights. I think people’s feeds are fake cos it could show a person they are playing online but really, they could secretly be in a really low mood and feel rubbish about themselves but are hiding it from everyone else by using their feed to show this perfect, amazing life.”

Although the term ‘feed’ is related to Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, there are similar features available on other SMPs such as ‘timeline,’ ‘wall’ and ‘stream.’ Interestingly, the platform that was identified as ‘being such a big deal’ and eliciting the most pressure to have the perfect feed, was Instagram. This is illustrated in the following extract from focus group 5:

Female 1: “Compared to any other social media, it is the one where people would have a picture and they would be like, “oh, but is it good enough for Instagram?” Cos Instagram is the top sort of league, like, if you have a really good picture, you’re posting it there to your feed, but if it’s not good enough and you haven’t spent enough time making sure it looks really good, then it’s going somewhere else. You won’t have it on your feed. It’s sort of, that façade sort of app.”
In summary, this subtheme captures the prominence placed on young people’s feeds. Although young people acknowledged that the feed depicts a false sense of what everyone is doing, an eagerness to continue to strive for this artistically curated personal space was particularly apparent.

3.3.3. Sub-theme 2c: Adjusted Personas

An additional factor discussed by young people was the contrast of self, between the real self and the altered self portrayed online. This not only referred to appearance but also to character and personality. This dichotomy is illustrated in the following opinion:

Female 6: “I think that's where mental health issues are massive cos we don't actually know who we are because we are being two different people everywhere” [FG5]

This reference to a dual existence was not portrayed in a positive manner among focus groups. Young people admitted to changing not only aspects of their appearance, but also to adjusting characteristics of their personalities when interacting online. When asked to clarify how they conducted this in an online environment, participants referred to using stronger face modification filters, presenting only upbeat emotions, commenting on people’s photos that they would not talk to in school and expressing more open opinions.

When questioned how they felt when interacting as an altered self, responses were positive. This is illustrated in the following exchange from focus group 5:

Female 5: “When I’m using Instagram and Snapchat, I’m much more confident and expressive. I feel like I can say what I want, to anyone I want, without feeling nerves or scared to be honest. I wouldn’t be like that in real life. I’m quite shy. It’s given me a voice.”

Female 1: “I would agree that I can be a better version of myself. I can be the person I want to be, if that makes sense, the person I wish I was in real life but can’t seem to be.”
It was a common factor that young people felt a sense of ‘escapism’ when interacting with an adjusted persona. When reaching deeper for the reasoning as to why young people engaged in this dualism in the first place, discussions were negative, and related to feelings of ‘pressure’ and the need to compete to fit in due to the constant comparison to others as discussed in Theme 1. The following opinions encapsulates these elements of escapism, pressure, and underlying emotions that many young people divulged:

Male 2: “When you are on Snapchat or even Instagram, you can edit things and delete things and you can get rid of things whenever you want, but you can’t do that in real life. I’m going to attach myself to social media where I can be whoever I want, I can act however I want. But you can’t do those things in real life. There’s no block button in real life.” [FG9]

Male 4: “When people are posting all these amazing, good photographs about their lives on their feeds, and acting totally different from how they would in reality, you really don’t know who is crying behind the camera or having a really bad day. And this kind of thing can really affect your mood because you start to wish that your life was like that all of the time. You wish you were that happy person you show to others on the screen.” [FG2]

In summary, the data uncovered within this subtheme indicates how young people turn to HVSM as a method of distraction and appear to use it as a platform to present an overemphasized description of themselves.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

Inductive thematic analysis revealed two overarching themes connected to HVSM and young people’s mental health – Competitive Comparison and Designed Perfection. The first theme associates with young people’s position as a ‘viewer’ when using HVSM and experiencing engulfing emotions embedded in competitive comparison of others through the quantity of likes, quality of comments and daily posted activities. The term ‘viewer’ therefore refers to
the experiences of observation and cognitive processing that young people are immersed in. This term supports previous literature surrounding the passive use of social media (Verduyn et al., 2017; Tromholt, 2016; Trifiro, 2018). When referring to the first theme in this study, the role of ‘passive viewer’ will be adopted.

The second theme associates with young people’s position as ‘contributor’ to HVSM. This theme explores the techniques that young people employ to compete in this online expanse by means of filtering photographs, showcasing the best parts of their lives, and presenting an adjusted persona. The term ‘contributor’ therefore refers to the physical behaviours that young people engage with when using HVSM. Creating, adding, modifying content; the act of ‘doing’ rather than ‘viewing.’ This term supports previous literature surrounding the active use of social media (Verduyn et al., 2017; Tromholt, 2016; Trifiro, 2018). When referring to the second theme in this study, the role of ‘active contributor’ will be adopted.

With these two roles in mind, findings will be discussed in relation to each of the three research objectives stipulated at the outset of this study (section 1.3).

4.2. Research objective one

To explore why young people, aged 14-15 years old, engage with HVSM.

Findings show that with the sample of 14–15-year-olds represented in this study, there is a significant level of pressure to follow the crowd and use the popular HVSM platforms that everyone else is using. It seems that with HVSM today, there is a strong case of the psychological phenomenon known as ‘The Bandwagon Effect.’ This term is used to describe the tendency for people to adopt certain behaviours or attitudes simply because others are doing so (Fu et al., 2012).
Findings illustrate that young people are motivated to use HVSM as a means of enhancing self-presentation through posting what is deemed as socially desirable content. Young people report how using HVSM to create such content allows them to fit in and feel accepted, although, it is evident that this experience triggers a variety of psychological responses. These findings provide contemporary support to Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, whereby, young people appear to be using HVSM to compare themselves with others who are similar to them in order to gauge their own ability and self-worth (Yang, 2016; Verduyn et al., 2020). This study has illuminated that during this process, young people underestimate their friends’ negative experiences but overestimate their friends’ positive experiences, subsequently causing emotional distress.

Findings also show that young people engage with HVSM as a means of self-expression. The nature of the environment and the features it offers, provides a creative outlet for young people, and allows them to explore their identity during a key developmental stage of their lives. Consistent with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory, young people are using the tools associated with HVSM to construct a role and perform it to an audience in their online feeds. Their identity, based on their curated images, is fluid and is constantly shifting based on the performances of the day and how others respond to them (Riccio, 2010).

4.3. Research objective two

To explore the features inherent within HVSM and understand how engagement with such features impacts young people’s mental health

Previous research presented inconsistent findings associated with social media use and young people’s mental health (Vannucci et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2014; Livingstone and Third, 2017; Orben et al., 2019; Johannes et al., 2022). This study illuminates previous findings
by suggesting that engagement with the newer HVSM platforms creates an unrelenting cyclical process of emotional highs and lows. The features inherent within HVSM appear to act as triggers for these emotions, some of which seem to act as a psychological crutch.

When observing, absorbing, and processing information in their role as passive viewer, the level of competitiveness experienced with features such as likes and comments on photographs and scrolling through images on their feeds, appears to result in young people feeling undeniable jealousy, inferiority, and pressure to be accepted. These findings are consistent with previous literature that report negative associations when passively using social media (Krasnova et al., 2013; Verduyn et al., 2017). Consistencies are also evident with social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), where participants appear to be using the quantity of likes, the quality of comments and other people’s content to determine their own personal worth.

Findings show that young people turn to their role as active contributor in an attempt to compete and combat any negative emotions experienced in their role as passive viewer. By designing their perfect personas through features such as the use of filters and selecting highlights for their feeds, the role of active contributor appears to lead to feelings of higher self-esteem, greater acceptance, and popularity. The role of active contributor therefore seems to act as a psychological support for young people, a way of gaining validation and approval from others. These findings support previous literature that reported positive relationships with wellbeing when actively engaging with social media (Myers, 2000; Ellison & Vitak, 2015). This study, however, illustrates the temporality of such emotions depending on the role adopted, supporting Weinstein’s (2018) emotional see-saw of social media use, weighted by both positive and negative influences.
As such, when using HVSM and oscillating between roles of passive viewer and active contributor, young people are constantly involved in a ping-pong effect between divergent emotions of instant inadequacy and instant gratification. Findings show that young people use HVSM to post visuals as a method of seeking such frequent validation or reassurance of themselves. This is consistent with previous research that claims social media use relates to higher levels of self-esteem (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Toma and Hancock, 2013; Wilcox and Stephen, 2013; Kim, 2020). This study has found that with HVSM and the nature of the highly visual environment, posting these visuals means that users are easily challenged. This study has illuminated that when young people do not receive sufficient likes, do not receive the affirming comments they desire and do not experience what they see other people experiencing, their emotional health plummets and they reach out for strategies to gain such endorsement to, in turn, feel happier, accepted, and popular. This perpetual change in emotions is supported by the concept of fragile self-esteem (Borton et al., 2012), whereby, individuals’ evaluations of themselves are poorly grounded, are shallow and entirely superficial (Kermis and Goldman, 2003).

These findings also illustrate how young people may be so preoccupied with protecting and enhancing their own self-esteem, that they do so at the expense of others. When in their role of active contributor, adding filters to visuals, falsifying their feed and acting as an altered self, other users are viewing this content and are in turn experiencing social comparison and a fluctuating internal self-esteem gauge. At an age when identity formation is taking place, this variability supports and expands upon the changes in levels of self-esteem that were reported in previous literature (Woods and Scott, 2016; Jan et al., 2017; Andreassen et al., 2017; Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Toma, 2013; Wilcox and Stephen, 2013). It is clear from this study that certain features which are strongly promoted with HVSM use, seem to cause reality and illusion to morph into one. It could be suggested that the idiosyncrasies of HVSM
distort young people’s perception of the real and the constructed, to the extent where they struggle to distinguish between the two (Riccio, 2010; Goffman, 1959).

One of the most striking findings from this research was the noticeable acknowledgment from young people as to the detrimental impact engagement in these factors had on their mental health. Young people were able to clearly articulate how they interacted when using HVSM and why they engaged in such activities. Equally, they were able to convey how short-lived their positive experience was and how prolonged their negative experience was. It was the nonchalant acceptance that was most remarkable as young people seemed to accept that these damaging feelings were ‘normal.’ This suggests that this generation of young people have such an ingrained need to conform, that interacting in a cyclical process of viewer and contributor on HVSM is seen as normal practice, and the associated levels of pressure, inferiority, and jealousy experienced are just deemed as part of ‘growing up’ in this era. These findings are consistent with existing literature that report both positive and negative effects of social media use (Weinstein, 2018; Singh et al., 2017; Orben et al., 2019; Johannes et al., 2022), but due to the qualitative, exploratory nature of this paper, we have unearthed that both experiences can and do co-exist.

4.4. Research objective three

To develop a conceptual model based on these results that explains their actions and emotions

The conceptual model developed (Figure 3) encompasses the aforementioned discussion of findings and depicts the relentless cyclical process that users of HVSM report in this study. The two main themes and subsequent subthemes are also illustrated. This model has been
informed by the concepts of fragile self-esteem (Kernis and Goldman, 2002; Borton et al., 2010), dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), and social comparison (Festinger, 1954).

The conceptual model suggests that HVSM, with its emphasis on photographs and videos, offers young people an online stage to interact in the HVSM environment. Interacting in their
role as ‘passive viewer’ correlates with being backstage in Goffman’s (1959) representation. Viewing likes, viewing the nature of comments, viewing others’ experiences is conducted authentically, as their real tangible selves. However, when in their role as ‘active contributor,’ it alludes to being front stage, using the tools of HVSM to create an exaggerated, hyper-self (Goffman, 1959; Baudrillard, 1981). This allows young people to mask their appearance with filters, to stage their world through the selectiveness of their feed and to switch into character as they present an idealised self. This study contends that it is this switch between backstage and front stage portrayals that fuels the emotional highs and lows.

The concept of fragile self-esteem informs the temporality of the positive emotions experienced on-stage as these feelings are only felt when in character, an apparent defence mechanism. The findings are reflective of this concept as they indicate that young people are using HVSM to compensate for their insecurities by engaging in exaggerated tendencies to defend, protect and enhance their feelings of self-worth (Kernas et al., 2008). The conceptual model echoes how engagement with filtered photographs, showcasing the best parts of their lives and adjusting their personas in this environment generates feelings of perceived high self-esteem. However, due to the fragility of this perceived high self-esteem, the model indicates the transition back to feelings of pressure, inferiority, and jealousy. Once young people revert to their real selves in the real world, they lose these shallow sensations experienced in the role of active contributor, as evidenced in this study. The concept of Social Comparison (Festinger, 1954) informs the theme of competitive comparison and the role of passive viewer on HVSM. The model shows how external conditions or socially approved benchmarks in the form of likes and comments, are more important to young people than internal personal traits.
5. STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study uses qualitative focus groups to provide rich, in-depth descriptions of personal experiences associated with HVSM and mental health. The sample group focuses on an under-explored cohort, namely young people aged 14 and 15 years old. As purposeful sampling was adopted, the number of participating schools was limited. Future research could employ a more random sampling approach to embrace a wider geographical area. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 situation, focus group sessions were carried out in an online environment. Although this could be seen as a limitation, it could also be argued as a strength. Modern young people are accustomed to technology and may therefore express themselves more openly in the virtual space, rather than feeling uneasy in a face-to-face group situation.

Future research is needed to address the ‘vicious cycle’ depicted in the findings of this study with HVSM use and young people’s mental health. In particular, more research is needed within the concept of fragile high self-esteem and how this can be addressed with young people. Studies that are intervention based within school education programmes would also be beneficial for future research projects.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a rich insight into young people’s experiences with HVSM and has illuminated associated emotions through their roles as ‘passive viewer’ and ‘active contributor.’ Young people appear to crave acceptance and will engage in a number of behavioural strategies in an attempt to gain such approval. This study has shown that HVSM platforms appear to perpetuate this process by exposing young people to a highly competitive
environment where the tools are provided to modify appearance, character and lifestyle in order to fit in.

Although young people recognise the emotional impact of their actions and acknowledge these in a matter-of-fact manner, the detrimental emotions so articulately expressed do not seem to deter young people from engaging in HVSM. The obsessive nature, the all-consuming need to compete appears to be ingrained in this generation. Finding a way to breaking this cycle is urgently needed in order to have an impact on the continual decline of young people’s mental health.
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