

**Scrolling, Safety and Self-
presentation: A Grounded Theory of
Social Anxiety for Instagram
Millennials**

Doctoral Thesis

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Abstract

Most people live with some form of mild social discomfort, but for those with social anxiety daily life is mired with social distress. With the advent of digital technology, those individuals now need to navigate their social worlds through a terrain of in-person and online engagement, and this influences how social anxiety manifests for them. In this investigation, 12 millennials were screened for social anxiety and reported using Instagram daily. They were administered open-ended interviews which were analysed using constructivist grounded theory principles. After the analysis, a strategic literature review was carried out to integrate the findings within the literature. Data from the participants led to a substantive formulation for understanding social anxiety in the information age. Three core categories emerged: exclusion, inferiority, and limitation. Those categories were then used to investigate social media processes for the participants. The findings indicate that socially anxious millennials in this study engaged in four main psychosocial processes online. The first is social comparison to others was indiscriminate online, the second was that assertive self-presenters were better able to make use of the new possibilities that Instagram presents. The third is that compensatory connection took place through voyeurism or watching others' personal content. Finally, scrolling on Instagram seems to be serving a safety behaviour for those individuals. This research develops on a small but crucial body of literature which centralises the lived experience in understanding online engagement in the fields of cyberpsychology and counselling psychology. This study revealed the significance of Instagram engagement for those who struggle with social anxiety and clarifies how Instagram is integrated within their social experience.

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Chapter 1

This chapter introduces the researcher's background and motivation in section **1.1**. Then it proceeds to explain and justify the chosen investigation and outlines the aims of the study in section **1.2** Finally, section **1.3** illustrates the relevance of this project to practitioners and participants.

1.1 Researcher Background

I began my career in a psychiatric hospital in Egypt in 2014. I spent many long hours with a multidisciplinary team deciding what the best approach for patients on the ward would be. Often this meant understanding the patients from a biopsychosocial framework. Looking at their physical health, their psychological wellbeing, their social skills, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Mental illness presented an urgency and practitioners' response of attending to thinking and emotional patterns, meant that they rarely utilised their resources to explore the social world of the patient. This was my job as an Assistant Psychologist on the ward, to attend to the patients' social world. I would often wonder at how the social element of the patients' experience would be the last thing we would assess clinically and seemed to be crowded out by other more pressing issues.

After working at that hospital, I moved to the United Kingdom and began my placements. In primary care clinical placements in London, they were no longer patients; they were referred to as 'clients' and they could put their experience into words easier than patients on the wards. The social world of the clients still featured greatly in the sessions; it was not just the patients on the wards that struggled. I was privileged to work with those two starkly different populations and to be able to contemplate the significance of the social world and its inextricable relationship to mental health.

This bird's eye view of different clinical populations led me to seek more comprehensive structures for understanding mental illness from the social perspective. I was eager for a departure from the medical model. I felt constrained by it and uninspired by what it had to offer.

Diagnostic formulations often explored the cognitive, the physical and the behavioural components of a person's life, they explored the social determinants of mental health less frequently, partly because that often took place outside of the therapy room. During my academic training I read books by Ronald Laing that framed mental illnesses such as schizophrenia as socially intelligible and found myself drawn to social formulations of mental health issues. In Laing's books there was emphasis on the social aspect of mental distress. The chiasm between the biopsychosocial model and the long, drawn-out explorations afforded to a trainee therapist was a gap that fuelled my interest. I found theories that centralised relatedness to ring true to what I had learned in my years of training. Whether it was the existential approach which recognised our 'being-in-the world', or the gripping formulations of social psychologists around the influence of systemic power in social interaction and shyness (Heidegger, 1927/1996; Zimbardo, 1998). They all assumed that connectedness was important, and that was resonant with my understanding of myself and others. The main question that kept coming up was: how does our social experience inform our mental and emotional health? Social formulations gave me hope that things could change for the patients I had worked with.

However, the formulations I was grappling with could not be fairly applied to the present day understanding of social space and interpersonal distress without factoring in how the social world has become so widely mediated by technology. Those formulations were constructed before the exponential ballooning of digital technologies and did not consider how our online worlds would influence our social lives (Attrill, 2015). We currently exist in what is referred to as the 'Information Age' (Quinn, 2015). Jaron Lanier, American philosophy writer and computer scientist said in one of his books: we are "losing our free will" (2018, p.5). Although this study

steered clear from such declarations, it recognised that it became impossible to fully understand how a person related to their social world without making their engagement with the online world part of the conversation. The gap between psychological theories and the reality of digital communication sparked a few questions:

- What does it mean for social networking platforms to be the primary form of communicating with others?
- What effect do they have on our ability to process our feelings?
- How do they aid and/or hinder forming or maintaining relationships with others?
- How do they aid and/or hinder growing spiritually?
- What kind of daily habits do they support in our life?

As a Millennial, I experienced both online and offline worlds; born between 1981 and 1996, we have memories of life before the digital revolution, yet we are also well-versed in social networking platforms in our everyday life. Those who were teenagers with the onset of social networking platforms could contribute to a rich discursive investigation and would have the right combination of distance yet engagement which allows for a critical stance. In years to come, those who have memories of offline worlds yet are equally invested in online platforms will dwindle in number and memories of offline worlds will no longer influence present experience. It felt urgent to use this opportune time to develop a conversation around it and include it within the wider discussion on mental distress. On the one hand, social networking platforms are part of an external world, elaborately connected and mediated by technological firms with highly skilled designers, optimised for maximum engagement (Mccay-Peet & Quan-Hasse, 2017). On the other hand, social

media engagement is deeply personal and has a direct bearing on our social lives, with existential implications on how we view our position in the world.

1.2. Justification & Aims

1.2.1 Justification for Project

Social networking platforms carry an inherent paradox of interaction. They are private platforms with a semi-public existence. The idea that one can be in private yet also in public is a new way of being for humans. This ran the risk of being taken for granted as normal, which might have led to dismissing an exploration of the deeper impact of this paradox. In my clinical work, I observed that a big portion of what clients brought to the session, especially around their interpersonal issues was in the context of online communication. This started the inquiry into social networking platforms and how they interact with interpersonal issues.

This inquiry led to exploring my own engagement with social media, I realised that as a millennial, I was not entirely a native user of technology. This meant that I grappled with questions surrounding the ever-evolving engagement of social media since its advent. Those who have been introduced to those platforms at an age past childhood (12-13 years of age) carried the potential for expressing something about how these technologies interacted with their lived experience, in a slightly different way than digital natives would. To millennials, this world is foreign enough to observe from afar, but familiar enough to be able to understand its personal impact. Considering my primary interest in social interaction, the question became: how does social media affect our engagement with others?

The next issue to ponder on was the question of who I thought was most influenced by the advent and advancement of social networking platforms. After taking stock of what I know about psychopathology through my clinical experience, both inpatient and outpatient, and establishing that interpersonal problems went hand in hand with mental health problems; I decided to choose a population that fit that clinical picture. Given how much has changed in the way we interact with others, how did this correspond with those who struggled with social anxiety?

The term ‘social anxiety’ meant different things in the past. Various words were used to describe the experience of social anxiety: social phobia, agoraphobia, shyness, introversion. This research looked at the experience of social anxiety from a lens that incorporated social networking platforms as a central way of communicating with others. The words social phobia and social anxiety were used interchangeably throughout this project to make references to literature easier. The terms ‘social networking platforms’ and ‘social networking sites’ (SNS) were used in conjunction with ‘social media’, again, to simplify references to literature.

1.2.2 Overall Aim

The overall aim of the project was to develop a formulation of what constituted social anxiety in the information age with omnipresent social networking platforms. Beyond diagnostic formulations, there needed to be a recognition of the way social interaction occurred in this era. The overall aim was broken down to a few objectives:

- The first objective was to craft a formulation for understanding social anxiety based on qualitative data by participants who report being socially anxious. This was achieved mainly through the analysis of qualitative interviews with participants who have lived experience of social anxiety.
- The second objective was to understand basic processes taking place between the individual and the online platform.
- The third objective was to develop a dynamic substantive theory that represents and partially explains the lived experience of social anxiety based on the data produced by the participants as well as the findings of a strategic literature review.
- The fourth objective was to develop insights on how the findings inform counselling psychologists, clients, policy-making and ethical considerations of computer mediated communication.

The objectives were achieved through the course of this research, and the final formulation captures social anxiety in the information age through the lengthy accounts of lived experience of the participants. The findings have thus informed counselling psychologists and the stakeholders, as outlined in *Chapter 7*.

1.3 Relevance

1.3.1 Counselling Psychologists and Cyberpsychologists

In clinical work the focus is on the client and what they bring to the session and therapists have not been trained to understand the online experiences of their clients. Often the online experience is side-lined as ‘the online world’, failing to be seen as integrated within daily life

(Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Psychologists do not typically study social media; or cover it as part of their post-graduate curricula (Sherrell & Lambie, 2018).

The British Psychological Society, which is one of the major organising bodies for counselling psychologists in the United Kingdom, only recognised 'Cyberpsychology' as a section in 2018 after it was first proposed in 2015 (Kaye, 2019). The delayed recognition of this field is also reflected in the practice and supervision in post-graduate programs. None of the clinical supervisors on this doctoral program were particularly interested in the topic and it was generally regarded as an extra dimension, removed from psychotherapy. Existential psychotherapy has yet to incorporate the online world in its formulations. For existential therapists, the client is seen through mostly physical, spiritual, social or personal dimensions, there is a glaring absence of the digital world. This absence is not justified as the internet has seen 4.66 billion active users worldwide and is thus playing a huge role in the world we live in (Statista, 2021).

This project was an attempt to bridge the knowledge gap between the way social anxiety was conceptualised in textbooks to what it is when social media interaction is considered. It also provided rich data to support psychologists in answering relevant questions and assumptions about the influence of social media, that are often taking place in the public realm. These questions are being answered by media outlets and other organisations that are not emancipated from the corporate gain of technological platforms.

‘The Social Dilemma’, a famous documentary that came out in January 2020 tackled the controversy around how social networking platforms were affecting people’s lives (Orlowski, 2020). Although this documentary has a very clear agenda against the use of social media, it sparked big questions in wider society. Those questions were not being answered by psychologists, but were being addressed by people who were affiliated with technological corporations. The existential aspect of social media engagement seemed to be very present in the public debate around its influence on human beings. This research is driven by a desire to engage the division of Counselling Psychology in the BPS in systematically tackling those questions, establishing its entitlement to be heard in the global debate around social media engagement and mental health.

Finally, this project was relevant to clinicians as it provided them with a resource on understanding the nuanced implications of daily online interaction on those presenting with social anxiety, or less clearly defined social difficulties. The relevance to counselling psychologists is also enhanced by the timing of this project which is in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened the power of social media on people’s lives in almost every way around the world.

1.3.2 Socially Anxious Individuals

This research helped those who met the criteria for inclusion in this study in a few ways. Firstly, it led to deepening their understanding of their online experiences and certain patterns of behaviour online and offline. Secondly, it enabled a more constructive conversation around the influence of social networking platforms on their lives from the vantage point of health and the

quality of their social experiences. It introduced new insights on how they might better use those platforms to support the quality of their relationships and manage their anxiety, exploring how platforms can help or hinder. Even though the focus on social anxiety limited the generalisability of the study for the sake of staying focused on one mental health phenomenon, it enabled them to explore the distress that social anxiety presents in the modern world and in a way that reflected their day-to-day life.

1.4 Problems with Current Situation

Social anxiety is one of the most diagnosed conditions (Kasper, 1998; Kessler et al., 1994; Furmark et al., 1999). It is associated with reductions in quality of life, in employment and use of prescribed medication (Acarturk et al., 2009). Individuals who experience social anxiety are more likely to use medical outpatient clinics, receive lower incomes, be less expected to earn college degrees, or attain managerial, technical, or professional occupations than people not experiencing the same distress through social anxiety (Acarturk et al., 2009). They are also less able to manage family relationships, romantic relationships, with 21.9% having attempted suicide (Magee et al., 1996).

The issue with social anxiety is that it manifests differently than it would without omnipresent social media platforms which govern how many people communicate in the information age. Lived experience is not generally consulted when technology and its impact are being researched. Researchers who have conducted meta-analyses on different research methods to investigate social networking platforms have noted that the literature has been deficient in its involvement of rich personal accounts. Most of the studies were broad quantitative studies, which

are very insightful, however compromise the richness of individual experience. Social media research methods must go beyond what takes place on the screens to contextualise interactions with what is happening around those screens (Farman, 2015; Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2017). This is all with a broader aim to tackle how psychologists tend to view the internet as a homogenous arena, and this generalisation needs to be pixelated by researching the interaction with the online world through the uniqueness of each user and their specific needs (Attrill, 2015; Baker & Algorta, 2016).

After deciding on the subject and population of interest and conducting a preliminary literature review (See *Chapter 2: Preliminary Literature Review*) the research question was then defined as a starting point:

How does frequent use of social media platforms influence the experience of social anxiety for millennials?

This research question was the guiding principle behind the research methodology and design, as well as how to approach participants. The coming pages capture the process of arriving at the aims and the justification for the research project through the preliminary literature review. This review was done to skim over relevant sources and avoid falling into the trap of replicating or missing important elements both in the choice of methodology and the research question. It was done to ensure that this study would contribute to original insights in the field.

Chapter 2: Preliminary Literature Review

This chapter presents the search strategy used to build the preliminary literature review in section **2.1**. It then details the reviewed literature in section **2.2**. The review is arranged thematically as follows: ‘Social Anxiety Disorder: Diagnostic Definitions and Qualitative Research’; ‘Social Anxiety in Existentialism’; ‘Social Networking Websites’, and ‘Discourse on Social Networking Platforms and Mental Health’. Finally, the summary of the chapter is presented at the end of the literature review in section **2.3**.

2.1 Search Strategy

This section includes a basic search strategy for the preliminary literature review. The purpose of this search strategy was to clarify which key words were used for searching for sources and justifying the use of the key words generally used for the search. Below is a table that illustrates the basic search strategy for the preliminary literature review.

Table 1

Search Strategy for Preliminary Literature Review

Key Words	Dates Searched	Justification	Inclusion Criteria
‘Social Anxiety’; ‘Social Phobia’	20 years prior - This is because the current understanding of social anxiety dates to more recent years (In addition to the earlier Diagnostic Statistical Manual diagnosis in 1952).	‘Social phobia’ and ‘Social anxiety’ were used interchangeably. The diagnostic formulation of social anxiety was important to review for the purposes of understanding how it could be used and where it stood in comparison to how participants made meaning of their social anxiety in this research.	In order to cover traditional diagnostic formulations of social anxiety from diagnostic manuals (i.e. DSM).
‘Social Anxiety’; ‘Social Anxiety and Qualitative Research’	20 years prior	This was to excavate the literature for alternative formulations of social anxiety and to clarify where to position this research project in the realm of qualitative literature on social anxiety.	Used the first 10 sources from the search, excluded studies that involved different mental health problems such as depression or developmental disorders.
‘Existential-phenomenological philosophy’; ‘Heidegger’ (being-in-the-world); ‘Sartre’ (being-for others); ‘Buber’ (I-it and I-thou), ‘Laing’ (Self and Others) and/or ‘Social Anxiety’; and/or ‘Social Phobia’	N/A - This is because existential philosophy emerged in the 19 th century.	This was to incorporate a more philosophical conceptualisation of social anxiety. This was also done to inform the researcher’s definition of social anxiety. It was significant to reflect on existential formulations to make the research relevant to counselling psychologists. The full details as to why existential philosophy was explored can be more fully explained in Chapter 3, 3.1 <i>Ontology</i> .	Used the first 10 sources from the search results, excluded studies that were centred around politics or public policy as they were not relevant the research.
‘Social networking websites’, ‘Social Networking	10 years prior – Social networking websites started growing in 2004	Carrying out basic research on social networking websites was essential to choose which platform to focus on. This search was	Used the first 10 sources from the search results. Excluded research that was focused on the

Platforms’, ‘Social Media’ and/or ‘Mental Health’	with the beginning of Facebook.	also done to review literature by scholars on the combined topics of social networking and mental health, to clarify the ongoing discourse in academia.	business/corporate aspects of social networking websites.
‘Instagram’	10 years prior – Instagram started growing in 2010.	This search was done to find specific studies done around Instagram since its inception. This is because the eventual choice was to carry out research on Instagram users exclusively, to narrow down the scope of this investigation.	Used the first 10 sources from the search results. Excluded research that was focused on photography or art solely.

I started by looking at diagnostic formulations of social anxiety and social phobia from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and related health problems. Afterwards, I examined qualitative research on social anxiety to unpack the qualitative accounts of social anxiety that are not necessarily captured in diagnostic frameworks. Finally, I searched relevant existential literature on social anxiety; this was to facilitate the possibility of bridging the existential perspective on social anxiety with findings of this investigation.

Researching social anxiety from the diagnostic and the qualitative paradigms while incorporating existential literature facilitated my construction of a definition of social anxiety that would be original to this study. I arrived at a choice of psychometric survey of inclusion that did not reduce the experience to its diagnostic definition but found resonance in both qualitative and diagnostic formulations. Finally, I kept the definition of social anxiety broad to allow for the data to shape it as it emerged as theory construction took place.

I aimed to explore research on social networking platforms and the possible links that were made with mental health. The main aim of this search was to reach a choice of platform that focused the scope of this study and was most aligned with the choice of participants. As previously mentioned in *Chapter 1* section *1.2.1 Justification for Project*; throughout this investigation, the terms ‘social networking websites’, ‘social networking platforms’ and ‘social media’ were used interchangeably. This was because although social media implied a wider set of media outlets (including video-based platforms), most of the literature did not distinguish between social media and social networking platforms. I used Middlesex University library database for my search.

2.2 Preliminary Literature Review

2.2.1 Social Anxiety Disorder: Diagnostic Definitions and Qualitative Research

In 1952, when the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders was being developed, it used terms such as ‘antisocialism’ and ‘agoraphobia’ (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). The descriptions centred around symptomatic manifestations of the fear of being in public spaces. The DSM-III categorised social phobia as a specific phobia that is mutually exclusive with avoidant personality disorder. The DSM III-R afterwards expanded the definition to include interactional fears such as hand trembling and saying foolish things in social situations. Avoidant personality disorder could later be comorbid with social anxiety disorder. Furthermore, in the DSM-IV, the entry for the disorder became entitled ‘Social Anxiety Disorder’, which reflected the change in perspective from a disorder that was once considered a

specific phobia to a broader understanding of it that considered it a more generalised phenomenon (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Social anxiety is most recently defined as the “Persistent fear of one or more social performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The individual fears they will act in a way that will expose their anxiety symptoms and experience humiliation. The DSM goes further to say that it can cause a situationally bound or pre-disposed panic attack, that the person is aware that the fear is unreasonable, and that these individuals end up avoiding the situation, or enduring it with intense distress. As most diagnostic criteria, it needs to interfere with the person’s routine, academic or occupational functioning, social activity, or relationships and last more than 6 months for a diagnosis to be complete and is not due to another mental disorder, drugs, or medication (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Social anxiety disorder was also framed as a phobia by the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and related health problems, or the ICD-10. The ICD-10 categorises social anxiety as a social phobia as well, defining it as a fear of scrutiny by other people leading to avoidance of social situations. It refers to how pervasive social phobias are linked with low self-esteem and fear of criticism; and those patients present with complaints of blushing, hand tremors, nausea etc. They often reported that the physiological manifestations of their anxiety are the most pressing issue they are facing (ICD-10, 2009). In both diagnostic criteria, the experience of being scrutinised by others as the underlying concern for the socially anxious individual was commonly stated. Although the DSM and the ICD-10 rightly outlined the physiological states

associated with the disorder, researching qualitative methods of inquiry enabled the arrival at a more comprehensive understanding of social anxiety.

Some qualitative studies used structured interviews to elicit information. One of them was looking at a specific population (socially anxious teachers) and how they experienced their futures compared to teachers who did not fit the score for social anxiety and showed that social anxiety seemed to have an adverse effect on their outlook on their future (Ozturk, 2009). Further research looked at factors that participants believed were helpful in alleviating social anxiety, and others that worsen it (Chartier et al., 1998). The most significant feature of the latter study was that it was able to identify an interesting element of social anxiety: its pattern of occurrence. According to this study, social anxiety was a chronic experience that expands temporally and is usually experienced long-term (Chartier et al., 1998).

One line of research focused on uncovering relationships between disclosure to close friends and family and social anxiety, showing that although social anxiety manifests with interactions with wider social circles, close friends and family seemed to be the exception (Gee, 2013). Explorations that focused on the relational aspect of social anxiety in the literature contrasted with research that centred on the cognitive behavioural framework to understand it (Mohammadi, 2019; Hulme et al., 2012).

Phenomenological studies also looked at experiences of social anxiety as a socio-spatial phenomenon and how individuals with social anxiety engineered certain habits within their daily life to manage their symptoms, particularly how they avoided social interaction (Boyle, 2018).

One study focused on the phenomenology of social anxiety, drawing from the existential given of ‘Being-for-others’, which is the persistent awareness of the self as the actual or potential object of a conscious other (Kagedan, 2017). The findings emphasised the need for the individual to be seen and accepted by their therapist. It also suggested that therapy in a group setting is often most helpful, and that developing authentic self-approval is usually the aim of the therapy. This study used an existential perspective on social anxiety throughout the study (Kagedan, 2017), and served as an entry point to examining social anxiety in the realm of existential philosophy.

2.2.2 Social Anxiety in Existentialism

Many existential philosophers have sought to explain how a person’s existential position is implicated by the social world. The first philosopher that was central to this investigation was Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger (1927/1996), human beings are different from objects in the world, and he referred to them as ‘Dasein’, which means ‘to-be-there’. In his seminal book *‘Being and Time’*, he distinguished the human being from the rest of matter by claiming that dasein is characterised by a certain care for the world. To Heidegger, the world is inseparable from the being; and being is always in the world. Having established that the human being is ‘being-in-the-world’, he believed that our state of mind affects the quality of the world around us, and our interactions with others (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

On a greater scale, Heidegger believed that existing in the world on a day-to-day basis exposed the human to a state of ‘everydayness’, which is the notion of conforming to an average way of being, which he perceived leads the human to inauthenticity. The individual is subjected

to the influence of society and becomes a 'they-self' or 'das-man' (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Thus, the capacity for *dasein* to experience anxiety individuates him/her from the world around them.

Building on Heidegger's views, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1943), dedicated a third of his book *Being and Nothingness* to understanding human beings' existence with others. He articulated how 'being in-itself' and 'being for-itself' are different in the sense that the previous is the unconscious mode of being whereas the latter is being which is conscious of its own consciousness. The 'being for-itself' is marked by negation, in the sense that we become conscious of what we are not, which is an object. However, this changes when we are aware of being observed. The other's 'look', or 'gaze' exposes the human being to a compromise of existential freedom: the freedom to subjectively define oneself (Sartre, 1943). Social anxiety is - from Sartre's standpoint - defined as a mode of being where all the 'being-with' others is a 'being-for others' (Sartre, 1943; Kagedan, 2017). However, he also regarded anxiety as the window into authenticity and a more questioning mode of existence, claiming that individuals are shielded from true awareness of the unfathomable nature of their existence by their blind pursuit of a life lived in a crowd, suppressing their own individuality.

The work of those two philosophers aligned well with Søren Kierkegaard's view of selfhood amongst others. In his book *Either/Or* he posits that trying to take part in modern society alienates the individual (1843/1987). To fit in, the individual must engage in pretence and construct life in a way that the inner is not the outer; he likens it to game-playing, which invites a certain inauthenticity with being around other people. This dissonance then results in coping mechanisms for the individual in the sense that they either withdraw physically or take the more

common route which is an inward withdrawal while continuing to adhere to popular conventions in the manner of 'irony' (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987).

Martin Buber brought in a more relational component to social interaction. He depicted two forms of relating to others: 'I-it' and 'I-thou'. In the realm of 'I-it', man is experiencing the world as a multitude of contents, a world of objects that exist in time that has been. On the other hand, in the realm of 'I-thou', man is living within a relational world, a mutual world, that transcends the past and is only in the present. He believes that 'I-thou' is the realm of subjectivity which allows human beings to connect to others, or God (Buber, 2013).

These overviews of existential thought all point to a general notion of society as posing a challenge to human authenticity, and they all allude to the idea of having a hidden self that is not brought out in the social world. Whether it is Heidegger's concept of the 'they-self', or Kierkegaard's notion of 'irony', or the Sartrean 'being-for others', or Buber's 'I-it' form of relating to the world, the social world according to existential literature is inextricably bound with tensions around authenticity and the threat of being objectified. Through reading about social anxiety from an existential perspective, I held the assumption within this investigation that social interaction is inherently difficult, and perhaps from this vantage point, social anxiety could be comprehended as a state where the tension between oneself and others in social settings is heightened.

2.2.3 Definition of Social Anxiety

After briefly reviewing the diagnostic formulations and existential literature on social anxiety I crafted the following definition for social anxiety as:

The persistent fear of interacting with other people rooted in a struggle with managing the tension between the social response to the self and an authentic self. Social anxiety can exist on the level of daily activities or in a more public domain. It could be experienced both offline and online.

The definition was kept broad to allow for the data to inevitably reveal different dimensions that could be uncovered throughout the investigation through the in-depth qualitative accounts. After developing a working definition of social anxiety, the next step was to examine the literature on social networking platforms to determine which one to focus on.

2.2.4 Social Networking Platforms

The internet has seen 4.5 billion users at the start of the year 2020; active users on social networking websites have surpassed 3.8 billion. Almost 60% of the world population is now online, and 49% of the world population is currently on those platforms (Phua et al., 2017; Statista, n.d; GCF Global, 2020 (a,b); Chaffey, D, 2020). Moreover, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these numbers have increased according to a consumer behaviour report (Kantar, 2020). It is no longer regarded as a world separate to users' physical existence, but rather is part of individuals' everyday lives as a means of interacting with others (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2005).

The ubiquity of social networking technology has led to the conflation of terms that are used to refer to it. The term ‘social media’ is used interchangeably with ‘social networking websites’, however they are not the same thing. ‘Social media’ is a wider term referring to platforms where there is a collaborative sharing of content which can include web-blogs, online virtual communities, and social networking websites (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Social networking websites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with whom they share the connection, and view and follow other connections made by people in their system (Dewing, 2012; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). They enable individuals to communicate with one another, expand their networks and exist in the collective consciousness of the people they know and exhibit aspects of life narrative online (Walsh, 2017). The most globally used SNSs are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Snapchat (Chaffey, 2020).

Facebook was founded in 2004 as a platform which was initially limited to those with a university email address. It allowed students to send messages and invites, upload photos and otherwise stay virtually connected to their classmates. It gradually expanded to include high schools, and by 2006 it was open to the public due to popular demand (Jenkins, 2013). It enabled its users to connect and share content online with family and friends; it is now the world’s largest social network with over 1 billion users worldwide. It is not the oldest social networking platform; however, it is one of the longest standing and most globally embraced (Shah, 2020). Having a Facebook account is seen by a large amount of its users as essential as having an email, this is because many other websites have integrated Facebook into their login process. The content mostly shared on Facebook is videos and links to news websites and various media hubs

(GCF Global, 2020a). Its professional counterpart, LinkedIn, is a social networking platform primarily used for career development (Johnson, 2020).

Besides Facebook and LinkedIn, Twitter is also a vastly adopted platform. It is a microblogging platform that enables its users to share short messages publicly, called 'tweets'. Tweets can be up to 280 characters long. Twitter users follow other users, a lot of the time with similar academic and personal interests. It is mostly written content that is shared with less emphasis on photos and videos (Economic & Social Research Council, n.d).

Far from sharing only words, Instagram is a social networking platform that enables a form of communication where users share their updates by taking photos and using filters to tweak them. It is a primarily visual platform, claiming to 'allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen' (Instagram Press, n.d). Amongst the platforms apart from Facebook, Instagram is the fastest growing. It has attracted 1 billion active users (Statista, n.d), and on average there are 55 million photos uploaded by users per day (Hu et al., 2014).

Social networking platforms generally belong in the information technology field, which makes it very difficult to explore them from the perspective of mental health and psychology. Despite the challenges of researching social networking platforms, there is a growing body of literature that aims to build clarity around how social networking platforms interact with our mental health and wellbeing.

2.2.5 Interactions of Mental Health and Wellbeing with Social Media Engagement

In 2018 the British Psychological Society formally recognised the sub-division ‘Cyberpsychology’, as previously mentioned in *Chapter 1*. This division aims to formalise a scientific understanding of the impact and dynamic processes that occur in groups and for users of digital technologies (BPS, 2021). This led to research that prioritised exploring various aspects of engagement on social networking platforms. Research on social networking platforms was carried out in many different directions and from different vantage points. There is research on online engagement as it related to generational differences for example (Leung, 2013), and how different activities online affect mental health (Yang, 2016). There are many psychological theories that developed within the cyberpsychology discipline such as the ‘Online/Offline Integration Hypothesis’, which aims to provide a framework to examine the relationship between the offline and the online world (Lin et al., 2018). Other theories such as the ‘Technology Interaction Model’, aim to map out how technology use can subtract and add to a person’s mind, body, environment, and possessions (Shaw et al., 2018).

Those theories provide potential frameworks for integrating engagement with technology and social networking platforms and human social and emotional goals, needs and processes. They are broad and all-encompassing and provide a global perspective on user engagement with technology. The design of social networking technology starts with the user, which is why it is important to place emphasis on individual differences when approaching research on engagement with technology. Application developers need to satisfy or be perceived to satisfy users intrinsic or extrinsic motivations if they want to be successful in their design. (Peters et al., 2018)

In 2018, Cambridge Analytica, a British political consulting firm harvested millions of online Facebook profiles to be used for political purposes. A public discussion around the ethical standards of social networking organisations was incited as a result. News networks like the CNN published articles on the need for a new digital social contract, to steer technology towards the ‘wellbeing of democratic society’ (Ghosh & Scott, 2018). It propelled a movement of thinking critically about those entities and understanding our relationship with them. Psychologists expressed widespread concerns in opinion pieces around how levels of depression, loneliness and reduced wellbeing were associated with how much time individuals spent communicating with strangers online (Kraut, 2015; Walton, 2017; Reynolds, 2020). The great bulk of research on mental health and social media engagement has correlated it with loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998), and declines in wellbeing (Kross et al., 2013; Lin et al., 1996) and social isolation (Cacciopo et al., 2011).

In a study done by the University of Copenhagen on 1095 individuals, who were divided into two groups: a control group that was permitted to use Facebook for a week and another group that was not. They found that those who were not using Facebook scored higher on a life satisfaction survey. They also discovered that abstinence from Facebook was more beneficial for individuals who reported experiencing ‘Facebook envy’, the tendency to envy other users on Facebook (Tromholt, 2016). This stood in opposition to research that showed the immense value it added to users who had learning difficulties and special needs. This demonstrates how those users benefitted in various ways from using social media (e.g., building social capital) (Chadwick & Fullwood, 2018). In comparison, another study stated that individuals are 80% more likely to self-disclose on the internet than in real life, meaning that they feel more comfortable

communicating online (Suler, 2004). Older studies also looked at the equalisation effects of online communication on social status differences (Dubrovsky et al., 1991). There are a few studies that show that social anxiety and the use of social networking platforms are not linked (Alkis et al., 2017; Mosanya et al., 2019). One study has shown that there are some correlations between preoccupation with social media platforms and particular personality profiles (Sindermann, Elhai & Montag, 2020), and another has demonstrated the positive correlation of social media mediated comparison and social anxiety (Jiang & Ngien, 2020).

Experts often overlooked the utility and social and emotional significance of being online and did not make nuanced distinctions between different platforms, or users. There are many researchers which claim objectivity yet have a clear bias against the use of social networking platforms, such as Mary Aiken (2017), which means that there is a need to develop more exploratory ways of approaching it and detailed and in-depth methods of understanding how it interacts with different aspects of who we are.

The tendency to sensationalise social media engagement as damaging to mental health is also fuelled by chilling accounts of teenage suicide attempts and eating disorders (General, 2021). However, to simplify and sensationalise platforms that have garnered the attention and engagement of billions of people around the world, is to risk really being able to understand them. Social networking platforms are all different, and the choice of which one to focus on required some reflection on my part. As previously mentioned in *Chapter 1*, section *1.2.1 Justification for Project*, the primary focus on millennials guided me to the choice of platform due to their unique generational position.

2.2.6 Instagram

Arriving at the choice of using Instagram to research was mainly due to how it was frequently referred to as the most addictive social networking platform alongside Facebook (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), and that visually based social media is more intimate and reduces a feeling of loneliness (Sheldon, 2016). Content on Instagram is primarily visual, which makes it stand out from the rest as championing a photo-based form of communication. Instagram content is also comprised of the curation of pictures, which means that there is a creative component that is inseparable from Instagram and makes it very interesting to explore. In addition to Instagram being the platform most heavily used by millennials who have been the demographic of interest for this study from its inception. 65% of Instagram users are between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age (Statista, n.d). This user demographic is unique to Instagram, which means that there is a particular relevance to millennials. It is also a mobile-centric application, which means that it is generally associated with regular use. There are many recent studies suggesting the need for more research on Instagram since it began in 2010, as it still has not attracted enough attention from the research community (Lup et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Hu et al.,2014).

2.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the preliminary literature review, in addition to detailing the search strategy used to build the literature review. It was used as a foundation for developing the aims and objectives of the research previously outlined in *Chapter 1*, section *1.2. Justification & Aims*. However, it will not be used for the analysis process of this research project.

This review covered the diagnostic understanding and qualitative research on social anxiety and enabled a clearer conviction in the chosen research methodology, as well as the choice of social networking platform. Ultimately, the initial literature review has served its role of clarifying the aims of the research investigation, which were outlined in *Chapter 1*, section *1.2.2 Overall Aim*.

Although grounded theory, which is the chosen research method, does not typically involve conducting a literature review prior to the investigation; since Glaser and Strauss' original grounded theory suggested that the literature review be conducted after analysis to avoid placing research into pre-constructed theories and seeing the research through existent frameworks (Charmaz, 2006). It was considered an important addition to the beginning phase of this project to craft the aims based on an initial understanding of other platforms and review diagnostic and alternative definitions of social anxiety. In addition to arriving at a working definition for social anxiety that would guide on the inclusion criteria to be used throughout this research. It also helped understand the varying existential and diagnostic formulations on social anxiety and guide on a psychometric test to utilise to refine the sample of participants.

The next chapter will discuss the research methodology based on the aims of the study and the researcher's own ontological-epistemological value position in relation to the research methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

After introducing the research topic, the researcher's interest and background and conducting a short preliminary literature review, the next step was to decide on how to approach this investigation.

The ontological position of the researcher is presented in section **3.1**. The epistemology of the qualitative research method is detailed in section **3.2**. An evaluation of the different qualitative research approaches and the choice of research method is outlined in section **3.3**. Section **3.4** and **3.5** explain the chosen research method in more detail. The research design and ethical considerations are clarified in section **3.6**. The analysis process is outlined in section **3.7**. Finally, researcher reflexivity is discussed in section **3.8**.

3.1 Ontology

A foundational part of choosing a research method is the clarification of the ontological position of the researcher. Ontology is the study of being and its primary concern is the question of ‘what is the nature of existence and the structure of reality?’ (Crotty, 1998; p.10). This question needs addressing to fully outline the ontological foundation of this research investigation. As a student and researcher, I chose to study existential psychotherapy. Finding my philosophical position on the continuum of relativist and realist ontologies has been a challenge from the beginning of my career in psychology. The challenge started when I began working closely with the medical model as a function of my workplace, and therefore had an appreciation and understanding for the semblance of certainty it provided in the face of demanding situations and ruptured families.

However, as I developed in the field, especially as someone who traversed two starkly different cultures (Arab and British), an appreciation of relativism emerged, and with it came the choice to study existential psychotherapy and learn about the phenomenological approach to therapy. This then led to an immersion with existential philosophers. One of the key ideas that influenced the ontological position of this research investigation belonged to seminal philosopher, Martin Heidegger, whose work was referenced earlier in *Chapter 2*, section 2.2.2 *Social Anxiety in Existentialism*. Heidegger posited that ‘being’ could not be conceived without subjectivity by which he meant that lived experience is inseparable from reality, just like being is inseparable from the world. He prolifically argued that through the givens of our being we

perceive the world. He outlined the givens as universal constructs such as time, sociality and space (Heidegger, 1927/1996).

This compelling assumption about the nature of reality as having an inextricable relationship with our being opened my research endeavour to subjectivity as an ontology. Subjectivity emanated from a recognition that psychological and cognitive science must deal with mental properties that cannot be referred to by means of a purely physiological or objective vocabulary (Searle, 1991). This ontological position, often considered a product of Heideggerian thought, predicated that all conscious experience is beyond quantification. It is unique as it is uncommon to approach computer mediated communication research from the ontological vantage point of subjectivity. Additionally, this approach assumes that no computer has more knowledge than human beings and that computer programs are syntactical, whereas human minds are semantic (Searle, 1991). Social media is seen as no different; it is conceptualised as a product of the social and emotional meaning-making processes of humans. This is a departure from the ontological assumptions most widely adopted in this area of research which fell in the realm of objectivism or empiricism, often expressed as behaviourism (Economic & Social Research Council, n.d; Hu et. al., 2017; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Statista, n.d).

Additionally, psychologists have approached this subject by drawing from positivist and materialist positions and by utilising their expert knowledge to make meaning of it, although the data has no consensus. This divergence from positivism or materialism is a key factor in the originality of this research study and holds the promise of revealing rich qualitative material that is grounded on an assumption that reality cannot exist without the observer (Maturana, 1986; Searle, 1991; Dell, 1987). This means that as a researcher I would not be positioned outside of

this research endeavour but would play an active role in the analysis and the final product. This would also mirror my active engagement with Instagram as a user, which was a parallel process all the way through. The implications of my activity on Instagram will be further addressed in *Chapter 3, section 3.8 Reflexivity*.

The phenomenological ontology of existential training, my cross-cultural experiences combined with my clinical work has brought me to an assumption about the nature of existence and the structure of reality which incorporates the need for a ‘bigger picture’. This means that even though I am deeply attuned to individual qualitative experiences; I do not separate the individual experience from a wider context, culturally and historically. The emphasis on the bigger picture was also influenced by my most recent job as a refugee mental health counsellor, where the stories of my clients would lead me to question the world’s systemic problems at large. Those clients usually arrive to the therapy session with a long history of trauma that was not of their own choosing, which left me grappling with a more robust way of including wider context in the formulations of these clients.

The awareness that the bigger picture needed to be explored was expressed in concerted efforts in the world of psychology to examine individual presentations in a contextualised way, leading to the development of the ‘Power Threat Meaning Framework’. It is a framework created by a group of senior clinical psychologists in the United Kingdom. It summarises and integrates evidence about the role of various kinds of power in people’s lives, the kinds of threat that the misuse of power poses and the ways they have learned to respond to those threats (Johnstone & Boyle, 2019). The importance of contextualizing the individual within a bigger picture of what

happened to them, and how it has affected their lived experience was crucial to arriving at an understanding of their reality. I was very influenced by this framework and how it incorporated the outside world and its forces into individual narrative.

That emphasis on the outside world, also sat well with the way social networking websites are structured and designed: by global technological corporations that design strategic algorithms which allow for content to be sorted in a user's feed based on relevance instead of publish time (Mahapatra, 2020). This made the user's experience both a product of their own choices and a function of an external algorithm which they have no direct control over (Wieder-Bottaro, 2011). Therefore, the participants' reality is also partially determined by external stakeholders that design the user interface based on their previous choices. This meant that I needed an approach that allowed my findings to be scaled up to the outside world. Qualitative research approaches tend to be insular in nature, and focus on the dynamic between two individuals, the interviewer, and the interviewee. However, in the case of those participants, there was one more dimension: the digital world, and it was expansive and outside of them. This meant that I needed to allow for an element of the outside world to permeate the analysis after the data has been collected from the participants. This was achieved by choosing grounded theory as a research method.

The ontological position as influenced by both the nature of the research design, and the researcher's clinical experience required that there be a careful integration of a strategic literature review as informed by the participants' experiences. This literature review would be carried out after the data collection to formally incorporate academic literature on social media in the

findings and discussion. This also meant that the literature review was utilised as a source of competing data, to refine the findings and evaluate them. This process of evaluation was necessary for two reasons. The first reason is that the structure of social networking platforms and our engagement with them has two distinct dimensions: internal and external. The second is to scale up the theory and position it in the wider literature. This interest in both the big picture and the lived experience, therefore positioned this research within the realm of relativist and subjective ontology, and led to the final choice of research approach which is grounded theory.

3.2 Epistemology & The Qualitative Research Paradigm

After presenting the journey leading up to the ontological position of the researcher; it was decided that a qualitative approach to this investigation was most fitting. This section will introduce the qualitative paradigm, its epistemology, and critique various qualitative research methods. The aim was to arrive at a research method informed by the ontological position of the researcher and that would serve the research question. This choice will be elaborated on below.

Epistemology is the discipline concerned with how knowledge is constructed and by whom; aiming to identify the nature of knowledge and its legitimacy (Crotty, 1998). The qualitative paradigm is a model of research used to understand people's beliefs, attitudes, and experiences; and generates largely non-numerical data (Kalra et al., 2013). The purpose of qualitative research in the context of psychology is to inform practice and it benefits from a balance between realism and relativism (McLeod, 2012). The key advantage of qualitative research is that it enables a rich, deep, and complex description of the phenomenon in question (Barker et al., 2002).

The choice to carry out qualitative research was mainly because of the observation that the individual experience of the online user was scarce in the literature. Qualitative research allowed the depth of the lived experience of social networking platforms to be explored. The main way this is done is through in-depth interviewing. At the root of interviewing is not an interest in evaluating or quantifying, but what drives good data collection is genuine interest in lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of this experience (Schutz, 1967). Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour (Seidman, 2006). Since social networking is a socio-cultural phenomenon, using a quantitative approach to research it would have been useful, but might reduce some of the unique ways it interacts with the individual user; and some of the psychological and experiential complexity might have gone uncaptured (Salmons, 2017).

To allow for explanatory power to be yielded from this substantive study, there needed to be an interpretation of the data. Descriptive approaches to understanding the data provide rich reports, however, the interpretative epistemology focuses on analysis of the data from the participants' accounts, as a route to obtaining knowledge (Crotty, 1998). The assumption is that the researcher, participants, and the social world impact each other, and that this makes up the nature of our reality. This assumption is congruent with the ontological position of relativism, and the centralisation of the observer. The research methodology chosen was thus consistent with a relativist, subjective ontology, and interpretative epistemological position.

3.3 Choice of Research Approach

The qualitative paradigm has been chosen for this research with the belief that it would open a novel and original way of building knowledge around how social networking sites influence those with social anxiety. There were various qualitative methods that were considered for this research:

- *Narrative Approach* - The narrative research method is an umbrella term for research that captures personal experience over time, considering the relationship between individual, identity and cultural context through the story being told by the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McAdams, 1988). The main assumption of this approach is that human beings are meaning-making beings that have a natural inclination to tell story; and that language is the medium for constructing meaning and self-identity (Mishler, 1995; McAdams, 1988). One of the assumptions of the narrative approach is that personal stories are more adequate to understanding social life than other approaches (Sarbin, 1986). When the research question was refined, this approach was not considered because its focus would have been on the narrative structure, tone and themes within the context of using social media such as Instagram, instead of focusing on the emotional and social interactions which unfold in the data.
- *Phenomenology* - Phenomenology is the study of 'being' with two important phases: the transcendental and the hermeneutic or existential (Larkin & Thomson, 2012). Transcendental phenomenology – from Edmund Husserl – strove to identify essential core

structures of a given experience through a process of methodological reductions. For Husserl, phenomenology was a means of identifying and suspending assumptions (Husserl, 1907/1999). This was also referred to as ‘bracketing’ off culture, context and history to get at the universal essence of a given phenomenon, as it presents itself to consciousness (Larkin & Thomson, 2012). For an existential-phenomenological practitioner, this meant that prejudice and assumptions are excluded from the therapeutic process as much as possible (Van Deurzen, 2012; Van Deurzen, 2014). When these principles are translated to research, they imply that prejudice about the research process would be bracketed out, and the researcher would strive to capture the essence of the phenomenon between the researcher and the participant. The phenomenological approach to investigation has also resulted in the development of interpretive phenomenological analysis outlined below.

- *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* - IPA is when descriptive phenomenology delves into interpretation (Larkin & Thomson, 2012). It involves analysing the transcript of and producing a thorough examination of the participant’s ‘life world’ (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This is done by interviewing participants who are trying to make sense of their world, while the researcher is also trying to make sense of their own reading and meaning-making frame in relation to the text. This was broadly categorised into ‘reading in’ versus ‘reading out’. This double hermeneutic is characteristic of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The core principle of IPA is that it requires the researcher to extend the same practice not only to the participant but to the researcher’s own person as well (Tindall et al., 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

The reason the phenomenological approaches were overlooked was because of how they centralised the in-depth experience of the participant, at the expense of exploring social attributions of meanings, which would have played a major role in understanding the research topic at hand. The chosen research topic is relatively new, and the literature is still lacking but is emerging rapidly under the umbrella of cyberpsychology. This called for an approach that enabled a more expansive understanding of the area and integrated different sources of information to allow for more explanatory power and theory to be developed.

SNSs are part of a wider world, a pure investigation into user experiences could have missed insights to be gained from conducting a review of secondary sources which could be incorporated into the analysis after the substantive theory was developed. As a qualitative researcher it is best to accommodate different vantage points that are made available through looking at social networking in secondary sources and individual experience of them, rather than focusing purely on the qualitative phenomena. This mirrored the notion that social networking platforms are shaped by whilst simultaneously shaping the user experience (Gündüz, 2017).

Another reason those methods were dismissed was because of their emphasis on the dynamic between researcher and participant (Larkin & Thomson, 2012). Although this dynamic is invaluable in therapy, it might have cluttered the analysis process in this study since the aim was understanding the emotional processes underpinning user experiences of social networking platforms, instead of how participants and the researcher (interviewer) experience the interviewing.

3.4 Grounded Theory

Having established that the research method needed to allow for an exploration of the emotional processes underlying the use of Instagram, this section will present grounded theory as applied to the research topic and inquiry and explain the appeal of this research method.

Grounded theory means theory derived from data, with a focus on theory construction over description. Unlike most approaches, theory formation follows data collection, and not vice versa. “It allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants and determine how meanings are formed through and within culture” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.12). The assumption is that from the subjective experience of participants, a researcher can tease out a collective story (Charmaz, 2006). It entails simultaneously and systematically gathering and analysing the data until ‘theoretical saturation’ is reached, the point at which no new data emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Unlike other qualitative methods, analysis and data collection are closely related, such that the resulting theory is derived through the accumulation and representation of concepts (Corbin, 2017). This resembles collecting fragments and arranging them together in one cohesive tapestry based on what emerges from the interviews.

The choice of grounded theory stemmed from the belief that it fit my ontological position and research question, which would optimise for the most impact regarding the research topic. Grounded theory does not impose a theory onto the data but waits for it to emerge from the data. Stepping back and analysing the data with little emphasis on pre-constructed theory and bracketing out pre-assumption resonates with the skill that is practiced as an existentially

oriented practitioner. However, it also allowed for the probing of the processes that underlie the action or the experience that is being outwardly expressed, and the expansion into the literature as a source of potential or competing data. The flexibility inherent in grounded theory emulated how social networking websites function as continuously changing altering landscapes and little would be learnt from an approach that makes them an insular experience of the person's narrative. This is more likely to happen if one of the other research methods were selected. Other methods would not have allowed the integration of external sources of information after the analysis process.

This area of research warranted a creative method that allowed for a theory to be constructed through integration of various sources of data, due to the multi-faceted nature of the topic, and the diversity and vastness of the questions that the researcher came with, as presented in *Chapter 1, section 1.1 Researcher Background*. The method allowed the researcher to draw from the lived experience of the participant interacting with the social media platform, moving back and forth between data and analysis, iteratively (Charmaz, 2006). The way analysis is formulated as a co-construction of meaning is pivotal to grounded theory, and when it is used with that in mind, it adhered to the constructivist mode of inquiry. Constructivism is the reliance on the notion of knowledge being created between researcher and participants or other parties (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2006).

One of the philosophical underpinnings of constructivist grounded theory is symbolic interactionism, often utilised in the work of Kathy Charmaz. Symbolic interactionism is based on the idea that individuals think about their actions before carrying them out, and respond to

meaning through social interaction (Charmaz, 2006). These meanings are refined through an interpretative process which considers individual choice, though the parameters of this choice are mainly defined by society (Handberg et al., 2014). All these features of grounded theory fit a relativist and subjective ontological position (Aldiabat et al., 2018). As previously mentioned earlier in this chapter, in section *3.1 Ontology*, symbolic interactionism paralleled the interaction between the participants and social networking websites. This will be explored in *Chapter 4: Findings* in more depth.

The use of grounded theory was observed in studies which have similar interests in elucidating the relationship between individuals and technology. One example is a study conducted on the use of social media for new mothers by Kate Davis. She used individual experience as a starting point to exploring participants' relationships with various social networking platforms (2015). This led to very detailed and rich categories that were central to understanding the nuances of social media engagement for a specific group of individuals (Davis, 2015). There is a precedent in the use of grounded theory in the realm of cyberpsychology, in areas such as information literacy (Lipu et al., 2007) and social media usage in the workplace (Schalow et al., 2013). In addition to one study that looked at online gambling behaviour and the inhibiting and motivating factors associated with it, which also showed how focusing on individual experience culminates in original and useful findings (McCormack & Griffiths, 2012).

Phenomena such as cyberbullying were also explored through a grounded theory perspective. A study by Nancy Camp captures the significance of the theme of 'trust' in receiving support after being subjected to cyberbullying (Camp, 2016). Other studies explored

the phenomenon of social media fatigue (Zhang et al., 2020). Rich psychological insights have been produced by the marriage of qualitative research and social media usage, as is also exhibited by the work of Throuvala and colleagues (2019) on adolescent social media use. Using grounded theory needed to be planned out well, and one of the ways this happened was through reading about other researchers who have also adopted this approach to their inquiries.

Although grounded theory emphasises a tabula rasa approach to exploring the data, this research relied on a preliminary literature review, partly because it is a requirement for doctoral thesis proposals. But there was also another reason for conducting a preliminary literature review and that is partly because social networking platforms are relatively recent tools which existed only since 1997; robust psycho-social theories on their use are not yet saturated. The novelty of this research topic also invited the need for developing an awareness of the existing research pre-analysis to have something to start off with. Another reason for carrying out a preliminary literature review was to limit the risk of missing well-known aspects, the researcher must look at previous literature to avoid reinventing the wheel (Thornberg, 2012). Additionally, it was important to arrive at more refined aims in order to ensure the value and originality of this research study.

3.5 Ethics

3.5.1 Ethical Approval

After deciding on the research method, and research design elements of this project, it was then important to ensure that the project considers appropriate ethical research considerations. This research has been granted ethical approval by the board of ethics at

Middlesex University. The letter of approval is attached to *Appendix I: Ethical Considerations: Ethics Approval from Middlesex University*.

Gaining ethical approval necessitated a close adherence to the BPS code of ethics on human subjects, a statement detailing how this research abided by the BPS code of ethics is attached to *Appendix W*. Additionally, due to the nature of this research being internet-mediated research this meant that extra caution needed to be practiced in order to meet the standards of internet-mediated research that were produced by the BPS as well. The BPS guidelines aim to consider the issues that are not obvious for researchers, but that present complex ethical challenges to conducting research online. A table showing BPS IMR guidelines is attached to *Appendix X*.

After carefully considering the guidelines for conducting IMR, the researcher carefully tackled the challenges that were applicable to this research endeavour. The research design fell into the category of ‘reactive internet-mediated research’, this is because the method for data collection was primarily reactive (in the form of interviews) and not passive data collection from online platforms. The unique risk being presented by this form of research is mostly pivoted around being less able to monitor, support or terminate the study if adverse conditions occur. This risk was mitigated by several factors.

1. The data collection took place in the private domain with consent, which meant that the research was able to successfully assuage any copyright issues that may have been present had there been any handling of public data. The only copyright issue

that needed to be resolved was taking permission for the use of the LSAS, which was done by directly getting in touch with Dr Michael Liebowitz who designed this scale. He gave approval for this study's use of the LSAS, in addition to sending a manual with instructions on how to administer it. The approval is attached to *Appendix J: Ethical Considerations: Approval from Dr Liebowitz*.

2. In terms of *confidentiality* online, the interviews took place on Zoom using password protected meetings. The emails were mostly sent from a password protected university account. Additionally, the Zoom calls were conducted from a private locked room in the researcher's home. The laptop that was used was a password protected one and the transcripts were written up by the researcher to avoid uploading the transcripts online to a transcription software. They were anonymised and did not include the names of the participants.
3. In terms of *withdrawal and debriefing* – as previously mentioned in *Appendix W* that was outlined in the 'Participant Information Sheet'.
4. Regarding the point about *levels of control*, to ensure that the researcher had the maximum level of control during data collection the Zoom call was recorded using two different recording devices (both were manual, password-protected voice recorders). The second action that the researcher took to ensure maximum levels of control was to undertake a telephone counselling training course to better adapt to an experience of reduced physical cues from the participants. This counselling

course taught skills that allowed for the practitioner to be able to pick up on voice cues and sensitise themselves to the intonation, inflection, pitch, and tone of people who are expressing themselves one-to-one. This course also had a practical component where the learnt skills were being practiced and assessed by the tutor. This was helpful in increasing the researcher's confidence in their ability to conduct a meaningful research interview through this medium.

5. This research project largely did not risk *disruption of social structures*. There was no inclusion of controversial topics, or high-risk populations. The only thing that is worth mentioning would be that in the Arab world (six out of the 12 participants were Arab) people are not as open about mental health difficulties as in the Western world. However, because I am Egyptian myself, this meant that I am fully aware of the parameters of taboo topics in Egypt since I lived there for most of my life. Additionally, I also worked within the mental health system in Egypt and have two years of experience in a psychiatric hospital. This made me better able to navigate any social/cultural issues with a fair amount of confidence. I had a lot of contacts for mental health professionals that were included in the list of supportive contacts. All the assigned mental health professionals (psychologists and psychiatrists) were contacted in person before being included in the debrief statement to let them know that they might need to work with any of my participants and to ensure that they had the availability to see my participants should they need them.

3.6 Research Design

After clarifying the ontological position adopted, and the choice of the research method, decisions around the research design needed to be made. Sub-section **3.6.1** discusses the choice of participants'; **3.6.2** presents the recruitment process implemented for those participants; **3.6.3** details the ethical considerations for this research process.

3.6.1 Participants

As previously mentioned in *Chapter 1*, millennials were chosen because they have memories of life before social networking technology, which although was a long time ago, still meant that they are not digital natives who know no other reality. Among the first to use the term 'millennial' to define this age group were historians Neil Howe and William Strauss, and their book is considered one of the few academic references that have used that term to define this generation, also defined as generation 'Y' (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The term 'millennial' has been mostly used in commercial contexts. Most of the studies found defined millennials as those born between 1981-1996 (Deal et al., 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Kowske et al., 2010).

The rationale for engaging millennials was that they are well positioned to provide insights about the complex relationship that this generation developed with social networking platform use. They were the first global generation to be connected to the Internet and social media (Espinoza et al., 2010; Leveson & Joiner, 2014). They are individuals who are undergoing transition, which was a unique position to be in as research typically frames participants as simply users or people with certain qualities, but rarely considers the significance of insights

brought from transition between two states (Willson, 2019). The participants were ultimately selected based on theoretical interest, which meant that this inclusion criterion was guided by this sample's ability to provide relevant data to build a theory (McLeod, 2012). This purposive sample was a characteristic of recruitment for qualitative research methods.

In terms of the number of participants, that was not determined prior to conducting the interviews simply because the number would be informed by the point at which the data collection and analysis processes stopped yielding new concepts or information (commonly referred to as 'data saturation') (Sargeant, 2012). The following sections will clarify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the participants.

3.6.1.1 Inclusion Criteria. The inclusion criteria needed to consider the 'participants' as 'users' and these two terms were used interchangeably when referring to them. The following attributes were applied to the choices around participants:

1. Participants who were over 13 years of age when social networking websites started (born between the years 1981-1991).
2. Participants who have an online Instagram account that they report using daily.
3. Participants who scored above 50 on the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale.

In terms of the frequency of use, it was found in a meta-analysis that users were not very good at estimating how long they spent on their phone or on social networking platforms according to the discrepancies between self-reported and logged hours (Parry et al., 2020). Therefore, the inclusion criteria only specified 'daily' use of Instagram to avoid those

discrepancies from affecting the cohort with the assumption that individuals found it difficult to estimate how long they used those platforms for.

The second main factor that determined the inclusion criteria was the severity of their self-reported social anxiety. The Liebowitz Social Anxiety scale (LSAS) was used to provide a general benchmark for inclusion for this study. This is because it allowed the participants to meet the criteria for research with relative confidence. It was also used to establish something about their experiences without spending too much time in interviews trying to find out whether this person does indeed experience the level of social anxiety that would make them eligible to take part in this study.

The LSAS was also chosen because it is one of the leading psychometric surveys on social anxiety and is comprehensive and sensitive to the various nuances of being socially anxious. For example, one of the items in the LSAS asks about the level of anxiety attached to returning goods to a store, and another item asks about how they would feel if they walked into a room when others are seated. These examples show that the LSAS is constructed around a certain level of detail in the lived experiences of those with social anxiety. In addition, the LSAS is proving applicable to people from multicultural backgrounds with a high proficiency of English, as the items and the scoring are universal and straightforward (Angélico et al., 2013). Permission to use the LSAS was granted by Dr Michael Liebowitz, and his approval is attached to *Appendix H: Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale*.

3.6.1.2 Exclusion Criteria. Individuals who did not speak English were not included, which limited the diversity of the participants, however, it is because including people who solely speak other languages would have disrupted the analysis as there would have had to be a reliance on structured interviews and translations which could have complicated or destabilised the analysis process.

To screen out participants who did not fit the criteria, a small demographic questionnaire was sent to them prior to sending the consent forms and participant information sheets asking them if they meet the three basic requirements detailed under the inclusion criteria: age, frequency of engagement with Instagram and whether they report experiencing social anxiety. This demographic questionnaire is attached to *Appendix C*.

Another criterion for exclusion in this study was if they were not genuinely interested in the research topic. This is because the interviews needed to provide rich accounts of their experiences for this investigation to be productive. The participants who got in touch would have seen a 'Call for Participants' flyer (attached to *Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer*) and would establish contact on that basis. This guaranteed that the participants would have a high level of attentiveness and would be interested in sharing their stories.

3.6.2 Recruitment and Interviewing

3.6.2.1 Recruitment and Assessment. The process of recruitment began by sending out a recruitment poster to therapy circles. There was an open request on online forums for volunteers to approach if they were willing to be interviewed.

After recruiting a participant, an initial session was arranged to administer the LSAS. It was administered to most of the participants on the Zoom video conferencing application online due to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, and the interviewer followed the rules of administration as outlined in the LSAS manual that was sent by Dr Liebowitz for the purposes of this study (2003). The manual had detailed guidance on how to administer the interview with as much clarity as possible and in a way that ensured that the participant was not led to a certain answer, curbing examiner bias. The assessment was short, and in most cases lasted for 10 minutes. This enabled the researcher to decide whether they were eligible to participate or not. Participants who scored above 50 were scheduled for a full research interview and included in the study. All 12 participants given the assessment met the threshold for participation in this study with varying degrees of severity. The interview was scheduled a few days later for most of the participants. To clarify the recruitment process, a flowchart was crafted and can be found in *Appendix A: Recruitment Flowchart*.

3.6.2.2 Interviewing. The research interview is the main interview administered for primary data collection. It is an open-ended and unstructured interview designed to elicit concepts to be used in the next step of the analysis. The questions that were asked were open-ended, directly related to the subject of interest (e.g., social networking, socialising) (Foley & Timonen, 2014). The interview schedule is attached to *Appendix D: Interview Schedule*.

The research interviews (like the LSAS assessment) took place on online video conferencing platform, Zoom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This process will be further

explored in section 3.8.2 *Interviewing*. A list of guiding questions were used to open up the topic with participants. The interviews were kept open to concepts as they presented themselves as the grounded theory approach required open explorative interviews (Charmaz, 2006). It was a flexible, emergent process; ideas and issues emerged during the interviews, and the interviewer then immediately pursued these leads (Charmaz, 2003). This meant that the interview questions at the start were broad; for example, the questions would start off like this: ‘How would you describe your relationship with Instagram?’. The answer then determined the direction of the conversation. In one of the early transcripts a participant answered: “I have always hated Instagram”. The conversation went on to explore the feeling of hate towards Instagram, which led to other themes.

Each transcript was analysed right after the research interview was conducted, and the analysis informed the coming interview questions. The interview questions were thus shaped around the data and the themes that emerged from the first interview, like Kathy Charmaz was advising regarding the interviewing process: the scope of the questions becomes more focused to gather specific data for their theoretical frameworks that are unfolding (Charmaz, 2003). This could also be referred to as theoretical sampling, where the researcher decides on analytic grounds where to sample from next to build a comprehensive theory truly driven by the data (Urquhart, 2012).

By the last interview, the questions mainly covered themes such as ‘social comparison’ and ‘perceptions around Instagram addiction’. An example of a question from the final interview is: ‘What does it mean to know things about people?’. This was based on the earlier categories

that emerged from the previous interviews of participants who emphasised how their main reasons for going on Instagram is to know things about others.

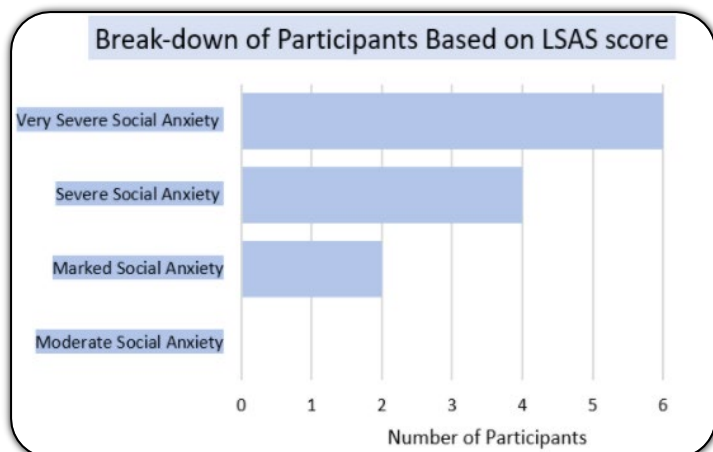
3.6.2.3 Final Participants. The participants who were interviewed were from diverse cultural and occupational backgrounds. All participants spoke English as a first or second language and had a high level of English language proficiency, even when they were not from an English-speaking country (like the researcher), which will be further explored in the reflexivity section on interviewing in section *3.8.1 Interviewing*. The participants all had evident communication skills; they all attended international schools which meant that English was a language they were used to conversing in. This was a screening criterion on the demographic questionnaire, which is attached to *Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire*.

The final participants were six Egyptians, two Americans, two Lebanese participants and two British participants. Their occupational backgrounds were: dentist, makeup artist, actor, sales employee, filmmaker, linguist, UN employee, PhD student, product designer, journalist, architect, and someone who worked for a charity. All of them were able-bodied, although one of the participants was born with achondroplasia (dwarfism); she considered herself able-bodied. The diversity of the participants was a strength as it allowed for the theoretical sampling and analysis to proceed in more directions and develop a richer reservoir of data to craft a truly original theory.

After the first two interviews, the participants were chosen based on their potential contribution to the richness of the data, there was an intentional choice to diversify the participants based on occupation as some of the users were using Instagram for career enhancement. Although 15 participants had carried out the first step of filling out the demographic questionnaire, 12 followed through. The final participants were individuals who did not use Instagram for any alternative purposes, those participants were screened for that criterion before they took part; the ‘Demographics Questionnaire’ was edited to reflect that at that point in the recruitment. A table with the relevant participant details is attached to : *Participant Background Information*. It is important to mention that the interest generated by the flyer was a lot more than expected. The total amount of inquiries received was around 25, which is more than double the research sample. This could have indicated how topical and timely this research project was. This also proved my initial suspicion that this was a subject many were grappling with as previously mentioned in *Chapter 1*. The following bar chart displays the breakdown of participants’ LSAS scores in this study:

Figure 1

Participant LSAS Scores



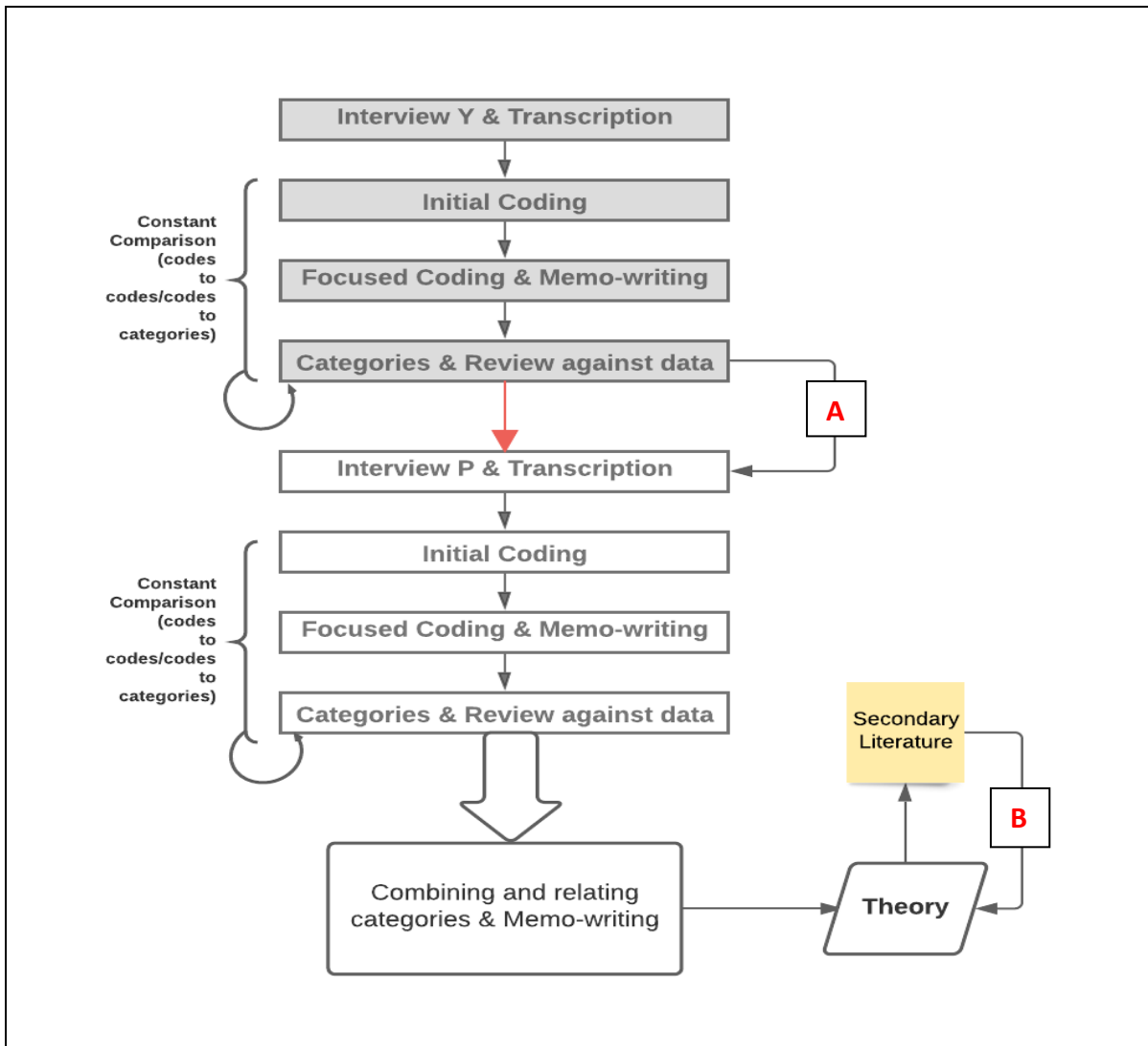
As is shown in *Figure 1*, half of the participants fell in the ‘Very Severe Social Anxiety’ range, four participants presented with ‘Severe Social Anxiety’ and two with ‘Marked Social Anxiety’. The results of LSAS were positively skewed towards scores that indicate very severe social anxiety. This supports the claims of this being a purposive sample. It also mitigates the effect of self-selection bias, which is the bias that is due to people who were only interested in the subject coming forward for the research (Lavrakas, 2008).

3.7 Analysis

This section outlines how the analysis process unfolded. It starts by introducing a diagrammatic representation of the overall analysis process in sub-section **3.7.1**, and then briefly presents each of the different phases of analysis: the transcription, initial coding, focused coding, and the memo-writing in sub-section **3.7.2**. Finally, it describes how reflexivity was considered and built into the data collection and analysis, in section **3.8**. This section only provides an overview of the analysis process, a full breakdown of the process will be laid out in *Chapter 4: Findings*. The diagrammatic representation below demonstrates the analysis of interviews (Y and P) for the sake of illustration. It shows how the process flowed from transcription to coding, to focused coding, where memo-writing was intentionally carried out.

Figure 2

Overview of Analysis Process



In *Figure 2* above, point 'A' marks the transition from one interview to the next and at that point the interview questions were reviewed and edited based on the emergent categories from interview Y. When all 12 interviews were completed (conducted and analysed) and when no new data seemed to be emerging, the interviewing process ceased.

This was all with the aim of building a cohesive theory that incorporated data at this stage purely through an inductive process of analysing participant interviews. Point 'B' on the diagram represents the integration of findings from the literature into the theoretical formulations that were developed after the findings were analysed. This will be further detailed and explained in *Chapter 6: Discussion*.

3.7.1 Stages of the Analysis Process

The book that was used as a primary guide for the analysis process is '*Constructing Grounded Theory*' by Cathy Charmaz (2006). The reason for this choice is justified by this study's epistemological and ontological position which is outlined clearly in section **3.1 Ontology** and section **3.2 Epistemology & The Qualitative Research Paradigm**. The constructivist approach allowed there to be an emphasis on theory formation and on the role of the researcher in the data analysis, which sat well with the ontological position of the researcher which recognises the impossibility of being divorced from the data analysis process. This was particularly true because there were many aspects of the researcher's experience that were similar to the participants'.

Transcription, Every qualitative research endeavour begins with the researcher transcribing the interviews. The transcription process began by uploading the interview from the voice recorder and slowing it down using offline transcription software. When it was

slowed down; it was listened to and typed up and revised again for edits. The full transcript was then numbered line by line for ease of reference.

Initial coding, The first step in the analysis was initial coding of the transcript, which is a line-by-line scrutiny of the text that attempts to label what has been said in a way that portrays social and psychological processes in the text (Charmaz, 2006). The result was coming up with codes that presented the processes that the interviewee was describing. Initial coding ‘breaks open the data’. The codes in a sense simply described what is happening in small units (Urquhart, 2012). It is a form of bottom-up coding where the meaning arises from the data units and was not imposed from literature (Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2012). After initial coding, a more intricate form of coding takes place, referred to as ‘focused coding’.

Focused Coding, Focused coding was the phase where the most meaning was generated. It was a phase of data analysis that was selective and enabled the identification of repeated, or most significant initial codes to sort, and organised large amounts of data (Urquhart, 2012). During focused coding, concepts from the line-by-line coding, were applied to larger chunks of text. The main purpose was to ensure that larger excerpts of data could be contained under one concept. After each concept was linked with a larger chunk of data, the transcript was read for a second time and the codes that were attached to the text were revised again to validate them (Charmaz, 2013). The idea behind that stage of analysis was to mine the data for analytic ideas to pursue (Charmaz, 2006). The analytic ideas were often captured by the memo-writing which was occurring simultaneously with the focused coding.

Memo-writing, The process of memo-writing is the act of stepping away from the coding process and developing ideas in a creative, free-flowing manner. The significance of memo-writing was mainly to make more informed decisions about the next steps in the research process. It allowed the possibility of exploring more implicit meanings and the instrumentalization of the researcher's own process (Charmaz, 2006).

Memo-writing is considered a vital tool because it allows researchers to document good ideas that they have and support the development of those ideas. Memos play an integral role in scaling up the theory in the final stages of the analysis process (Urquhart, 2012). They also allow for the development of a fruitful discussion after analysis is complete. Examples of memos could be found attached to *Appendix N: Memo-Writing for Initial Coding* and *Appendix P: Memo-writing for Focused Coding*.

Theoretical Sampling, Theoretical sampling is the process previously outlined in section 3.6.2 *Recruitment and Interviewing* It is the act of gathering data that focuses on the category to further develop it (Charmaz, 2006). This meant that the interview questions changed a little bit every time as the analysis process developed categories, the categories then informed the questions which led to further findings.

Building the Theory: Theoretical Coding and Constant Comparison, After each interview transcript was written up, and analysed, the emergent categories were then compared with categories from the previous interview. This was to try to identify common or recurring categories in the data and enhance theoretical sensitivity to the data being collected in the coming interviews (Charmaz, 2006). This act of constant comparison also created space

for theoretical coding, which supported the discovery of substantive relationships between the categories. Memo-writing and the development of theoretical memos also played a role in that process (Urquhart, 2012).

Conducting a Literature Review, After the core categories and theoretical codes were developed, the links to the literature were then made. Charmaz claimed that completing a sharply focused and thorough literature review is the aim. This could be part of the abductive process of this research endeavour; going back and trying to explain the findings. It was a chance to analyse the most significant works in relation to what was addressed in the developed theory (Charmaz, 2006). This is when some explanatory power could be added to the theory. This will be further elaborated on in the discussion chapter, *Chapter 5: Literature Review*.

3.8 Reflexivity

After briefly outlining the analysis process, this section presents a detailed account of how I maintained a reflexive position in the analysis process.

Outlining personal reflexivity is paramount to enhancing the transparency of this research endeavour. In qualitative work the researcher is the research instrument since data collection and analysis is a subjective process, there is a great responsibility placed on the researcher to clarify their position and to show that they have looked within for potential bias and accounted for it. Reflexivity is the process of continuous self-examination, which takes effort and practice (Finlay, 2002; Teh & Lek, 2018). As previously mentioned in section 3.3 *Choice of research approach*,

the position of the researcher is not that of an outsider, but the analysis process occurred through incorporating the memos which were the researcher's own insights or reflections on the research process and the emergent data. The memos were a way of constantly ensuring that opinions, or bias is being explicitly spelled out. Transparency was one way of protecting the analysis process against blind researcher bias. Reflexivity is construed as an interactional process which creates change over time through repeated awareness, reflection and action. The first point to account for is similarities and differences between the researcher and the participants, as well as the inevitable power differential in that dynamic (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). The coming two sections will outline how reflexivity was considered both for the interviewing stage and the analysis stage.

3.8.1 Interviewing

The process of interviewing required a lot of focus and attention as it was very different than how it typically took place in clinical settings. There was a need to be more directive and assertive yet at the same time I was trying not to stick too closely to the questions so as not to disrupt the natural flow of the conversation. This meant that as a researcher I had to maintain a stance of neutrality in order not to be leading the conversation in a specific direction.

I could feel the tension between trying to provide a safe space for the participant to express herself and not providing any cues that would misconstrue the nature of the encounter by turning it into a therapeutic space. I did however emphasise that the participant could stop whenever she felt like she did not want to answer certain questions. I ensured that the language was kept neutral and casual so that I could relieve some of the natural anxiety that this situation

presented. The availability of further support was also emphasised, both at the start and the end of the interview.

The second main issue that needed to be carefully considered when conducting the interview was the issue of language. My first language is Arabic since I come from Egypt, however, most of my education was conducted in English. I have been educated in British and American institutions my entire life. English is therefore a strong second language. This needed to be considered from the perspective of the participants as well. One of the strengths of having a diverse group of participants was the fact that this sample could be considered rich with insights on Instagram use. Although English is technically their second language, it was also the language of their Instagram platform. This made the reflections on Instagram in English a lot more accurate as the application itself was in English.

Additionally, a lot of psychologically minded Arabs are usually well acquainted with mental health terms in English since most of the medical and academic institutions in the Arab world are based on a Western medical model. All of this was considered, since I was going to be using English in the interview, the participants were explicitly told that they need to strictly use English to avoid perplexities in meaning and to reduce misinterpretations in the coding process. This could have come at a disadvantage since speaking in English meant that the participants had less vocabulary to draw from and might have affected how well they were able to express themselves. I thought that this would have to be an unavoidable compromise. If the interviews were carried out in Arabic, this would have meant the inclusion of a translation process which would have posed further room for misrepresentation or misinterpretation. It would have also

been time-consuming and could have meant that there would have been more consent forms to approve since the translator would be translating confidential material. It could have reduced the participants' readiness to share openly, as they would have known that this material was going to be translated by a third party.

The diversity allowed there to be a cross-cultural component, which meant that the data would be universal instead of purely illustrative of a specific cultural background. This was something that sat well with my values, and my ontological position as a researcher who interprets information through a relativist position and has traversed across different cultures (see section 3.1 *Ontology*). I believe that psychological research should strive to include individuals from a myriad of different backgrounds, since it tends to oversample 'Western', 'Educated', 'Industrialised', 'Rich' and 'Democratic' societies (Azar, 2010). There is an ethical responsibility for psychotherapists and researchers to gain awareness to work with diverse cultures (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Ivey & Collins, 2003).

What allowed for the diversity of the participants was also the fact that the interviewing took place on an online conferencing application, Zoom. The reason for this was due to the lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions which limited face-to-face contact. There were privacy concerns regarding Zoom at the start, however, after they changed their data encryption properties and guaranteed user privacy it was deemed a suitable platform (Zoom, 2021).

The interviews were carried out in a confidential space, much like therapy sessions. Before beginning, the participants were asked if they were alone, in a quiet comfortable space

and felt secure to start the interview. It felt like this medium allowed for more ecological validity to be built into the interview (Brock-Utne, 1996). The interviewing taking place online meant that much of the physical aspect of conducting the interview in-person was missed. This could have led to missing nonverbal communication cues from the participant. However, it also felt like a medium that most participants were using to conduct most of their communication anyway due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This could have enabled more consistency in their experience, which meant that they were in their comfort zone and that there were minimal environmental cues that would have skewed their accounts or made them uncomfortable and reduced their chances of self-disclosure.

3.8.2 Analysis

Reflexivity is difficult to quantify, but it is important to also consider in the context of analysis. The biggest and most glaring issue regarding my own position as a researcher and the analysis process was that I was using Instagram almost every day myself. I felt like I knew it very well and had experienced it very intimately as a form of communication, especially during COVID-19 lockdown. The main temptation with this would have been jumping to conclusions or the risk of confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is the tendency to rate confirming information as more convincing and being more critical of disconfirming information (Frey, 1986; Russo et al., 1996). This was mitigated and kept transparent by the process of memo-writing. Memo-writing allowed the opinions and the creative open thinking process the opportunity of being incorporated within the analysis and subjected to comparison and resonance with literature in the final stages. Excerpts of the memos are attached to *Appendix N: Memo-Writing for Initial*

Coding. In that memo I am grappling with the participant's accounts of her insecurity, this helped keep the analysis focused on what emerged from the interviews and clarify when a strong response arose to the material. This was done to avoid the risk of jumping to conclusions.

Grounded theorists believe that the researcher is not someone who is separate from the analysis process and that my experience will inevitably trickle into analysis. One of the tacit assumptions that I may have held was the assumption that people wanted to have friends. I have a lot of friends and I place a lot of emphasis on social relationships in my life. This meant that I might have held the view that social anxiety would be something that mainly stopped people from forming new friendships. Ever since I was at school, I was always someone who was very sensitive to people who were excluded, including myself at times. I remember just how scary it was to be left out with no friends. I witnessed the destruction that ensued with some of my friends. This meant that I held a position as a researcher that assumed that not having friends was a bad thing. However, throughout the process I journaled about my own responses to Instagram use; and about my own fears around being a researcher. This meant that I found grounded theory very intimate and immersive because I was always questioning my own feelings and thoughts in relation to the research and its participants. This could be observed through reading a few excerpts of the journal which are attached to *Appendix Q: Journaling Excerpts*.

Due to my background as a psychotherapist, I was also attentive to moments when it was clearly problematic for participants to express themselves, or when they were talking about something particularly difficult. At those points I always made sure not to probe or draw too much attention to the emotional responses. However, I stayed alert and gave short pauses to

acknowledge what was said. This allowed more comfort in the position of the interviewer as I had developed the instinct for sensing when an issue was too painful to probe.

My background in existential psychotherapy also meant that I might have been attuned to how individuals assuage their existential anxieties, however, I needed to ensure that precedence was given to what emerged from the data instead of imposing theoretical assumptions on the interview transcript. This would have risked a very thin analysis process and would have stopped this theory from developing on its own terms.

After examining the way reflexivity was incorporated in the research design, and mapping out the analysis process, the data collection and analysis took place. The next chapter will present more details around the analysis process before presenting the findings that emerged through the inductive process of analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

After the processes of data collection and analysis took place, the study was able to generate substantive findings. This chapter systematically presents the findings that emerged from the process of analysing the transcripts. Section **4.1** presents the stages of the analysis process again, but this time it incorporates examples from the data. Section **4.2** details the findings on social anxiety; and section **4.3** outlines the findings on social media processes. Finally, section **4.4** presents the theoretical formulations that emerged from the analysis process.

4.1 Stages of Analysis

4.1.1 Initial Coding

This section will look at the analysis of the transcript from the first interview. The full transcript is attached to *Appendix L: Transcript of Interview with Y*. The first step after transcription was initial coding. The initial coding occurred as a line-by-line scrutiny of the text which attempted to label what has been said in a way that portrayed social and psychological processes, as previously mentioned in Chapter 3, section 3.7.2 *Stages of the Analysis Process*. Below is an excerpt of one of the transcripts with initial codes as an example.

Excerpt 1

From 'Transcript of Participant Y'

58	F: So um, I want you to tell you whether your social experiences	
59	have been affected by Instagram use?	Microsoft Office User Posting then feeling insecure
60		
61	Y: Can you elaborate on that question.	Microsoft Office User Feeling Insecure
62		
63	F: So how do you feel like your social experience have been	Microsoft Office User Waiting for likes
64	influenced by Instagram, it's an open question and I'm inviting	
65	you to think of how you feel Instagram has had a bearing on the	Microsoft Office User Getting few likes
66	social world around you?	
67		
68	Y: <u>Ummm...</u> I don't know if that's relevant but every time I post	Microsoft Office User Feeling insecure linked with posting less
69	something, umm, like I feel insecure the entire day, I'm waiting	
70	for likes ... to get likes on this post and I don't know every time I	Microsoft Office User Feeling Insecure
71	get less likes, every time I get more insecure, every time I get	
72	more insecure it makes me not want to post for a longer period of	Microsoft Office User Work is affected
73	time, and then this affects my work and my sales. (click) <u>So,</u> I	
74	mean, I once read uhh.. an article regarding how to use Instagram	Microsoft Office User Instagram as a marketing tool
75	marketing, and they all say like, you're supposed to post uhhhh	
76	two pictures a week in order to stay err current ummm.. with	Microsoft Office User Suggested rule for posting (two times a week)
77	your customers umm and potential customers. <u>But I could neverrr</u>	
78	bring myself to do this, it's always weighing on me, I'm always	Microsoft Office User Demotivation
79	like.. <u>ukh..</u> is this gonna be good enough. 4	
80		
81	F: Hmm..	Microsoft Office User Resistance to marketing frequently
82		

In the above excerpt from the transcript Y was referring to insecurities that manifest online.

“I get more insecure, every time I get more insecure it makes me not want to post for a longer period of time.” – Y

The initial codes that were used for this sentence were ‘feeling insecure’, ‘work is affected’. This basic breakdown of this long sentence enabled the focus to be on the processes. By keeping it simple as a primary depiction of what was being expressed, it meant that the risk of making assumptions was curbed and the neutrality of the coding was preserved (Urquhart, 2012; Charmaz, 2006). This process could be conceived of as a step in taking meanings and actions apart through coding (Sbaraini et al., 2011).

4.1.2 Memo-writing for Initial Coding

As previously mentioned in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, memo-writing is described as the researcher’s attempt to have conversations about the data with themselves (Charmaz, 2006). The significance of memo-writing was to make more informed decisions about the next steps in the research process. It allowed the possibility of exploring more implicit meanings and capturing tacit assumptions made by the participant that would only be revealed through this level of deconstruction.

The memo-writing and reflection resulted in the initial codes being arranged and grouped together to form basic clusters. The clusters formed an intermediate step between the initial coding and the focused coding, which will be detailed in the sub-section below. This process is

captured by the table attached to *Appendix O: Clustering Initial Codes*. This is a small extract from the memo-writing for the same transcript.

“So, the question she asks herself is should she keep going in this career despite not doing so well on Instagram or should she quit. There is also a temporal element. She keeps referring to feeling anxious “all day” and “always weighing on me”. It feels like her engagement on Instagram is like a chronic heaviness that weighs down on her for a prolonged period.”

As is shown above, the memo was written in a reflective, free-flowing style, to allow for the researcher to brainstorm what was occurring in the text. This creative documenting process allowed for more questions to emerge from the text such as ‘What role does Instagram serve in the development of self-efficacy in someone’s career path?’ and ‘What obstacles were standing in her way?’. Those questions would then catalyse the exploration in the coming interviews to build the inquiry from the data and the memo-writing and follow its lead. A longer version of the memo is attached to *Appendix N: Memo-Writing for Initial Coding*. Memo-writing supported the next stage of analysis: focused coding.

4.1.3 Focused coding

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, focused coding was the phase where the most meaning was produced from the transcript. It was a phase of data analysis that enabled the identification of repeated, or most significant initial codes to sort, and organize large amounts of data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During focused coding, concepts from the line-by-line coding, were applied to larger chunks of text. After each concept was linked with a larger chunk of data, the transcript was read for a second time and the codes that were attached to the text were revised again to validate them (Charmaz, 2013). This meant that some of the initial codes were challenged against larger bodies of data, and their generalisability was questioned by a process of constant comparison (codes to data, data to codes and codes to codes).

This process was also developed through memo-writing for the process of focused coding which is attached to *Appendix P: Memo-writing for Focused Coding*. In that memo it is evident that more questions were brought up than definitive answers. Since this was the first interview, the product of focused coding resulted in broad categories such as: ‘Career Motivation and Instagram’, under this category, those were the concepts:

- Demotivation in career due to lower performance on Instagram
- Feeling insecure about the account
- Impact on career
- Necessity for success
- Career doubts due to Instagram

Focused coding served to abstract the codes to be able to process them and link them with categories from other interviews to develop the theory. Memo-writing allowed for the coming questions that would be explored to include questions around the relationship between career perception and social anxiety.

4.1.4 Core Category Development

By the end of the 12 interviews, the previously outlined codes were developed to become the concept of ‘occupational inferiority’. The questions that were included in the following interviews changed to: ‘Did your perception of your career change after you started using Instagram every day?’. This line of questioning revealed that a few participants had a similar experience of feeling that their job was not good enough, as is depicted in the below list:

'Occupational Inferiority'
Participant Y
Participant P
Participant A
Participant N

The process of memo-writing captured the comparison between the interviews regarding ‘occupational inferiority’. The memos also included a discussion of the wording of the category which changed from ‘insecurity’ to ‘inferiority’. The memos that compared different accounts by the participants are attached to *Appendix T*.

4.1.5 Constant Comparison

During the stages of initial coding, focused coding, memo-writing and core category development, constant comparison was taking place simultaneously across the interviews to develop over-arching core categories and to start crafting a theory (Urquhart, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each interview as it was conducted was also compared to the categories from the previous one. Then after all interviews were conducted and analysed the categories from each of the interviews were developed and tabulated to compare them against one another.

In *Appendix R: Constant Comparison Across Interviews* there is a table that shows the different categories as they relate to one another. The researcher at this stage was drawing links between the categories from the interviews and establishing coding families (Glaser, 1978), in addition to trying to establish links between the categories (Theoretical coding). A theoretical code conceptualises how substantive codes may relate to one another. The processing of links between categories then led to the development of potential models (Charmaz, 2006). These frameworks were drawn up in diagrams linking core categories with themes that were abstract enough to allow the theory to be scaled up and extant literature to be integrated.

Another example was the core category of 'Exclusion' which was explicated and used to scan the data and the codes for any codes that fit the criteria of exclusion. This meant that there were changes that took place to the core concepts that defined 'Exclusion'. At the start there were only two concepts that made up this category: 'feeling unheard' and 'feeling left out'. However, through mining the data and asking questions about this core category, in addition to developing more memos around it, one other core concept emerged at the heart of the category of exclusion: 'feeling misunderstood'.

4.1.6 Theory Development and Integration

This is the stage of analysis where the reason for choosing grounded theory became apparent, and when there was a chance to use explanatory power to make sense of the findings. According to Thornberg and Charmaz, theoretical coding is when researchers start to think of how the codes and categories constructed might relate to each other to form a hypothesis which

could be integrated into a theory (Flick, 2014), as previously mentioned in *Chapter 3*, section *3.7.2 Stages of the Analysis Process*.

The questions that supported the researcher in theory formation were: ‘*What are the core concerns of the participants?*’, ‘*How are they constantly trying to resolve their core concerns?*’, and ‘*How does social media engagement help or hinder that?*’. These questions were applied to the constructed categories to make sense of how they might be linked and develop a tentative hypothesis. The links were drawn based on the defining features of their experience of social anxiety and how this experience interacted with being engaged online and on Instagram every day.

Memo-writing and deep reflection about the process as well as going back to the data and verifying the core categories all occurred at this stage to come up with a tentative hypothesis on the experience of socially anxious users on Instagram. The working out and deep reflection was captured by the memo-writing during the process of theory development, which is attached to *Appendix S*.

4.2 Findings

After outlining the analysis method up until the point where the strategic literature review was conducted, the findings will be presented in this section. Findings on social anxiety are presented in sub-section **4.2.1** and findings on social media processes are outlined in section **4.3**. All the findings will be linked with direct excerpts from the transcripts.

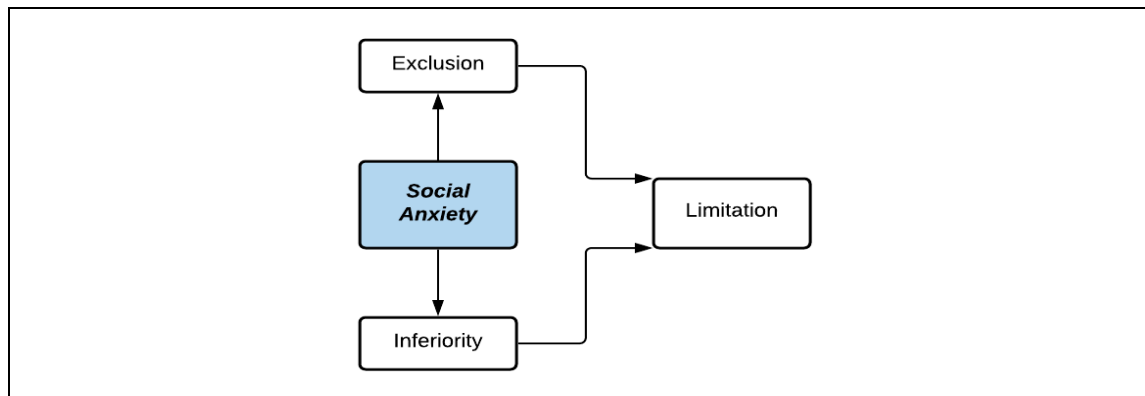
4.2.1 Social Anxiety

It is important to identify what emerged as core categories of social anxiety. Social anxiety as previously explored in the DSM and in qualitative research was described as an insular experience with a focus on the physiological responses in social settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), as outlined in *Chapter 2*. The aims of this study were clarifying what social anxiety entailed for the individual participants in a more contextualised way with a consideration for their daily engagement on Instagram.

The three main themes that kept emerging were that social anxiety is in response to the possibility of experiencing exclusion, that it was due to a *sense of inferiority* or of not being good enough, and lastly that it posed a limitation on their occupational functioning and their emotional wellbeing as well as their ability form new relationships and maintain the ones they have. The figure below illustrates the core categories of social anxiety broadly.

Figure 3

Core Categories of Social Anxiety

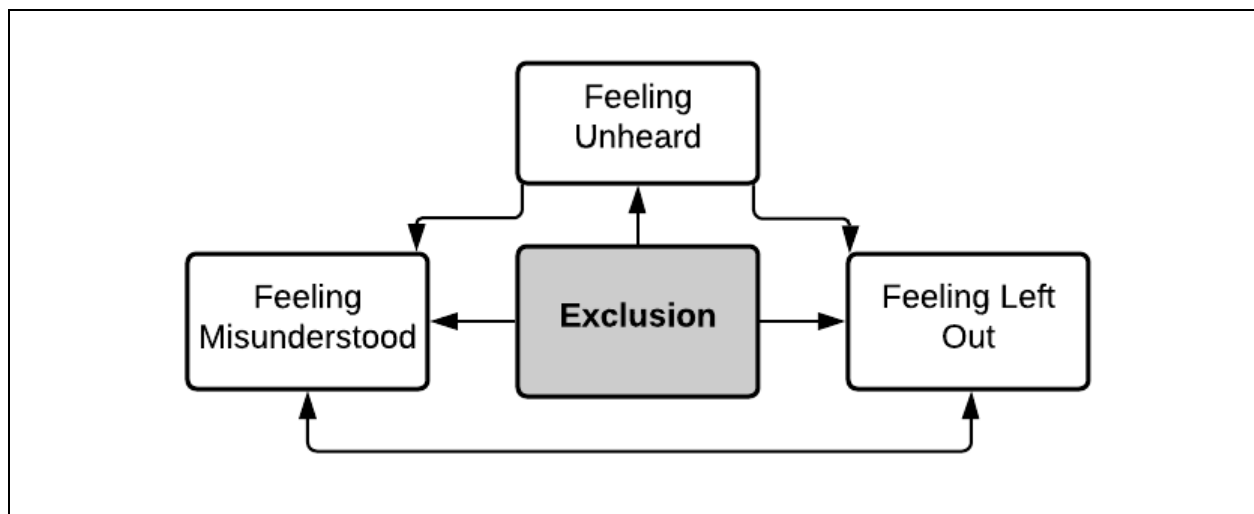


The above diagram is a depiction of the core categories of social anxiety and how they linked up. The following sections 4.2.1.1, 4.2.1.2 and 4.2.1.3 will unpack the three core categories in more detail and draw from the transcripts.

4.2.1.1 Social Anxiety: Exclusion. The first major category presented in this section is the theme of exclusion. Throughout the interviews there were constant references to the feeling of being excluded as being one of the core fears around social interactions and one of the most troubling aspects of their social experience. The theme of exclusion was comprised of three concepts: *feeling unheard*, *left out*, and *misunderstood*. Figure 4 illustrates the three main concepts that encompassed the experience of exclusion and shows how they are connected.

Figure 4

Core Category: Exclusion



As the diagram above shows, the experience of being excluded was often expressed as primarily being left out of a social gathering, a group of people, a professional cohort, or even momentarily at an event. In addition to an experience of being unheard, or not being listened to in the right way. Finally, the third concept that was integral to ‘exclusion’ was feeling misunderstood.

The three concepts were often expressed in one instance, or individually, however they all led to an overall theme of being excluded. This formulation shows which aspects of social experience led the participant to more anxiety in social situations. More details around how it was formulated will ensue in the sub-sections to follow.

Feeling Unheard; Feeling excluded was conveyed as a product of feeling unheard. 10 out of 12 participants alluded to feeling unheard in different social settings as an experience that was inseparable from their social anxiety. This emerged from the first interview; feeling unheard was a big part of Y’s difficulty with socialising with friends.

“They tend to do that if they are divided, but as a group, you say a word and they won’t even listen to you.” – Y.

This was echoed by other participants and revealed that participants assumed that being heard was necessary, and that they did not feel heard by people around them.

“You are talking about stuff and you are being an individual who is expressing a very different point of view when they just want to hear what’s comfortable or what’s common or what’s mediocre. I don’t know.”- A.

In both contexts, the notion of being unheard was expressed in different ways. The first is the idea that simply talking to people and being listened to was very difficult in her outing with friends, and the second was the notion of expressing oneself or being authentic and being affirmed by others. Another illustration of the concept of ‘being unheard’ was brought out when S said.

“The problems started arising when I started to feel like I was not listened to as much as I listened to them, or maybe even myself being jealous around them because of what they're accomplishing or whatever.” – S.

This was where the idea of being listened to was expressed regarding close friends of S whom she felt were not hearing her or listening to what she had to say, but she closely linked it to their accomplishments. This move from wanting to be heard to an appraisal of their accomplishments is observed throughout the interview transcripts. Besides socialising being something purely about common interests or time and place, more things seemed to play a great role, like status. This will be picked up again in section 4.2.1.2 *Social Anxiety: Inferiority*.

The idea of not being heard was different from not being accepted, because the previous suggested that the person had no platform for expressing themselves in their social world, the

latter refers to being rejected after expressing oneself. The next concept that will be explored is the idea of being left out.

Feeling Left Out; Feeling left out was a recurring theme in the participants' in-person experiences as well as their online experiences. Examples of participants bringing their experiences of being left out include M's account of his experiences both online and offline.

“At one point I feel like sometimes I feel like... everyone is posting that there's a party for example happening and everyone is posting that they are at the party. I wasn't there so it affects my self-esteem. Or for example if everyone is posting their ...they have like a job, posting about their work for example and I don't have a job, so it affects my self-esteem and therefore it affects how I interact with people.”- M.

In this account M reported how he felt left out of social events and accomplishments alike, and how this affected his self-esteem. This is where the link between status and inclusion is made very clear. Another experience of feeling left out was reported by Y.

“They were being bitchy. They're having a thousand photos together alone and excluding me and I'm obviously sitting alone on the side.” – Y.

That notion of feeling left out seems to play a significant role in those two participants' social anxiety. It also came up for A when he was talking about his experience online.

“You need to follow the trends, the trending hashtags, or the whatever, dance, the new challenge, the new stuff, and it’s just like if you don’t know it or you don’t know how to do it, you feel like you’re left out.” – A.

Then he elaborated on that point by saying that he felt like it has been very difficult because he learned to navigate his social life online, and that he found it difficult to interact in bars and restaurants with friends who have a strong online presence.

“Even on social media, you know, if you send them a message, you know that sometimes they’re not going to answer because they apparently they receive a lot of messages. Sometimes they’re your friends, and this is when it becomes a little bit stupid you know because it’s just like, I know they’re busy, I know they have a life and everything. Sometimes you are sending a message to someone that you know but they have thousands of millions of followers, so they ignore you for the next three, four days, then they reply and they’re like: ‘I’m very sorry I know’. Sometimes they’re really sorry, they mean it, but they get a lot of messages. It’s like you are trying to say hi to your friend who is a celebrity in the middle of the crowd.”- A.

This shows how the feeling of being left out here is coupled with anxiety related to status, perhaps more than for those who are not using social media (or Instagram). A described it clearly by explaining how his experience of reaching out to his friends online felt like *‘saying hi to your friend who is a celebrity in the middle of a crowd’*. This statement illustrated how his experience of his online world felt very embodied and real for him, because it linked up with his experience offline as well.

The overarching theme of being excluded expressed itself in the concepts of being left out and being unheard, however, the third and perhaps most underexplored experience of social anxiety was the notion of being misunderstood. Often participants mentioned either feeling misunderstood, or fearing being misunderstood; both online and offline.

Being misunderstood; 8 out of the 12 participants referred to the experience of being misunderstood as one that had a bearing on their social anxiety. This concept was one of the ideas that had emerged by the end of the interviews. The participant was expressing how his fear of being misunderstood made social interaction very difficult.

“A lot of the time I am just very afraid of being misunderstood, the need for me to go home and think about every single thing I said and wonder about what they were thinking, or whether I seemed too pushy” – T.

The notion of being misunderstood stood closely with being isolated in their experience of anxiety. Many participants discussed at length how difficult it was to garner understanding around life decisions, or choices.

“I don't want more people in my life that are going to add more anxiety, it's like the overbearing relationships and you feel like any other new relationship is probably going to carry the same level of heaviness around it. Simply because they are so intent on misunderstanding your actions.” – A2.

A2 was talking about how being misunderstood in her earlier relationships informed her assumptions about other people and relating to them. This meant that with her there was a component of needing to be understood well in the first place as a condition for a healthy relationship. It raises the question of whether people started to expect more understanding from close family members. ‘A’ also talked about how he had frequently experienced being misunderstood by those around him, when he described his new hobbies to a friend, and she responded in a way that showed she was surprised.

“So, we were out in a bar and there was a big group, and I was talking to this girl beside me and I was like just... so what are you doing now. I was like I am just taking classes I’m doing different dance and stuff I’m doing ballet. Then she was like wow it’s so strange that you are doing ballet... And this made me feel a bit odd” – A.

A was talking about how being misconstrued by his companion was something that made him feel more uncomfortable in this social setting. Making lifestyle choices and being misunderstood regarding those choices seemed to exacerbate anxiety in social settings. Expecting to be understood seemed to be the underlying assumption participants held about interactions with others. M2 also mentioned how he feared speaking his mind because he felt like people would not accept it as the truth or would feel personally offended by it.

“There’s like a robot on Interstellar in which the astronauts have like a conversation with and he’s pretty quirky and he has a rating of a percentage of honesty, of truth. Like when he says the

statements; how honest are they? And it's like, the idea that humans cannot handle 100% truth. They can't face that there are certain situations where we can't be faced with such sharp harsh criticism of who we are and what we're doing without taking it in some kind of offended way.” – M2.

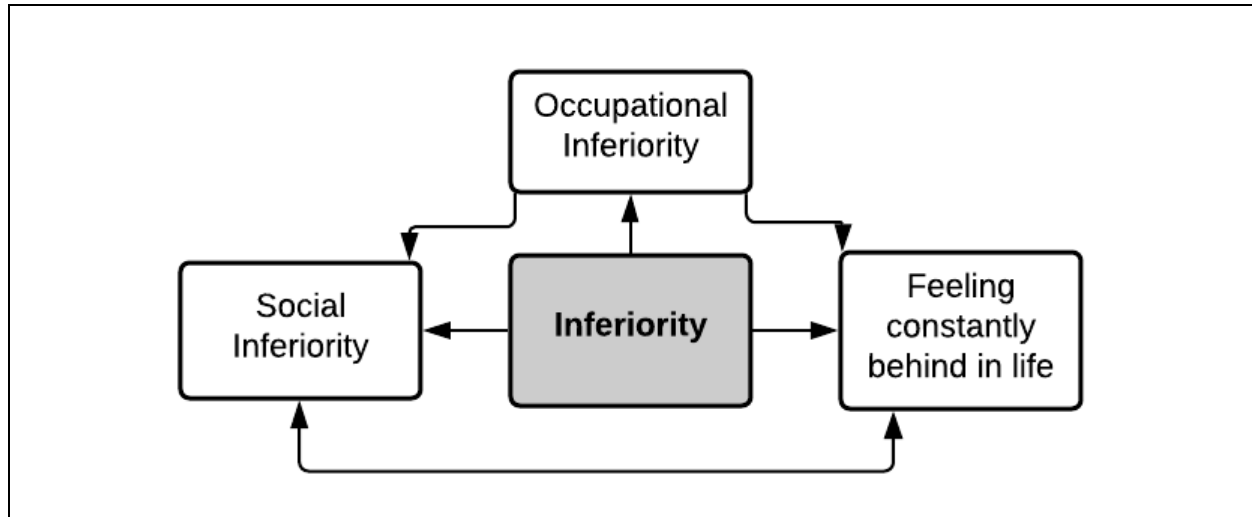
M2 used the example of the robot from a movie as a character that he personally identified with, as he saw himself as someone who was very honest but had to curb his honesty because others could not handle it; and because others could not deal with honesty, he felt more anxious around them. This again showed that needing to be understood was a pivotal element of the experience of being excluded and feeling socially anxious, as all the excerpts above showed.

The three basic concepts that formed the category of exclusion were being misunderstood, being left out and being unheard. All or most of the participants have expressed these social and emotional processes in their transcripts. After carefully exploring ‘Exclusion’, the next theme that was also tied to social anxiety, was the theme of ‘Inferiority’. It will be unpacked in the sub-section to follow.

4.2.1.2 Social Anxiety: Inferiority. The concepts that built the core category ‘Inferiority’ are: ‘Occupational Inferiority’, ‘Social Inferiority’, and ‘Feeling Constantly Behind in Life’. The diagram below provides a visual representation of the key concepts that made up that category of ‘inferiority’.

Figure 5

Core Category: Inferiority



As the diagram shows, the breakdown of ‘Inferiority’ is an important one as it leads to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of socially anxious Instagram users. The first concept to be explored in this section is ‘Occupational Inferiority’.

Occupational Inferiority. The participants’ feeling like they were not on the right career path or that they were not where they could be is a concern that many young people have in a more general sense. However, the pervasiveness of feeling occupationally inferior to others is difficult to ignore in the transcripts. Some participants were referring to the work they do in their daily life and a few were talking about artistic projects and the feedback they received on them. Others were disappointed about not being famous and well-known in the field that they worked in.

Social anxiety seems inextricably bound to their sense of occupational inferiority. Occupational inferiority to the participants also manifested as the idea that other people may not like the work they do; that other people received more credit and acclaim for work they did

which was of a similar standard. Moreover, it also expressed itself as a belief that the job they were currently doing does not measure up to societal expectations of a good enough job.

What is particularly interesting about this concept is the notion of unseen work. A lot of participants discussed how some of the hardest work they have done was uncaptured by social networking platforms that they are part of. Social networking platforms featured greatly in this theme of occupational inferiority. Y was the first participant to introduce this idea in her interview.

“I don’t think this other competitor is unfair, I just think she’s lucky, she knows how to use this tool without it weighing down on her like it does on me, and it makes me feel like sometimes I chose the wrong business to get into. I mean, I’m not a very forward person, I’m not outgoing, I try, I don’t avoid situations like that. But I guess it affects my work...”- Y.

In this statement, the dynamic relationship between the Instagram presentation of her work and her actual work is made very clear. The notion of not being in the right job because of how other people look like they are doing cast a doubt on her chosen occupation; showing how inextricably linked her online presence is with her offline vocation. This self-doubt was also expressed by N in her account of how she feels about her work.

“Because I see those people who are succeeding, those people in my college who are out there having fun or posting their work, and it is amazing, and I am just like, oh my god. I am horrible at this. Why? How are they so good at it?” – N.

The interesting thing to note is that both talked about how their work was based on how good other people were or appeared to be at their jobs or with their projects compared to how good they were or appeared. Another example of occupational inferiority was elicited in M's interview. He talked about how when he saw that other people had jobs online or appeared successful this affected him (referring to when he did not have a job).

"...they have like a job, posting about their work for example and I don't have a job, so it affects my self-esteem and therefore it affects how I interact with people." – M.

Here he made the link between not having a job and how he interacted with people, highlighting the important notion of the connection between a person's perceived occupational standing and their readiness to engage with others. Social anxiety as a function of perceived lack of success in comparison to others, led to the second concept that made up the theme of inferiority which is 'social inferiority'.

Social Inferiority. Nine out of 12 participants reported the experience of social inferiority. Throughout the interviews there was a sense that the social sphere was only one part of the larger theme of inferiority. The idea of being socially inferior was elicited for many participants, specifically, S, who discussed how her social standing was not 'successful' compared to others.

“The people who are very much socially confident and very much also like the kind of people that, I don't know how to explain that really put emphasis on social success. So, so there's like the confident people and the cool people. So, these of course, they make me anxious. But there's also who makes me more anxious, are the people who believe that social success is very much important. And they look down on people like me who are socially not, you know, socially successful. So, these are also very much for me very, like triggering.” – S.

The idea of social success is an interesting notion to ponder on, as it came up for this participant frequently throughout the interview. Her notion of social success seems very definitive. It highlights how her experience of social anxiety is mediated through being observed by those who value social success whom she assumes are always ranking her based on how socially successful she was. There is no direct way of knowing exactly how her social world is constructed around her, however this statement and others like it make her seem very self-focused. Except that she does not appear to rank herself but puts others as arbiters and judges of her own social life. It is also a statement that frames social life as an activity that one can either succeed or fail at.

“I just feel like it's something that's always on my mind, whenever I'm in a gathering or something... you're conscious because people are much more famous than you and they have more followers.”- A.

Here A was talking about his social success at a gathering as well as on Instagram where there was no distinction between his online experience and his offline experience. This statement

was about how when he is surrounded by people who are more famous or have more followers this made him a lot more self-conscious and anxious.

Both social and occupational inferiority came together under the overarching theme of inferiority, this link between social functioning and occupational functioning was made repeatedly by participants. It was also made in the opposite direction, because of their social anxiety they feel like they could not progress at work.

“I mean, I’m not a very forward person, I’m not outgoing, I try to avoid situations like that. But I guess it affects my work...” – Y.

“It’s good to be known. And to go out there and meet people, it is very important for my job, but it’s very hard and there is always a battle of either go out there or don’t go out there stay in!” – N.

“For especially not so much at work, I’m doing it more in social settings than like, for example, at work, a lot of times I must make phone calls to strangers, and that’s a nightmare for me. So, this is something that I still avoid as much as possible.” – C.

Anxiety in social situations is perceived as something that affected their performance at work, but their performance at work and the perceived value of their work also had a bearing on their anxiety and avoidance of social situations.

Feeling Behind in Life. The notion of feeling behind is a more universal concept and it was present in almost every interview. 12 out of the 12 participants expressed feeling ‘behind’ in

life. It is conceptualised differently from being left out or excluded and was more centred on accomplishment. This was explicitly stated by M2 in the interview.

“So, it’s like knowing exactly the feeling that you’re constantly behind. Constantly, constantly missing out. Not so much fear of missing out, but like lack of accomplishments. Yeah, you know.”

– M2.

The feeling of being behind was at the core of the experience of social anxiety. His anxiety did not exist in vacuum, a lot of it centred around his status and his accomplishments. This has been also explicitly expressed by S.

“Maybe even myself, being jealous around them because of what they’re accomplishing or whatever. And then, you know, so things start to play in my head even around people that I’m not anxious around.” – S.

The feeling of being behind came from a place of feeling unaccomplished and simply not doing enough. Both are conflated together, so there is a real sense that everyone held the assumption that when I ‘do more’ that means I ‘accomplish more’. This has been also expressed by P.

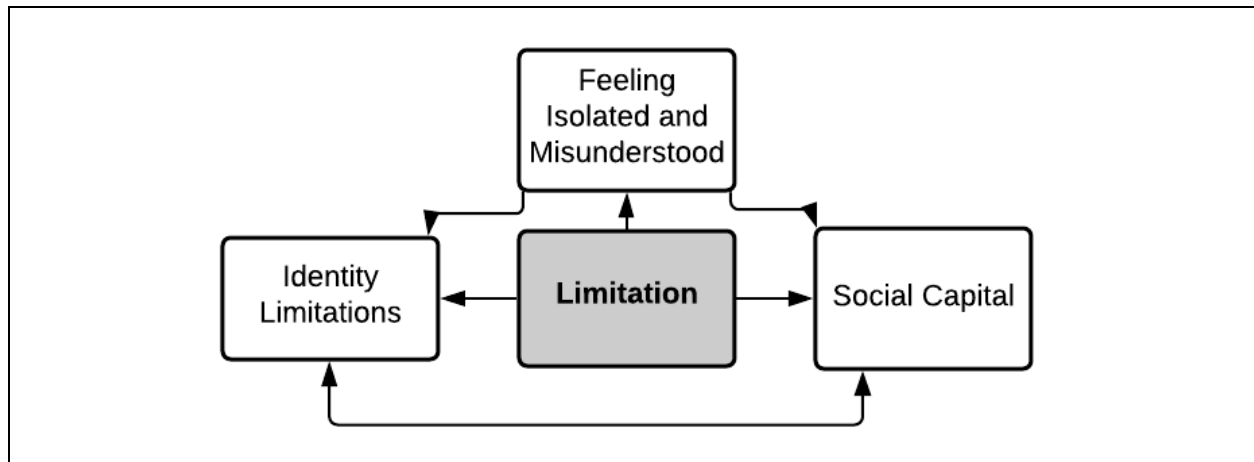
“Yeah... I don’t feel like I’m living my life... to the to the full...umm and you can see what other people are doing on Instagram so when I compare my life to other people’s I feel like I’m not doing that much” – P.

Although most of the literature on social anxiety tends to define it as a problem linked to one's social functioning, in these interviews it seems as though occupational functioning and an overall feeling of being behind were equally tied up to the experience of social anxiety.

4.2.1.3 Social Anxiety: Limitation. The core category of 'Limitation' also emerged as a key one. The word 'limitation' is broad, the diagram below clarifies the basic concepts that built the core category.

Figure 6

Core Category: Limitation



The word 'limitation' was used to represent the limits that were expressed by the participants that have been posed by their social anxiety and their ability to feel understood or heard by others. These are in addition to their work experiences including networking at work and building helpful professional relationships. It is seen as both a result of and a key feature of social anxiety. It results from the previously outlined concepts of exclusion and inferiority. The

coming sections will explain how the researcher arrived at the concepts that built the core category presented in *Figure 6*.

Feeling Isolated and Misunderstood. The participants' accounts of their experiences have frequently held an element of isolation around their social anxiety, they often expressed how no one really understood what they were going through. They felt like because their experiences of anxiety were often misunderstood, they found it difficult to communicate or socialise with people who did not know the extent of their anxiety. This notion of being isolated in their experiences has come through as a limitation for their social lives. In the following example, R talked about how she found that most people did not understand how serious her anxiety was.

“Yes, I'm feeling I'm different in that aspect and not anyone really gets it, people who have high anxiety, I don't feel other people really understand how serious it is.” – R.

Here the emphasis was mainly on their mental health needs and the emotional distress which was unheard and misunderstood by others. The participants had expressed that their social difficulties had no resonance in the world around them, where people routinely misappropriated their experiences and responded in ways that were reductive, which led to further isolation.

“I sometimes go talk to my friend, but it actually makes me more anxious whenever I find people being like, why don't you try this breathing exercise! My breathing is normal that's not the point!” – N.

The inability to communicate what she was going through was described by N as a difficult and distressing experience. The concept of being misunderstood cut through various contexts, but it contributed to a limitation on how some participants were able to ask for help. Sometimes even reassurance from others was not useful.

“People aren't good at distracting you. They're not good to distract. They make it more of a they make it more of a thing.” – N.

The idea that this participant felt that people were not good at helping her but made it ‘more of a thing’ also revealed that telling people about their anxiety meant that it was made more real and therefore more distressing. This notion of being isolated was expressed in some way by C as well who talked about how the moment she felt like people were nice she relaxed and was able to be herself, but she always felt like she was initially going to be judged, revealing a sensitivity to rejection.

“And usually, it's just the people that are there if they're nice, and they helped me and they make me feel comfortable and they're talking to me. It just makes me like relax very easily. But then if I feel that someone is judgmental, then the anxiety would like to persevere throughout the whole like, event.” – C.

This showed how her social anxiety was directly linked to her feelings of isolation, the moment she felt like she was not isolated, that people were listening to her and were talking to

her she felt relief. The key here is that a certain level of niceness that people showed allowed her to feel accepted and less isolated, which is different from N's experience where people placed emphasis on her issue and therefore caused her more anxiety (without meaning to). This reluctance to share their feelings with others could be a fear of influencing how they were perceived. This leads on to the next limitation, which was about a person's identity as a function of their social anxiety.

Identity Limitation. Identity is generally understood as a subset of the self, based on relationships with others, or categories that are used to define the self and place it amongst other people (Michener & Delamater, 1999; Owens, 2006). One of the biggest themes that arose from the interviews was this idea of being limited in terms of identity. It seems that there is a link between identity stagnation and social anxiety.

W talked about how her identity in school was inflexible, and how a stereotype she was ascribed to contributed greatly to her experience of social anxiety. In many ways W felt like she was constantly being judged by other people for how she looked, and she said that often all she wanted was to be someone other than 'the fat girl'.

"I'm exactly, I'm much more than one thing that you have stereotyped me into. And it was frustrating. Even I was nominated at the prom, voted as the smartest. And I didn't take it. Because I genuinely refuse that you only stereotype me as a smart person or a nerd person if they if they couldn't. I know that if they could, if they could write nerd on the award, they would." – W.

Her colleagues' failure to ascribe her to more than one identity led her to more social anxiety. This is one of the instances where it is very clear how the social feedback she got had a direct effect on how she felt. Being ascribed only one identity as a contributor to social anxiety also resonated with S, who talked about how she was always intimidated by people who put emphasis on social success. She felt like that was something that made her feel more anxious.

“But who makes me more anxious, are the people who believe that social success is very much important. And they look down on people like me who are socially not, you know, successful or whatever.”- S.

There is an assumption that she needs to be a certain type of person to gain their approval, something she felt was not part of her identity. T, likewise, talked about how when he was out with friends, he always felt afraid he would say the wrong thing, and then said that his anxiety came from people who constantly tried to define him and make him into ‘one thing’.

“I think my social anxiety stems from this feeling of being objectified, being turned into one thing, which if I one day not turn out to be, I will be shunned from society” – T.

T was describing how when there was no space around his identity, he felt that he had no authorship or control over how people saw him. This also shows that those participants found that socialising carried an ultimatum around who they needed to be; that if they did not end up being the person that others wanted them to be, they would no longer belong. The next limitation

that was more concrete and could be seen as a result of all of the previously mentioned concepts is the notion of limitation when it came to social capital.

Social Capital Limitations. In the same way that limitations posed by social anxiety were due to limitations in identity and feeling misunderstood and isolated in their lived experience; there was also a very practical limitation posed by individuals experiencing social anxiety. This was that they have a smaller chance of managing career development and social support. This made them more vulnerable than individuals who were not socially anxious. This vulnerability was explained by N, who talked about how she has experienced limitation in her networking with other designers who may have helped her develop in the field.

“It limits me a lot because I find in my field especially it's so important for network in the design field. I think a lot of fields actually. I bet some psychology as well. It is good to be known. And to social network to me, it's very hard.” – N.

This plainly showed how difficult it is for someone who has social anxiety to engage with others for networking purposes that are necessary for their career advancement. This was also echoed by another participant, A.

“I think yeah... the thing I said in the beginning about the fact that you just you wanna be an actor and you wanna be out there and now just like whenever you are in any meeting or outing or meeting people from the showbiz or anything, and this gathering... This is my area of of of anxiety honestly, I always feel like I am doing a little you know. Just, the fact that I am working

so much and I'm trying so hard and I'm taking my workshops very seriously and I'm reading a lot of books and trying to know about different approaches and different techniques. I am doing the work from a very different side. But not necessarily building key relationships.” – A.

In his situation, his social anxiety was a barrier to forming meaningful relationships with people in his field, which is vital for an actor. This quote also shows how he felt his hard work was unseen. This impact on career relationships and development in that respect has also been mentioned by Y, who is a makeup artist.

“I mean, I'm not a very forward person, I'm not outgoing, I try to avoid situations like that. But I guess it affects my work...” – Y.

There is a link being made between their experiences of social anxiety and their capacity to build and further their career. There is also an acknowledgement that both were intertwined, perhaps more than ever before.

4.3 Social Media Processes

After clarifying the concepts that comprised social anxiety for the participants, the next step was exploring how participants reported experiencing Instagram by focusing on the social and emotional processes that emerged around Instagram interaction. This was an exciting step that allowed for questions to be answered around how exactly this group of people engaged with Instagram considering their social difficulties.

To begin with, Section 4.3.1 discusses the notion of social comparison on Instagram; section 4.3.2 examines the new possibilities that Instagram engagement presented for the participants. Afterwards, section 4.3.3 unpacks the interesting compensatory function that Instagram served, and section 4.3.4 discusses the preoccupation with Instagram engagement as per participants' reports.

4.3.1 Comparison is Inevitable

12 out of 12 participants expressed a chronic form of social comparison on Instagram; the comparison was pervasive and multi-faceted. This was expressed very clearly by A who worked in the film industry.

“I just feel like it’s something that’s always on my mind, whenever I’m in a gathering or something... you’re conscious because people are much more famous than you are sometimes, and they have more followers” – A.

In A’s case, the comparison with others had a direct link to his day-to-day life and comparing himself to others on Instagram exacerbated how he likened himself to others in person. Here the intersection between the online world and the physical world was revealed, and the experiences he had online have been clearly carried through offline as well. Career-focused comparison also was also openly expressed by Y.

“But then I check her account and her account is much more I don’t know, coordinated, it looks better, she has loads of followers, loads of likes, and it’s two things, I realised I’m not good at

taking pictures like she is. And she's younger, and she gets Instagram way more than I do, so she has 10 times the followers I have, and she probably does have a lot more work than I do, just because of her Instagram account that has more than 10k followers." – Y.

In Y's case the comparison was based on followers and her specific area of work; being a makeup artist. Both Y and A come from a place of career or occupational comparison and both participants have careers that are more visual and creative in nature. At first it was thought to be a function of their choice of career; however, the theme of comparison seems to hold up across the data and not purely from a career standpoint, but from the prism of personal relationships, looks, general activities and possessions and as well.

"Millions of times I catch my, my girlfriends, like scrolling over Instagram and saying, I wish I had that dress. I wish I had that wedding. Her fiancé is so handsome, that she got married. I'm so jealous of her or something. And it's not helpful, it's not good. And they are saying it. It's just a moment, but you can see it in their eyes, that they really longed for this thing. Even though the moment before they were okay, they didn't feel like they need this thing." – W

W believed that Instagram created a sense of urgency around life achievements, and that many times she felt like her friends were being reminded of what they did not have and that it created a yearning for something that was not on their mind before going online. W also noted that prior to using Instagram she believed that her friends were 'okay', and that therefore it was Instagram that presented that need through social comparison. A similar experience was also shared by P.

“I think when I go on it, I do feel more anxious because I am comparing my life to other people’s lives. And I do not think that’s really living... I think for me it’s better to actually have those experiences rather than just go on Instagram and see what other people are doing” – P.

For P there was a sense that comparing her life to other people’s lives was at odds with the experience of being fully alive, and that it was better for her to have those experiences instead of comparing her life to others. An assumption that they were somehow mutually exclusive was held by P. For both P and W there seems to be a belief that their quality of life was compromised by comparing their lives to other peoples’. However, the underlying assumption is also that this comparison took place between two people’s lives and not one person’s life and another person’s Instagram post.

This inevitable comparison was also carried out on the level of body image, for example, A2 talked about how comparison on Instagram was different from comparison to celebrities because it was more ‘chronic’ and more incessant than television or magazines.

“I think I think it’s more pronounced because it’s more constant. Okay. Whereas like the magazines had like a publishing frequency. Right, whereas this is like all day all the time. Like look at this look at this look at that, it’s chronic.” – A2.

This experience of it being chronic is interesting; R also echoed a similar sentiment, saying that if she found herself in a bad mood, she was more likely to engage in comparing her

life to other people and question why she is not so happy. It was a personal comparison, unlike comparison to celebrities which was less accessible during the day and less personal.

“If you're having a bad day, and then you look at pictures that people are so happy and like, enjoying their life of course as a human being you're going to be like, why am I not happy like that again?” – R.

All the previously mentioned participants declared how comparing their lives to others took a toll on them emotionally. Similarly, for C there was a sense that not only was she comparing herself to others online, but that her friends seemed to also do the same and they would complain to each other about the profiles they were comparing themselves to, she even felt the need to break from following certain accounts to stop herself from engaging in that activity.

“And they are like, oh, look at this and look at that, and she is wearing this and she's wearing that, and my body doesn't look like this and I wish I could be like that and, and it's just like this kind of negative vibe. I'm really like, that's not what I want. So, I ended up tailoring my experience which was also gradual, and I just learned how to do that and just cut any negativity out.”- C.

There was a consensus amongst C and her friends that they were comparing their lives to other online profiles and it was a topic of conversation amongst them. Although for the most part comparison to other profiles was construed as a negative experience, this was contradicted at some points. Some participants talked about how comparison created new possibilities of

developing. N discussed how some of the accounts she followed have been inspirational in their content because they would motivate her to work hard to emulate some of them.

“Actually, sometimes it's useful to see the person doing something that you're not doing. So, you start thinking, hmm, maybe I should start doing it. Like, for instance, I only learned how to make a dessert and it actually turned out to be good, because I saw that Youtuber making that dessert and sharing it with people, and I was like, wait a second. Oh, I can do it, and I did it, and I was so happy, and yeah. So sometimes you do compare in a way and it makes you compare yourself in a way that motivates you.” – N.

The motivational aspect of comparison to other profiles appears to exist on the level of an activity such as cooking or playing a sport. This was also directly expressed by M who talked about how sometimes comparison made him do things he would otherwise not really do.

“It depends on the mood I am in, sometimes if I am sad it affects my self-esteem, I feel less than and other times its very inspiring to see like someone is doing something I wanted to do for long so it encouraged me to do it ...or like maybe a couple of old friends I've met and I wanted to meet one of them for a long time and they have done it so it encourages me to do something or it makes me feel like they're doing and I am not doing that. It depends on where I am in myself”- M.

Here M was talking about how comparison was contingent on the mood he was in. He also believed that it led to encouragement to do more. This facet of encouragement and motivation meant that Instagram engagement allowed there to be new possibilities for

participants of this study. The next section, *4.3.2 Presents New Possibilities*, will unpack the kinds of possibilities that were made available through Instagram engagement according to participants' accounts.

4.3.2 Presents New Possibilities

As previously mentioned, there were a few participants who emphasised how Instagram engagement had been motivating because they could see what others were doing and this gave them ideas on how to improve their circumstances. Drawing from M's excerpt he was clearly discussing that although he often felt like it made him feel 'less than', some Instagram content encouraged him to do something that he otherwise would not have done.

“Other times its very inspiring to see like someone is doing something I wanted to do for long, so it encouraged me to do it” – M.

This motivational aspect of Instagram use was echoed in other interviews. A disclosed how posting something she achieved was a way of marking her milestones and recognising her hard work. However, she was not very clear about whether she was waiting for recognition or acclaim.

“I think people need that motivation for themselves. I think some people post it like yes, I did it and I think that's absolutely great, and then I think some people do it because they need the external piece of it.... back in February, like I did a challenge at my exercise, I go to 'bar method'. Like there was one time a month you had to get up to 20 classes. And I usually like give up on like their challenges like after three classes. This one I actually finished, and I won

something. By the end of the day, I put in my Instagram story, and I didn't say that I finished that I just like put a thing that had my check marks that I finished it.” – A.

Within this excerpt it was clear that A found it motivating to post about her accomplishment, however she implied that she needed to be subtle about it. The fact that she shared it made it encouraging to go and work out again. It seems like a way of introducing accountability into an activity she thought she would do for herself to stay healthy. Accountability therefore seemed to be one of the possibilities that was presented through Instagram engagement. This self-development aspect of Instagram could also be through the participants' chances to meet and learn from other people who were doing things that they found interesting.

“To some extent, okay, to some extent in social media can, how can I phrase this, it can expose you to many experiences you would have known nothing about, introduce you to people you did not know even existed, social situations you would never experience, and other people did, so you learn from them and know what to do if this happens to you.” – W.

Although N said that she was gaining so much from the capacity to relate to social media as a learning and a teaching tool, but that she was too scared to use it to teach her favourite subject for fear of judgement. This again illustrates the overlap between anxiety in physical spaces and anxiety in the online world.

“I want to create content actually on YouTube because I really like those people who teach online and I like teaching, but it's been a long time since I had this thought. And I just keep chickening out because I get scared of appearing on a video.” – N.

These were illustrations of how using Instagram presents individuals with new possibilities, whether it is going out with someone, or exercising more frequently or baking something new. There is an undeniable educational and enriching element to this engagement that needs to be acknowledged. This notion of learning from other people’s experiences and their example is also an illustration of how Instagram engagement could also be a more tacit way for users to learn how to behave in certain social situations; especially centred around hobbies. Even though new possibilities were a big benefit from Instagram use, it was important to distinguish between whether they were in fact new additional possibilities or compensatory functions. The compensatory aspect of Instagram use will be looked at in section 4.3.3 *Social Media as Compensatory*.

4.3.3 Social Media as Compensatory

One social media process that was expressed through the data was the notion of it being compensatory for in-person interaction that was otherwise inaccessible to the participant. W for example talked about how going on Twitter gave her space to feel like she was not alone in many of her struggles.

“Because like, for example, I turned to Twitter because I had problems with my parents, I didn't know how to communicate with them. They didn't understand the changes going through me.

When I joined Twitter, I found the same people having the same struggle. And we would have these conversations past midnight, on our sadness and sorrows, I felt I felt connected. I felt like I can communicate to total strangers. People that I didn't know anything about. But we just shared the same thing. On that night, we're just sharing the same sad thought, were the same struggle or the same uncomfortable feeling. I found that from the comfort of my home. Even though I'm just meters away from my parents' room, I should get the confirmation and validation and comfort from them. But I couldn't because they didn't understand what's going on with me.” – W.

In this excerpt, W talked about the value she gained from sharing her personal experiences with strangers on Twitter, and how this made her feel momentarily connected and compensated for not being understood by her parents, whom she was living with. This shows how ideally, she wanted her parents to understand her and what she was going through, yet because she could not get them to empathise with her, she sought that connection on Twitter. Another example of social media being used in a compensatory capacity was when people posted for feedback on their work. This was expressed by N who was describing how validation (through likes and positive feedback) made her feel.

“That's one thing, validation, definitely validation. And when people get those likes and comments, they get happy, I get happiness or pleasure whenever I post my work” – N.

Then N went on to explain how she thought this validation was the product of a natural need to be accepted by people around her.

“It affects them by realizing that they're accepted because I think it's like probably, we're social beings and we rely on being around people and being around others and being accepted” – N.

Posting her work to an online audience meant that she was being accepted by those around her, it gave her the same response as though these people were around her applauding her work. There was a similar conclusion drawn by M, who said that he would post to show people that he too is doing things, that he is ‘cool’ too.

“Partly because I feel like if I post something, it is like saying ‘hey! look at me I’m cool too I do these things too!’ I’m out there, I like... I have a life.” – M.

Here, validation is not only about posting about his work, but also his choice to do things which other Instagram users found interesting and appealing. This he alluded to being a compensation for being accepted in real life, which he mostly did not feel like he was. Although the compensatory role of Instagram is up until this point portrayed as a compensation for understanding, approval and validation, there is one more situational way Instagram provided compensation. M mentioned how he would go on his phone whenever he felt like he was in an uncomfortable social setting.

“It depends how uncomfortable I am. If I am very uncomfortable, and I can leave I will leave. If I can leave maybe I’ll just look for my phone or sometimes I would just like find someone, like one person or two people that I can engage in a conversation and just talk to these couple of people and ignore what’s happening around me.” – M

This excerpt shows how looking for his phone or talking to one person were interchangeable, there is an implied meaning that both were protective strategies in uncomfortable social settings and compensated for the discomfort he felt at the time. This was also echoed by Y, who talked about phone use when she felt uneasy in a social setting.

“I guess I am communicating that I am not happy with you guys. Like we really like each other, and I really put effort to be friendly with them. And they tend to do that if they are divided, but as a group, you say a word and they will not even listen to you. So yeah, I guess I would be communicating to them that, you know what fine, you’re ignoring me then I don’t need you I will be on my Instagram” – Y.

It is interesting to note how in Y’s case; the compensation was using it when she did not feel included to show others that she did not need them. This could be another way of using devices in ways that communicated various things to others. However, it also helped her keep up with what other people were doing.

“It’s a research tool that allows you to keep tabs on people” – Y.

The fact that it is a research tool on other people’s lives meant that she would go online to understand what is happening in their lives because staying updated on their news, orients her to her social network. This was also mentioned by other participants like M.

“I like to know what other people are doing mostly, who went where and who did what err... it’s mostly that for me.” – M.

The window onto what other people were doing in their lives seemed to occupy the space of in-person interaction. This means that some participants’ lack of engagement with others is offset by a platform that shows them what other people’s lives looked like and where they were.

“I go on it to see pictures maybe of what people are doing, where they’re going, who they’re with, and events, they are attending parties. It’s mainly it’s mainly events like parties they go to concerts; I like to look at things like that.” – R.

This could be one of the most significant compensatory functions that Instagram played for this group. This need to check what others are doing as opposed to seeing or talking to them raises interesting questions about the new form of relating to others that social media introduces into users’ lives. It is, however, important to address the fixation on Instagram that most of the participants reported having, which the next section, *4.3.4 Preoccupation with Instagram*, will cover.

4.3.4 Preoccupation with Instagram

Most of the participants expressed their concerns over being ‘addicted’ to Instagram. In the below excerpt, M2 was discussing how he felt like he lacked awareness over when he would drift into scrolling on the application and feeling like he was losing time.

“Other times, it's just like, okay, well, the danger is any free moment that you have that you unwillingly give to Instagram, you know what? It's like, that's where I feel I'm guilty of where it's like, there's no purpose of going on here. There is no awareness of like, how much cumulative time like...at the end of the week, what this app has taken, like, the equivalent of like, two nights' worth of sleep.” – M2.

He recognized that there was a loss of control over how much he was using it and he felt like there needed to be a limit to his screen-time in general. He also believed that there was a deliberate plan that technological corporations had in their design of the platforms to optimise for maximum engagement.

“It's like a magic trick. It's kind of like the carrot and the stick, but it's like a continual carrot that's on loop. Literally, you know, there is from a psychological perspective there gamifying you know, visual stimulus, I guess all the time. Like, how can you be visually stimulated and more engaged. So, to be more of a consumer of advertising.” – M2.

Various other participants mentioned the behavioural aspect of scrolling, and some saw scrolling as not only addictive but also numbing.

“Because you're just like scrolling and not even paying attention. You probably, you know, just want to avoid your feelings. It's kind of numbing, it's very numbing.” – S.

Participants mentioned how they would grapple with deleting and downloading the application to curb their use. P talked about how she would do that for fears of being addicted to Instagram.

“Because I, don’t want to feel like... I’m addicted to it. I wouldn’t say I’m addicted to it; I don’t want to feel like I’m addicted to it.” – P.

Beneath the phenomenon of dependence, some participants alluded to Instagram being a platform that allowed them to escape reality as it was. M talked about how he believed that engaging online was a way of filling a ‘void’.

“Yeah, when I feel that I try to fill this empty void with something, whether its shopping, Instagram, food, drugs. This is when the addiction happens. It’s basically trying to fill it” – M.

This was similarly mentioned by S who talked about the reason for her ‘addiction’ to it being her indulgence in a ‘fantasy’ life that she wanted for herself, but that was very different from her real one. She very lucidly described what she believed to be the reason for her preoccupation with Instagram.

“It’s more powerful when there’s no real life and it’s more powerful when you don’t have self-worth. It’s more powerful when you don’t have self-esteem. It like becomes this huge thing that is just of course an addiction. Because it becomes the only thing that gives you a sense of something, because in my mind I built you know, I have a certain imagination of how I would like

to live my life and Instagram fuels these thoughts that I have. So, it becomes also another escape from life, and it becomes much better than life a lot of time” – S.

One participant pinned its addictiveness to the idea that the individual was always being presented with new information. This was expressed by N, who talked about the power of Instagram to constantly entertain her with new material to the point where she felt like she could not stop using it.

“It is always brute forcing you to take in new posts. If you go on my Instagram, and you always refresh, you are always getting something new. You're not getting the old things. There's always something new and even the search page is always suggesting things and these things are entertaining. So, you think I didn't see this. I didn't see that. Oh, it's a cat video. I didn't see it. But to me, I get drunk on these videos. Because they're so cute... It's addictive, because they see something that you like, all the time getting new and getting new, different things.” – N.

Preoccupation with Instagram seemed linked with the context of the participants and their emotional worlds. The physical environment seems to also be linked with Instagram usage. This was very clearly expressed by Y, who placed Instagram use within a hypothetical social setting.

“The other side would be, if I am sitting in a gigantic group and I can't get in a word in, I would indulge into Instagram and ignore everyone, and ignore how left out they made me feel... so I keep on scrolling, it's like a protective shield” – Y.

This small illustration of how Instagram use slotted into the experience of social anxiety leads to the conclusion that there is a safety behaviour component to the preoccupation with Instagram. Beyond escapism, novelty and behavioural conditioning, the function and value of Instagram use in the context of social anxiety was a way of managing themselves in an uncomfortable social setting and replacing it with a space where they had some level of perceived control and belonging.

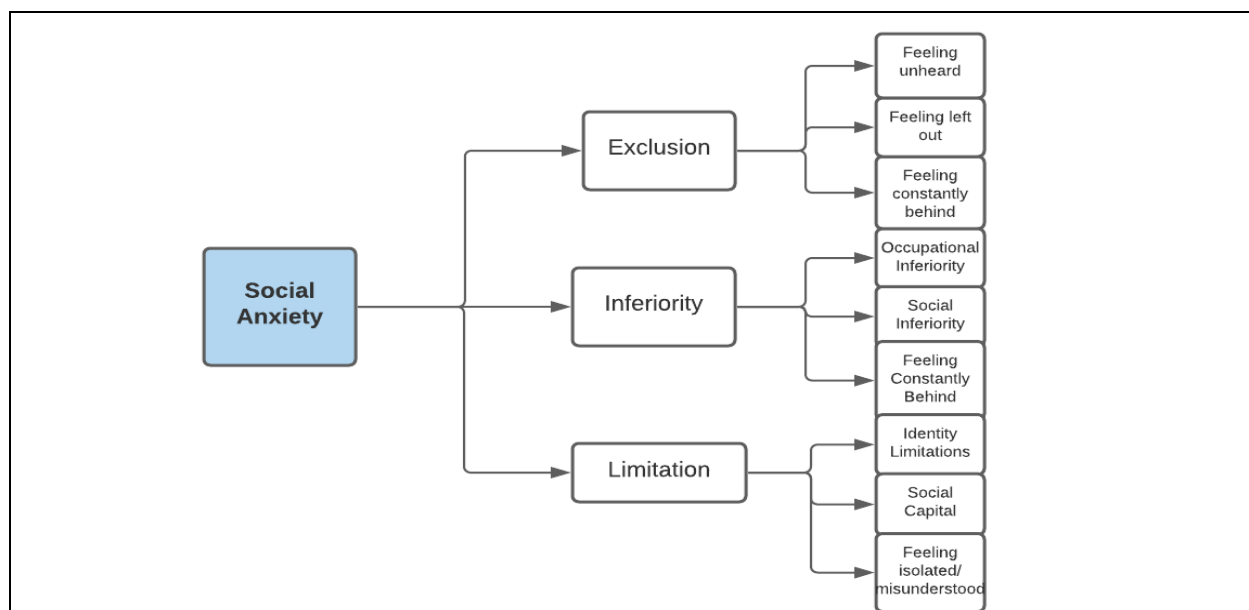
All the social media processes that were presented were carefully crafted through analysis in the form of meticulous coding and constant comparison. These processes represented the four most compelling interactions between socially anxious participants and their Instagram platform. The next stage was dedicated to putting it all together, the formulation of social anxiety as presented in section 4.2.1 *Social Anxiety* was linked with the social media processes that were outlined in section 4.3 *Social Media Processes*.

4.4 Theoretical Formulations

In this section, some of the findings are explored for links with the aim of building a conceptual framework for understanding the social and emotional processes that were playing out for participants when engaging on Instagram. Those links were made and then they were checked against the data, categories, concepts, and memos to verify relationships between them. This is referred to as theoretical coding, previously outlined under section 4.1.4 *Constant Comparison*. Below is a diagram illustrating the three core categories of social anxiety as they linked to their concepts.

Figure 7

Basic Processes of Social Anxiety



In the diagram above the core categories as they relate to the concepts are presented.

However, after careful validating against the data, there was a realisation that ‘Limitation’ was not a defining feature of social anxiety but also a result of exclusion and inferiority. At the start, ‘Limitation’ seemed to be one of the processes that mediated social anxiety, this is shown through excerpts from the transcripts. The first one described not being able to compete at work for example because of the experience of feeling inferior.

*"Yes, because now I feel like I can't, like I don't know how to compete, and I don't know... what something is holding me back. Something makes me not want to advertise myself on Instagram. I don't know what it is, but there are days when I wake up and like... yeah, I'm not gonna do sh** about it.... I don't know. I think it's insecurity." – Y.*

Other participants echoed a similar sentiment, saying that they correlated not being good at their jobs with not being very good socially.

"That's how I feel. I feel both like I'm not good at my job because I'm socially like not good enough. And the other way around as well." – S.

One of the participants talked about how she had felt like she was being regarded as 'stuck up' because of how socially anxious she felt.

"Like for example, some people can be like, you're difficult. You don't like people. You don't like to deal with people, try to be more flexible. People see you as like, you don't like them or stuck up any of this." – R.

This showed how her limitation was partly also due to social anxiety causing a limited social identity to form about her. This identity limitation is another example of how limitation is both a process and a result. She felt limited in her identity, and then felt more socially anxious; and on the contrary she was limited due to her social anxiety and was therefore less able to freely curate an identity that she wanted for herself.

Even though social media is widely recognised for its power to expand or explore one's identity, another participant discussed how limitation due to social anxiety was affecting her ability to post content online.

"And then going back to the social networking, it still does limit me even though I did go over one obstacle is still there that tells me 'don't put content online or try to teach others you're not useful or not useful'. People, people will not like it."- N.

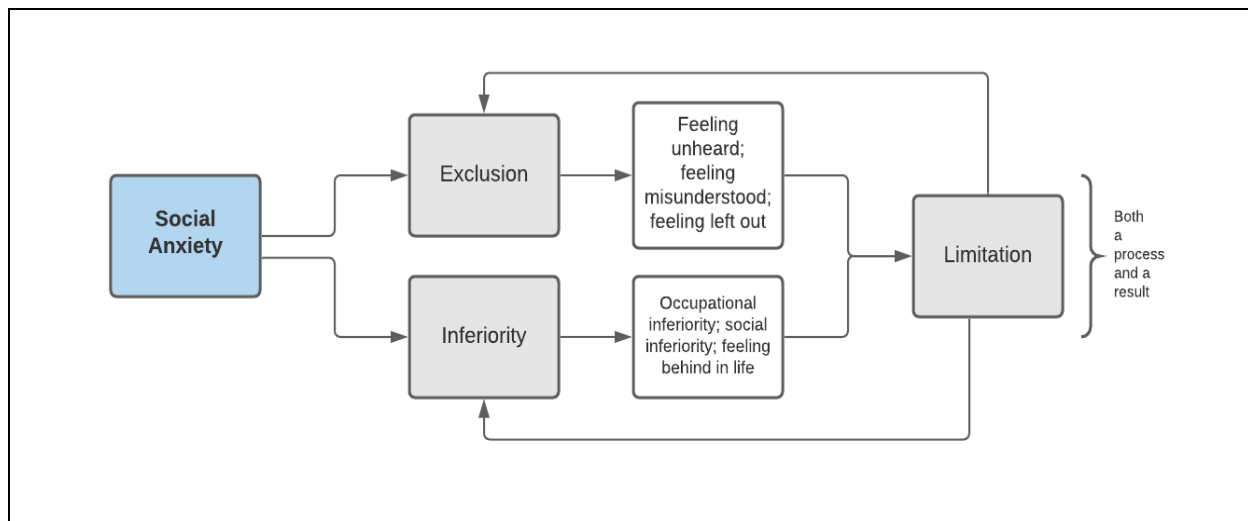
When she stopped herself from posting she also stopped herself from making friends.

"So, trying to make friends really makes me anxious. Like, I feel like now making friends is so much harder than when you're a kid because when you're a kid people are blunt. And people were obvious than now. Now you feel like people are wearing masks all the time, which is what you wear you wear different masks to your parents or your friends. But it does get in the way. And it's because it's deceptive. When you want to be friends with someone I need to know. Are they faking it? Are they not faking it? Are they happy when I'm around? I guess I need a lot of validation, my anxiety makes me always want to be reminded that my best friend loves me." – N.

Here the participant was talking about how her social anxiety emanated from both the fear of being rejected (both online and offline) and the fact that she was unsure which ‘mask’ to wear around whom. This also horizontally links into the idea of identity limitation being both a product of and a process inherent within social anxiety. After incorporating those excerpts in the development of the category ‘Limitation’, it was clearly positioned as a product of ‘Inferiority’ and ‘Exclusion’ as well. *Figure 8* below reflects that change in perspective.

Figure 8

Limitation as a Process and a Result



Placing limitation as both a process and a result allowed the social media processes that emerged from the analysis to be linked with the diagram seamlessly and added some explanatory power. This diagram also drew from memo-writing in its development, an example of which is attached to *Appendix S: Memo-writing towards Theory Development*. The integrative diagram is presented in the coming section: *4.4.1 Integrative Diagram: Social Anxiety X Social Media Processes*.

4.4.1 Integrative Diagram: Social Anxiety X Social Media Processes

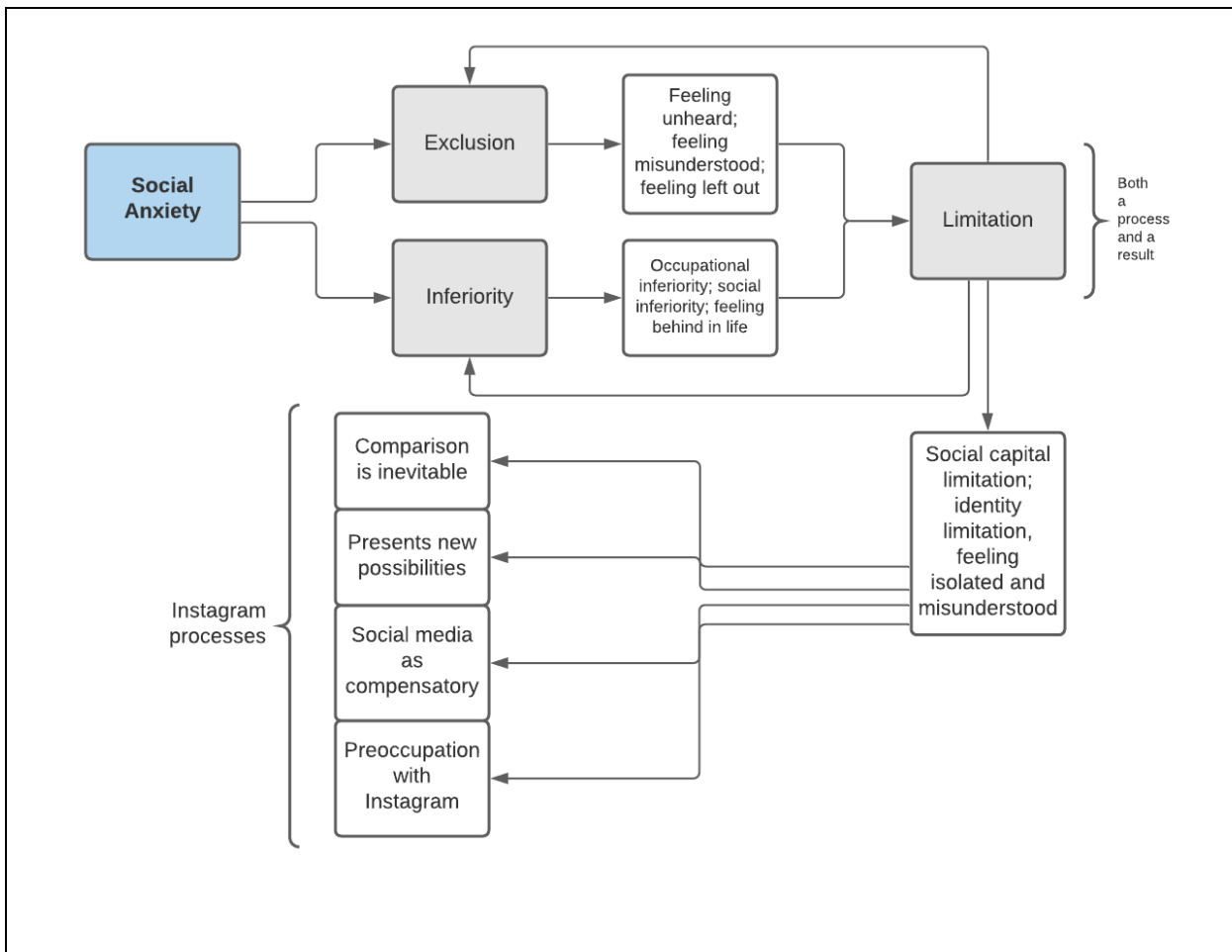
This section will present the integrative diagram that was developed to synthesise the findings. The diagram starts by representing social anxiety, as it branches out into its two core categories: ‘Exclusion’ and ‘Inferiority’. The two categories are linked with ‘Limitation’ which is both a process and a result of the aforementioned categories.

It then shows how ‘Limitation’ manifests and is broken down to social capital limitation, identity limitation and feeling isolated and misunderstood. These limitations are then connected

to the various social and emotional processes of Instagram engagement that were significant to participants.

Figure 9

Integrative Diagram of Social Anxiety Processes and Social Media Processes



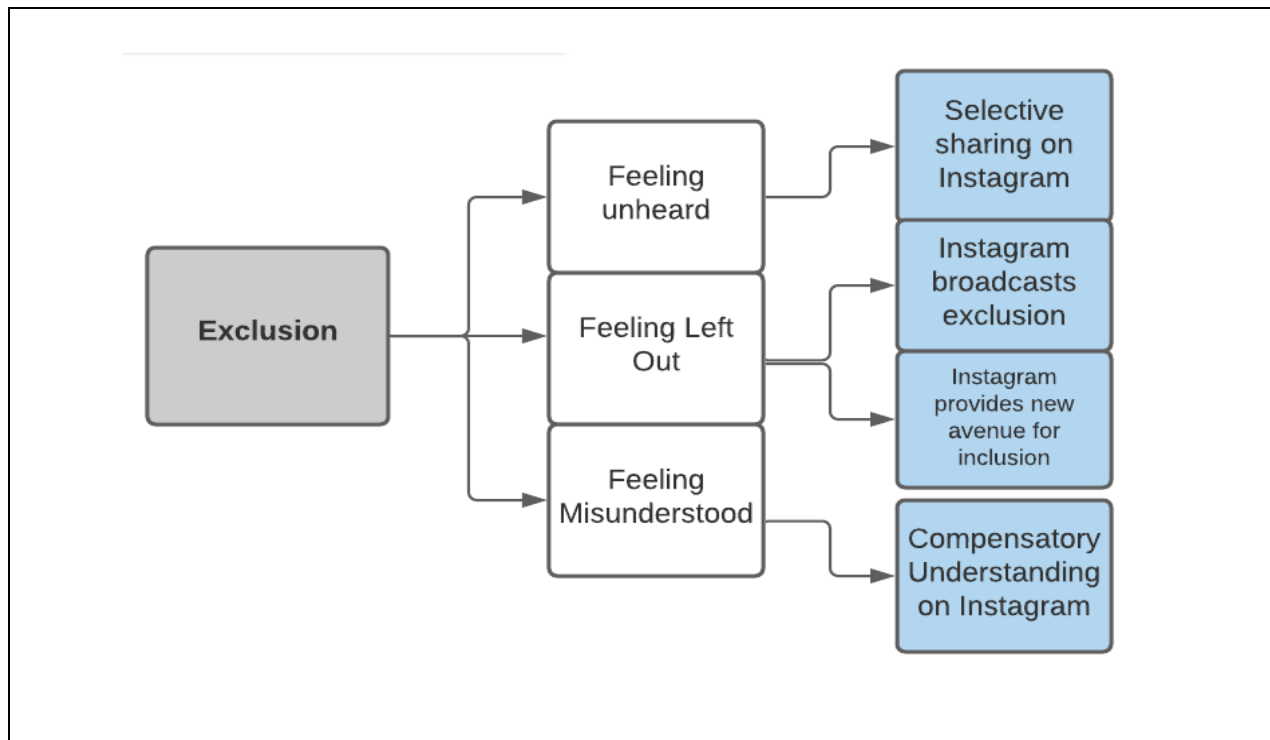
The integrative model presented above represents the significant processes of Instagram engagement as they relate to the experience of social anxiety. The core categories that were

developed from coding data around social media engagement are ‘Comparison is Inevitable’, ‘Presents New Possibilities’; ‘Social Media as Compensatory’ and ‘Preoccupation with Instagram’. The rest of this section will outline some of the reasoning around how those processes were linked with the experience of social anxiety, as well as detail some of the other processes that were present within the data.

4.4.1.1 Exclusion. The experience of exclusion was ubiquitous across the data. The diagram below displays the concepts of ‘exclusion’ on the left, as they link to social media processes on the right (in blue).

Figure 10

Exclusion and Social Media Processes



As is exhibited above, with the core category of exclusion there were many corresponding processes. The first concept was exclusion as an experience of being unheard. There is an unclear position in the data and an ambivalence as to whether Instagram engagement provided an avenue for being heard in a way that assuages social anxiety. On the one hand there seems to be identification with people who post specific life experiences who have taken to Instagram to express the truth about their life, and on the other hand there is a recognition of an unspoken rule about the nature of the content being shared needing to be politically correct and ‘not too negative’, as N put it.

“People would only show when they're good, so then people would follow them more and people want happy (content).” - N.

N talked about how although being heard online was possible in the right spaces, she felt like on Instagram she had to curb her negativity to meet the expectations of the other users who ‘want happy’. This means that feeling heard stands at odds with selectively sharing content that garnered positive engagement. This process of being selective means that participants were not baring their whole truth, but certain aspects of their lives that others would want to engage with. This supports the argument that Instagram is not a platform that helps socially anxious individuals meet their need of feeling heard, but their reality was fragmented and presented to receive positive engagement and affirmation.

The need to feel heard was not the only aspect of exclusion that socially anxious individuals struggled with. The second dimension of the experience of exclusion was ‘feeling left out’. Instagram engagement seemed to have a two-way effect on participants. On the one hand there was more exposure to pictures of social situations where they were indeed ‘left out’, as mentioned by C.

“I think it has happened quite a few times that if I find that, for example, some of my friends went somewhere without telling me or inviting me to come along. It sometimes creates a negative feeling for me that okay, it's not catastrophic, but like it does create some, some feelings. It definitely impacts my relationship with them.” -C.

This relationship between Instagram content and feeling excluded was also mentioned by a few other participants, mostly referring to pictures that showed that they were not included in certain events or moments. On the other hand, there is an element of specific inclusion that resulted from Instagram engagement, as mentioned by P.

“So... I work as a dentist and on Instagram there's like an ‘Empowering Women in Dentistry’ group and on there they hold different events and I always feel like attending one of those because it feels like I would be included.” – P.

Here the paradoxical relationship of Instagram engagement with exclusion is made explicit, in the sense that although Instagram provided an avenue for inclusion based on careers

or interests, it also showed how content posted by friends can make participants feel excluded and impacted their in-person relationships negatively.

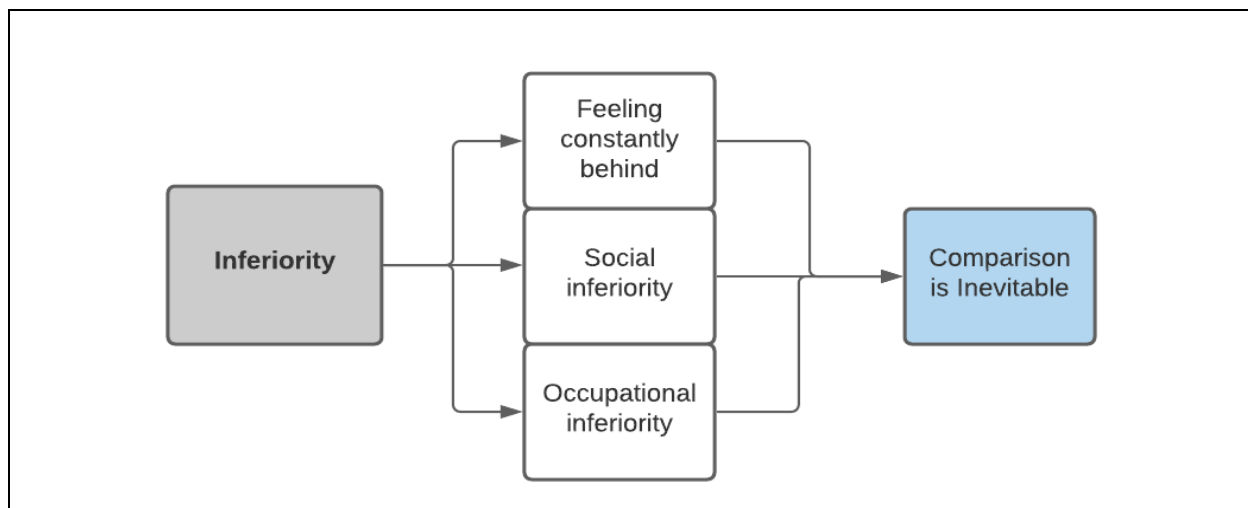
The last element of exclusion is the notion of ‘feeling misunderstood’. As previously mentioned earlier, there is some component of identification with strangers who share specific content online or engaging with profiles that are designated for certain life struggles, such as mental health struggles. This is expressed by S.

“The psychology pages, the spirituality pages. And yeah, yeah, people from those energy pages. These are empowering.” – S.

S was not the only one who talked about finding compensatory understanding on Instagram, more examples are mentioned in section 4.3.3 *Social Media as Compensatory*. This shows that although Instagram engagement led participants to experiencing social exclusion, and selective sharing with others that did not promote being heard; it seems to be a place where some empowerment took place.

After clarifying how Instagram processes related to the category of ‘Exclusion’, the next stage was to show how inferiority is linked with social media processes that emerged from the interviews, in the following section: 4.2.1.2 *Social Anxiety*.

4.4.1.2 Inferiority. The below diagram represents the core category ‘inferiority’, with its concepts and shows how it is linked to the social media process of ‘comparison’.

Figure 11*Inferiority and Social Media Processes*

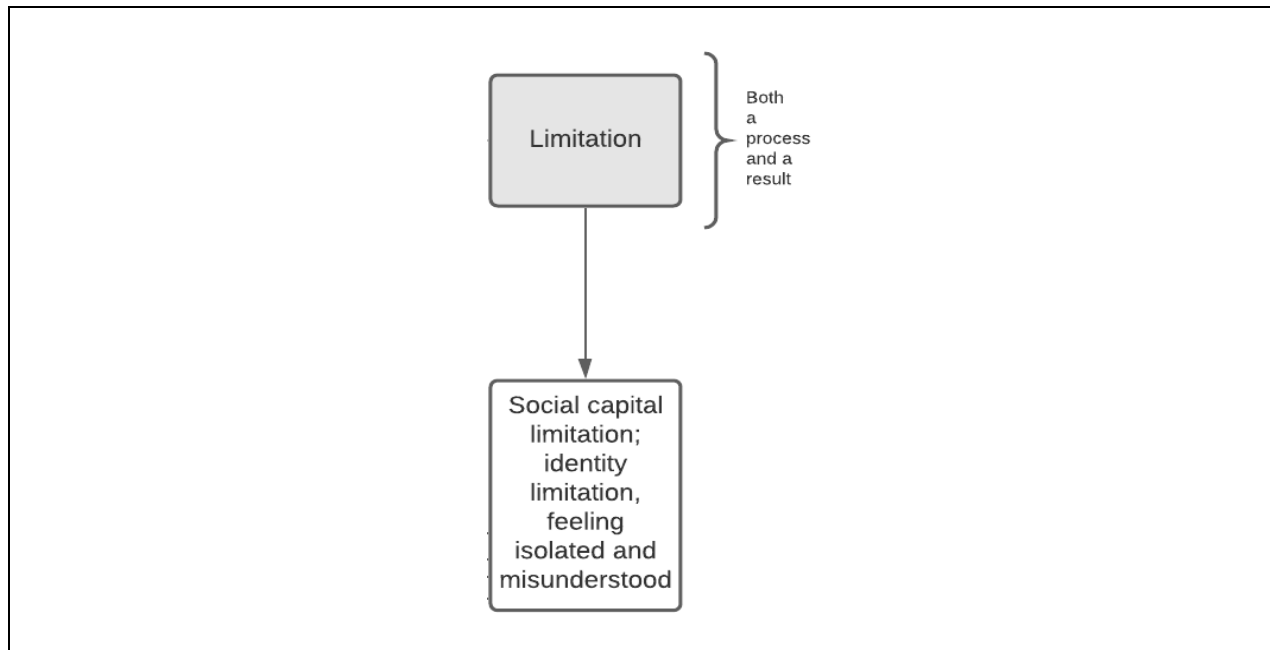
The above diagram displays social anxiety as an experience of inferiority, split up into three concepts: feeling constantly behind, occupational inferiority and social inferiority. All three were linked with the category of comparison being inevitable on social media. In almost every transcript there seemed to be an acknowledgement of how comparison to others took place on Instagram and how it affected the individual's perception of their own social standing in those three ways.

This comparison is present across occupational standing, social standing, and global perception of their position in life. This section of the conceptual model, and the link between comparison and social anxiety was discussed at length in section *4.3.1 Comparison is Inevitable*.

4.4.1.3 Limitation. The first two sections of the integrative diagram exhibited how social media processes and ‘Exclusion’ and ‘Inferiority’ correspond to relevant social media processes. The third component of the integrative diagram was the core category ‘limitation’ as a result and a process. The below diagram shows how it is represented.

Figure 12

Limitation as A Process and Result

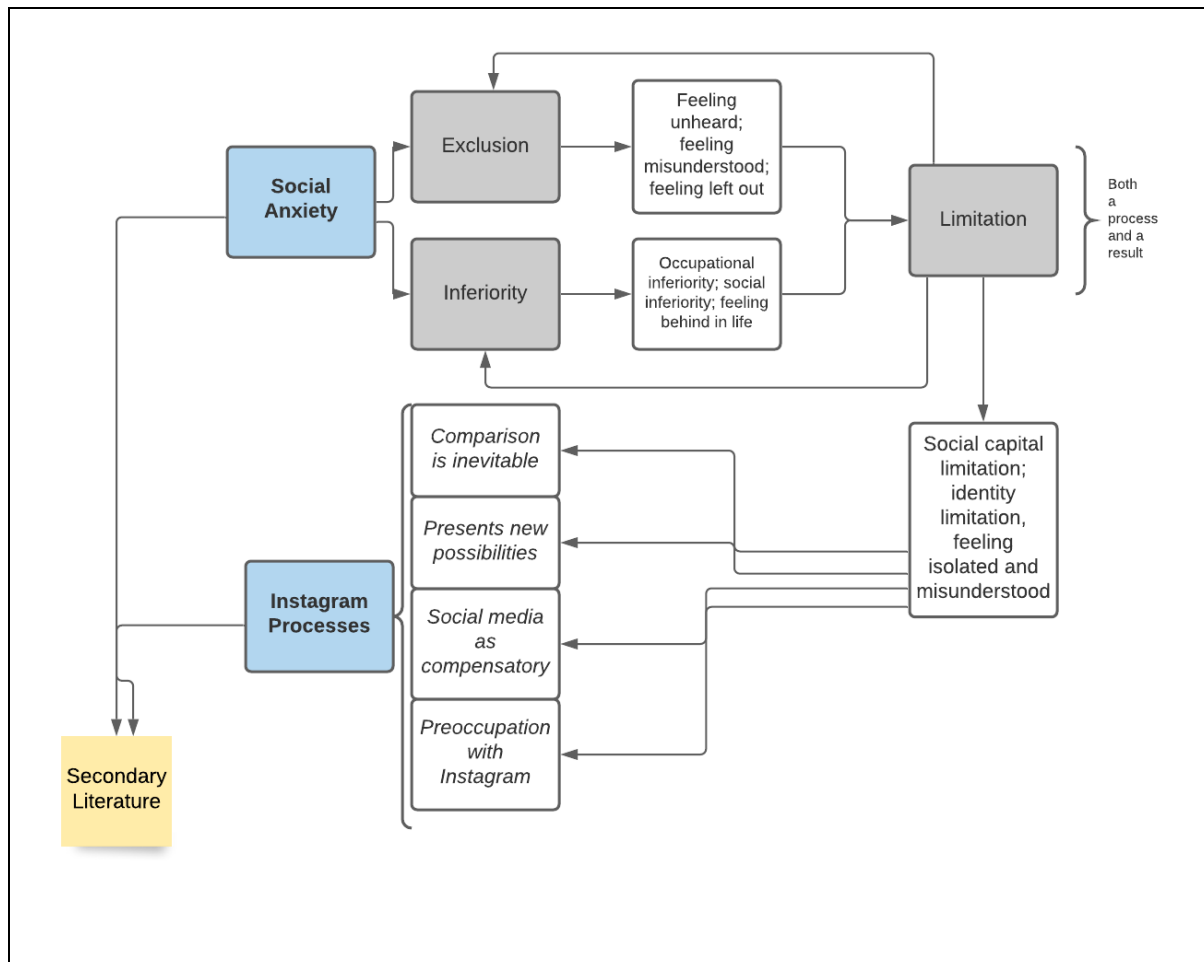


A more thorough discussion of the core category ‘limitation’ is found in section 4.2.1.3 *Social Anxiety: Limitation*. This core category is seen as a proxy between the core categories of social anxiety, and social media processes. The assumption is that Instagram use being such a big part of people’s daily lives should be able to support people in meeting their social needs, by being ‘brought closer to the people and the things they love’(Instagram Press, n.d). Instagram processes are primarily linked to this category as they are an avenue where new possibilities are

available for the participant, where there is potential to overcome limitations posed by social anxiety and that may paradoxically lead to more of it. After clarifying the core categories that emerged for social media processes, the below diagram adds one more process.

Figure 13

Social Anxiety Processes, Social Media Processes & Secondary Literature



This diagram the stage where a secondary literature search was conducted to compare the substantive findings from the participants against theory in the literature, evaluate them critically, as well as develop ideas around the theoretical formulation further. The integrative models

presented above supported the researcher in developing the search strategy for the literature review. *Chapter 5* will present the literature review as guided by the findings represented in the above diagram.

Chapter 5: Literature Review

This chapter presents the strategic literature review that was conducted for the purpose of advancing the findings. Sections **5.1** and **5.2** offer an introduction detailing the position of the strategic literature review within the scope of this study's research method and findings. Section **5.3** lists the objectives of the literature review, and section **5.4** clarifies the search strategy used to extract relevant literature sources. Sections **5.5** and **5.6** provide the review of the literature arranged sequentially based on the findings of this research.

5.1 Introduction

The literature review in constructivist grounded theory is a place where research findings could bounce off academic literature, and within that process, a discursive comparison leads to a refinement of the findings and a more focused and relevant theory (Charmaz, 2006). It was important to contextualise the findings within the field, which is at the intersection of cyberpsychology and counselling psychology. The literature review is thus the stage at which the theory is ‘scaled up’ (Urquhart, 2012). The structure of the literature review was informed by the findings from the analysis, and the integrative models developed to link the findings in Chapter 4, section 4.4 *Theoretical Formulations*. After this literature review is outlined, *Chapter 6* will then open the space for an evaluation of the findings considering the integration of the extant literature.

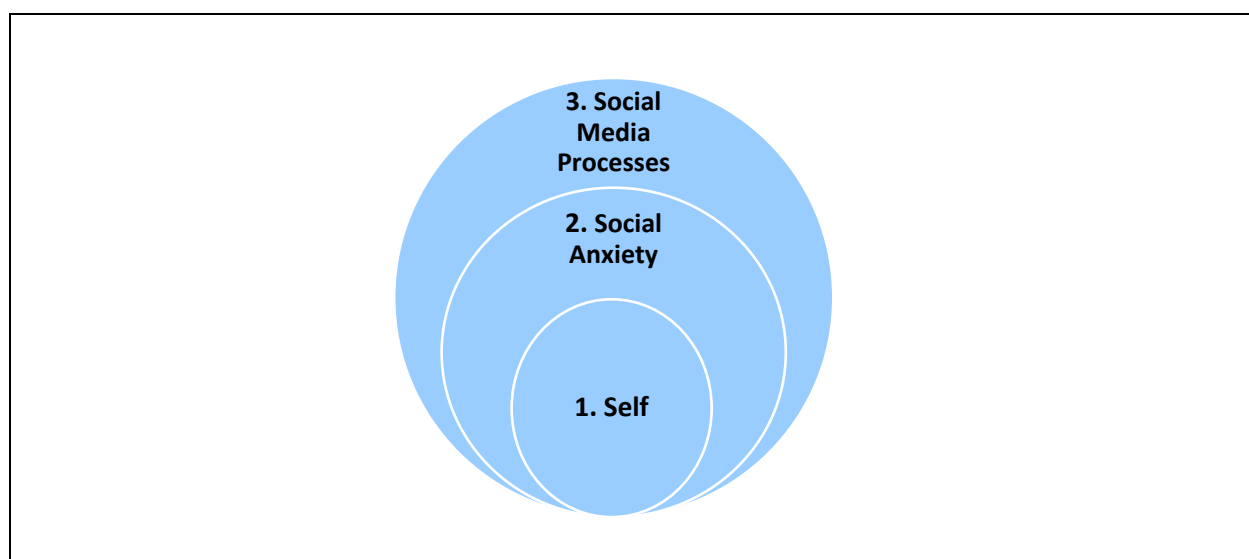
5.2 Rationale for Literature Review

Kathy Charmaz, one of the founders of grounded theory was very clear in her book *‘Constructing Grounded Theory’* about the role of a sharply focused literature review (2006). She stated that delaying the literature review was important because it helped in the articulation of ideas from the findings and was a chance to analyse the most significant works in relation to what was addressed in the developed theory. The purpose of it being the development of a theoretical discussion, in addition to a more in-depth understanding of where and how the work fits or extends the relevant literature. It allows the researcher to make specific and compelling ties between this study and earlier studies; this meant recognising points of divergence and points of convergence (Charmaz, 2006).

Given that so much significance was placed on the literature review, the central question that needed to be answered was: How is the search strategy developed? One way of determining the search strategy was utilising the integrative diagrams as guides for the literature strategy, as they were considered the best way of keeping it ‘sharply focused’ (Charmaz, 2006). The diagram below demonstrates how the literature review was arranged conceptually from research on the ‘self’, ‘social anxiety’ and finally ‘social media processes’.

Figure 14

Conceptual Framework of Literature Review



The above diagram is a symbolic representation of how this literature review was arranged, as informed by the nature of this investigation. It started by identifying literature that was relevant to the researcher’s understanding of the self, before proceeding onto the experience of social anxiety as experienced by the participants. Finally, the key social media processes that were outlined in *Chapter 4, section 4.3 Social Media Processes*, guided the search. The diagram

shows all three presented in concentric circles, proceeding one after the other, starting from the individual and moving outwards to their social anxiety, and finally their online interactions.

The literature review search strategy aimed to stay true to a relativist ontological position. There was also an appreciation of the researcher's journey which was a significant part of the analysis process. As a researcher, it was difficult to ignore the questions that emerged surrounding the nature of the self. Prior to this investigation, one of the most highly influential areas to inform an understanding of the self for the researcher was existential literature. Especially Jean-Paul Sartre's views on the self with others, which was outlined in the preliminary literature review, in *Chapter 2*, section 2.2.2 *Social Anxiety in Existentialism*.

However, throughout the last two years the researcher was exploring alternative and exciting academic inquiries on the nature of the self which were integral to the formulation and analysis processes. After looking at how this research framed the 'self'; the understanding of social anxiety which emerged from the analysis process was compared to alternative and more widely utilised formulations of social anxiety in diagnostic manuals. Later, the participants' online engagement was probed and evaluated against cyberpsychology literature to contextualise, compare, and contrast findings from this discipline to the substantive conclusions drawn from the analysis process. The theoretical formulations were examined at length again in *Chapter 6: Discussion*.

5.3 Literature Review Objectives

The literature review had three main objectives:

- 1) To develop a workable understanding of the ‘self’ by drawing from the findings of this investigation as well as wider literature from various domains: existential philosophy, psychology, social psychology, mental health, and sociology, engaging in an interdisciplinary review of the literature. (See section 5.5.1 *The Self*)
- 2) To refine and develop the understanding of ‘social anxiety’ as it is presented in the findings and review the literature for the purpose of expanding on the substantive findings of social anxiety. (See sections 5.5.2 *Social Anxiety*, 5.5.3 *Social Anxiety: Exclusion*, 5.5.4 *Social Anxiety: Inferiority*, 5.5.5 *Social Anxiety: Limitation*)
- 3) To explore the field of cyberpsychology and computer mediated communication research with the aim of clarifying and contextualising findings on the ‘social media processes’ outlined by the participants. (See section 5.6 *Literature Review: Social Media Processes*)

5.4 Search Strategy

This section includes a search strategy for the literature review. The purpose of this search strategy was to clarify the key words used in searching for sources and justify how they relate to this investigation. The search was carried out on five different databases:

- 1) Middlesex University Library Database (Unihub)
- 2) American Psychological Society Database (PsycNet)
- 3) British Psychological Society Database (PsychHub)
- 4) Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)
- 5) Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking Database (Mary Ann Liebert)

The databases selected for the search cover the breadth of the area of research and enabled a comprehensive search. The table below presents the key words used for the search strategy, along with the justification for each.

Table 2*Search Strategy for Strategic Literature Review*

Key Words/Boolean Phrases	Dates	Justification	Section
'Self & social constructionism'; 'self & psychology'.	N/A	To proceed with an exploration of social anxiety, it is important to first define the 'self' as per the findings of this research endeavour and incorporate relevant interdisciplinary perspectives	<i>5.5.1 The Self</i>
'Social Anxiety' and/or 'Social Phobia'; and/or 'Exclusion'; and/or 'Inferiority'; and/or 'Limitation'.	1960-Present	This is to clarify where to position the findings in the realm of qualitative, quantitative, and diagnostic understandings of social anxiety. 1960 was chosen because this is roughly when the diagnosis of social phobia was incepted.	<i>5.5.2 Social Anxiety</i>
'Social anxiety and/or social phobia' and 'comparison'; and 'psychology'; and/or 'Instagram'; and/or 'social media'.	2004 - Present	To extract relevant literature on social comparison in the context of social media and social anxiety.	<i>5.6.1 Comparison is Inevitable</i>
'Social anxiety and 'new possibilities'; and/or 'belonging'; and/or 'identity'; and/or 'validation' and 'social media' and/or 'Instagram'.	2004 – Present	To extract relevant literature on new possibilities (belonging, connecting, identity etc.) in the context of social media and social anxiety.	<i>5.6.2 Presents New Possibilities</i>
'Social anxiety' and 'compensation' and/or 'understanding' and 'social media' and/or 'Instagram'.	2004 - Present	To extract relevant literature on compensatory communication in the context of social media and social anxiety.	<i>5.6.3 Seeking Compensatory Understanding on Social Media</i>
'Social anxiety' and/or 'social phobia' and 'social media preoccupation' and/or 'social media addiction'.	2004 - Present	To extract relevant literature on compensatory communication in the context of social media and social anxiety.	<i>5.6.4 Preoccupation with Instagram</i>

5.4.1 Exclusion of Literature

After identifying the key words, dates and the justification for the literature searches, the following points summarise the basis upon which literature was excluded from this study.

- 1) For literature on the ‘self’, titles that included the word ‘self’ connected to another term, such as ‘self-reporting’, ‘self-concept’, ‘self-awareness’ were discarded. This is because that would have led to irrelevant articles.
- 2) Literature that covered psychopharmacology, medication or substance misuse was excluded because it is more relevant to psychiatric interventions.
- 3) Articles and books on other phobias, (e.g., arachnophobia, claustrophobia), were excluded, as this risked an unhelpful expansion into other phobias and the literature review could have lost its specificity.
- 4) Literature on the effects of hate crime and discrimination was dismissed, as this could have steered the investigation to a more expansive debate on socio-political factors of social experience.
- 5) Literature on social anxiety interventions for psychosis was also excluded as it did not apply to the sample of participants that took part in this investigation.
- 6) Literature on physical limitation or long-term illness was excluded as it did not represent the selected sample who all considered themselves to be able-bodied and without chronic health problems.
- 7) Literature on body dysmorphia and social media use was also excluded as it would have steered the discussion to a focus on eating disorders.

- 8) Literature on child psychology or adolescents, and literature on maternity and motherhood was also excluded.
- 9) LGBTQ-specific research was excluded as this would have also turned the review to a topic that is not relevant to the issues that the participants presented with.

5.4.2 Literature Search Extraction

After the key words were identified, and the exclusion criteria clearly outlined, the literature search extraction took place. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles within the field of psychology. It limited the extraction to the first 100 results and stayed within the date range outlined in *Table 3*.

5.4.2.1 Self. The initial search on ‘self & psychology’ yielded many results which were predominantly from psychoanalytic sources. 335,743 articles resulted, and the first 100 were reviewed, which culminated in 15 sources through the Middlesex Library. Additionally, the BPS PsychHub was also chosen as a relevant database, and the search was narrowed down to ‘self’ & ‘social constructionism’, which produced 1821 results, again checking the first 100 sources, yielded 7 directly significant results. The below table is a sample of the articles chosen for this section of the literature review.

Table 3

Sample Search Results for 'self' and 'social-constructionism' on PsychHub

Title	Subject	MESH subjects	Genre	Publisher	Creation Date	Notes
'The Self as a Moral Concept'	Psychology	Self & social-constructionism	Journal Articles	British Journal of Psychology	2010	Peer-reviewed
'The construction of self in online support groups for victims of domestic violence'	Psychology	Self & social-constructionism	Journal Articles	British Journal of Psychology	2010	Peer-reviewed
'Measuring vulnerability to threats to self-construction: The Self and Other Scale'	Psychology	Self & social-constructionism	Journal Articles	British Journal of Psychology	2010	Peer-reviewed
'Change in self construction during the transition from university to employment: A personal construct psychology approach'	Psychology	Self & social constructionism	Journal Articles	British Journal of Psychology	1994	Peer-reviewed
'Displacing place-identity: A discursive approach to locating self and other'.	Psychology	Self & social-constructionism	Journal Articles	British Journal of Psychology	2010	Peer-reviewed

These sources were amongst some that were the starting points for the literature review on the 'self', and through close reading of those sources, relevant authors who were frequently cited were identified, including psychologists and social psychologists who held key ideas on the self, such as William James, Erving Goffman, and George Mead.

5.4.2.2 Social Anxiety. After the previous section was written up and literature on the self was reviewed, the search on 'social anxiety' ensued. The same databases (Middlesex library and BPS PsychHub were used) in addition to a search on APA PsycNet. The search started by using the terms 'social anxiety', which yielded 5673 initially. This was refined to a search within

clinical and counselling psychology (which ended up including social psychology and health psychology as well as other sub-disciplines of psychology) this then narrowed the search to 266 articles that were peer-reviewed.

Those were then filtered out using the exclusion criteria and eventually 42 articles using the key words for social anxiety were included within this literature review. A list of included articles for social anxiety is attached to *Appendix V: Search Results for 'Social Anxiety' from APA PsycNet*.

5.4.2.3 Social Media Processes. The last phase of the literature extraction is summarised in the following tables. They outline the total number of results from each of the databases as well as the number of chosen articles from the first 100 results.

Table 5

Search Results for 'Comparison'

Database/Journal	Total Results	Chosen Articles (From first 100)
MDX University Library	59,388	15
APA PsycNet	155	10
BPS PsychHub	3720	31
Journal of Computer Mediated Communication	54	7
Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking	335	12
Total		75

Table 6

Search Results for 'Presents New Possibilities'

Database/Journal	Total Results	Chosen Articles (From first 100)
MDX University Library	31724	50
APA PsycNet	42	3
BPS PsychHub	2531	27
Journal of Computer Mediated Communication	73	16
Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking	382	37
Total		133

Table 7*Search Results for 'Compensatory Understanding'*

Database/Journal	Total Results	Chosen Articles (From first 100)
MDX University Library	4,628	35
APA PsycNet	1	1
BPS PsychHub	25	1
Journal of Computer Mediated Communication	21	8
Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking	63	24
	Total	69

Table 8*Search Results for 'Preoccupation with Instagram'*

Database/Journal	Total Results	Chosen Articles (From first 100)
MDX University Library	2623	36
APA PsycNet	2 (no access to PsychInfo)	1
BPS PsychHub	204,181	44
Journal of Computer Mediated Communication	9352	38
Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking	170	33
	Total	152

After the literature search was conducted and the literature was reviewed, more sources were excluded. A few articles on LinkedIn were omitted as well as some sources that were linked to injuries, and a few on virtual reality in the health psychology context, articles on the evaluation of the virtual classroom environment were also excluded.

5.5 The Self and Social Anxiety

5.5.1 The Self

This section will allow for an exploration of the notion of the 'self' as it is presented in the literature and formulated in this study. It is important first to recognise the inherent limitation of this attempt to capture an inquiry that is 4000 years old in a small section within a literature

review. However, it is necessary to grapple with the self as it is integral to the ontological position of this research, as previously outlined in *Chapter 3*. Most diagnostic formulations that inform human experience and clinical practice in a post-modern era have been based on assumptions on the nature of the self (Zweig, 1995; Sue & Sue, 2003; Cross & Gore, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2008). It has been a subject of contentious debate and scrutiny in the field of psychology and philosophy as well as related disciplines for hundreds of years.

The shift from modernism to post-modernism, marked a change in the understanding of the self. The idea that there is a stable, autonomous, and coherent self, reflected modernism, which mainstream psychology is mostly situated within. The rationality of modernism gave way to the self being understood as discoverable (Hoffman et al. 2008; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987; Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008). One of the most dominant views that could be used as an illustration of a modernist approach to the self is Sigmund Freud's understanding of the self being pinned to the unconscious. He believed the self was present within the human experience even if it were not overtly visible. However, he notably saw through the idea that there is one coherent self by developing the topographical model of the self and honouring its multifaceted nature (Freud, 1915; Watson, 2014). The second viewpoint that was also a leading one in the era of modernism, is the religious perspective on the self, which is attached to the idea of a soul; a more profound ethereal self (Blaine et al., 1998; Oomen, 2003).

The advent of post-modernism brought about a challenge to the notion of a discoverable truth, and instead of holding the idea of a self being stable, stagnant, and individual, it allowed for the exploration of the concept of separate selves; a socially constructed self; or a fluid self

(Polkinghorne, 2001; Anderson, 1995). The modernist view of the self was thus seen as one of the many ways of understanding the self in the post-modernist era. This formed a backdrop for social constructivists to argue that an individual's identity is constructed by social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). They mostly believed that what is perceived as the self is a configuration of positions taken within a social network and is mostly socially determined (Hoffman et al. 2008; Zweig, 1995). Philosophers such as George Herbert Mead distinguished between the 'I' and the 'Me'; the 'I' is a self that is shaped by self-observation and the 'me', a self that is shaped by social feedback (Mead & Morris, 1934).

This led the investigation down the path of exploring the self from a social constructionist standpoint, moving from a separatist view of the self, to a decentralised one (Lewis, 2003). Erving Goffman's theories on dramaturgical representations of the self in his book *'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'*, have been explored in relation to the findings of this investigation (Goffman, 1959/2007). The idea that in the presence of others the individual performs to achieve a certain goal within the social setting they are in, is applied to understand the findings. Many accounts of the participants presented a self that is seen through a social lens, and Goffman was primarily interested in the role that self-presentation played in the construction of social reality (Goffman, 1959/2007). His dramaturgical formulations gave way to understanding social interaction through the metaphor of actors on stage and that there is also a backstage where the individual frees themselves from the roles they need to take on in the outside world (Goffman, 1959/2007).

The interesting contrast within the notion of 'self' within the findings is the idea that the online self is somehow no longer perceived as separate from the offline self. Unlike the modernist view of the self that made the distinction between objects and the self; it is no longer that simple. The self that was knowable through the eyes of an audience is not just a masqueraded self, or a caricature, but computer mediated communication made it an extension of who the person is, or thinks they are. This was discussed by Sherry Turkle in her book *'The Second Self'*, where she made the argument that computers and social networking platforms display a projection of part of the self, a 'mirror of the mind', which speaks of who people are as individuals (Turkle, 2005). The findings show how this is palpable within the participants' accounts, many of them stated how revealing certain parts of their daily life in a certain light online would make them more 'desirable' and 'worthwhile'. Others' responses did not simply provide an instrumental or practical gain, the participants genuinely felt more attractive, and not just in a public setting, but in intimate and private settings.

The potency of others' feedback in the participants' self-concept (as is mediated by Instagram) strengthens the argument that the self is essentially a construction (Hurley et al., 2007), and a more expansive and multi-faceted entity. Through this study, it is recognised that the self is contingent upon and a product of relationships with others, instead of simply an isolated and encased self. This is well bolstered by the characterisation of the self as a socially defined node in a network of interpersonal relationships (Baumeister, 1986; pp. 63-74); it is best viewed as a shifting array of accessible selves. The selves emerge based on our social interaction or what we direct our attention to (Miall, 1986) (and in the case of this study their interaction with Instagram). Much of the struggle with the participants of this research investigation

stemmed from a sense of feeling unheard or feeling misunderstood and generally excluded. If the relational aspect of the self were used to understand and clarify this experience, exclusion would be a phenomenon that caused a disruption in the person's basic sense of self.

Given the selected and outlined literature on the 'self'; the 'self' in this research endeavour is seen as relational and socially constructed. The self is contextual and situated within a culture which provides the framework for understanding personal experience.

5.5.2 Social Anxiety

After clarifying this study's standpoint on the 'self', literature on social anxiety was reviewed to examine the diagnostic formulations that were widely prescribed and used amongst clinicians, and which have comprised part of the preliminary literature reviewed in this research, see *Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1 Social Anxiety Disorder: Diagnostic Definitions and Qualitative Research*. The terms social phobia and social anxiety were used interchangeably to allow for a comparison across the different theoretical approaches to occur.

The notion of social phobia being primarily defined through interactional fears (Crozier & Russell, 1992) needed to be revisited in this investigation in the context of the information age, especially in the era of COVID-19. Social anxiety was often seen as a function of the fear of confrontation (Dijk et al., 2018). The findings suggested that in this era, the fear of confrontation also included online interactions. The participants all expressed apprehension when engaging with their online Instagram profiles, however the social anxiety was characterised by feelings of inferiority and exclusion and not measuring up to others.

Social anxiety in this cohort of participants was therefore not only seen as restricted to the fear of public spaces, interaction (Turner et al., 1986), and the symptomatic responses to those (Nikolić et al., 2015), but as a personal struggle with exclusion and inferiority, and resulting in limitation. The scope of this research allowed for the breadth of lived experience to be explored. This in some cases was exacerbated by or mediated by an online presence. It did not place the problem within the individual but saw it as a product of processes beyond the individual's direct control as well.

The understanding of social anxiety existing in a wider context was emphasised by one study that focused on uncovering relationships between attachment to close friends and family and social anxiety (Strauss et al., 2017). Strauss et al., found that although social anxiety was more pervasive with strangers, attachment to close friends and family seemed to mediate the effects of social anxiety (2017). This held true in this investigation, as many participants reported that talking to a close friend or family member was their default way of coping with their difficulties. However, many also felt isolated due to feeling that their experience was thought to be unusual even amidst close friends/family. This therefore made them seek this interpersonal understanding from others online. It was said to provide momentary relief to find other people online who understood what they are going through, and this process was outlined in the findings in section 4.3.3 *Social Media as Compensatory*.

The relational emphasis on a lacking element in the individual's environment as linked with their social anxiety would be challenged by contemporary formulations of social anxiety disorder which centralise the role of cognitive processes in the maintenance of the disorder

(Clark & Wells, 1995; Gormally et al., 1981; Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Smits et al., 2006). One of the most notable therapeutic applications of the cognitive approach to social anxiety is cognitive behavioural group therapy (CBGT) (Heimberg & Becker, 2002). This treatment is an adaptation of Beck and Emery's (1985) cognitive therapy of anxiety disorders. The treatment approach was based upon the assumption that cognitive aspects are the most important element to focus on during the treatment process (Halford & Foddy, 1982). The postulation that cognitive processes maintain the experience was challenged by some research on cognitive interventions (Hughes et al., 2001). For this study's participants, the social world was challenging based on their susceptibility to social exclusion and experienced inferiority in their day-to-day life. Whilst irrational thoughts or isolated incidents may partially inform their experience they did not feature in their transcripts. Another study revealed that socially anxious individuals tend to be more self-referential and self-conscious, focusing more on themselves in social settings, instead of on others (Bates et al., 1990); some researchers also focused on the notion of emotion regulation deficits as a mediating factor in social anxiety (Helbig-Lang et al., 2014).

Further research examined factors that participants believed were helpful in alleviating social anxiety, and others that worsened it, which explained how social anxiety is an overall experience and the person experiencing social anxiety was either in remission or still suffering (Chartier, Hazen & Stein, 1998; Bjornsson et al., 2014) which can be particularly chronic for those who were from non-white ethnic backgrounds (Sibrava et al., 2013). This suggested that it was a more general or organic phenomenon that persisted or changed if the person re-experienced their social world in a different way. Most studies of subtypes of social anxiety

disorder in clinical samples suggested that a generalised anxiety around others is more common than discrete situational fears (Heimberg et al., 1993; Kashdan et al., 2013). This was echoed by the participants in this research, as nine out of 12 have reported that their experience was more general than it was related to a specific event (e.g., public speaking).

However, looking at situational fears led to examining more experiential studies that explored social anxiety as a socio-spatial phenomenon (Boyle, 2018), and how individuals with social anxiety engineered certain habits within their daily life to manage their symptoms. A classical conditioning model assumed that social anxiety is conditioned when neutral stimuli are paired with aversive social consequences (Wolpe, 1973). This was also supported by the accompanying treatment approach, namely exposure therapy or systematic desensitisation. This approach to dealing with social anxiety has been shown to be effective in adults (Bander et al., 1975; Fishman & Nawas, 1973; Kondas, 1967; Mitchell & Orr, 1974; Butler et al., 1984) and virtual reality to simulate exposure has proven to be a practical way of introducing exposure therapy within the therapy room (Anderson et al., 2013). However, there were other studies that showed that improvements obtained with exposure alone were relatively modest (Butler et al., 1984; Mattick & Peters, 1988). Exposure therapy could be likened to ‘assertiveness training’ where the focus of the work is on specific behavioural interventions that promoted assertiveness in social interaction (Swee et al., 2018).

Safety behaviour has been widely perceived as an impediment to the successful treatment of social anxiety (Taylor & Alden, 2011). The findings of this study suggested an interesting new way that individuals managed their distress: scrolling on their phone when in an uncomfortable

public setting. Scrolling was seen in the accounts of the participants as a major activity linked with the preoccupation with Instagram and to them was an inseparable part of self-soothing or self-management, especially in public. It was referred to as an escape, as numbing, as a way of avoiding directly being addressed by those around them and a means of sending a message to those in their surroundings that they are not interested in them when they felt excluded. This meant that behavioural therapy exposed individuals to social situations to help them overcome their fear of interaction, the use of scrolling to self-soothe was an obstacle to such behavioural interventions.

In everyday life individuals with social anxiety are repeatedly exposed to social situations without marked reductions in anxiety. The findings from the participants revealed that although fear of public space is a symptom of social anxiety, the underlying emotional experiences involved exclusion, inferiority, and limitation.

5.5.3 Social Anxiety: Exclusion

The first category, 'Exclusion' was defined by the concepts: 'feeling misunderstood', 'feeling left behind', and 'feeling unheard'. This clearly challenged the view that social anxiety is a function of a deficit in social skills (Curran et al., 1982; Bander et al., 1975; Bellack & Hersen, 1979; Curran, Gilbert, & Little, 1976; Baker & Edelman, 2002; Angélico et al., 2013). The notion of 'exclusion' placed the problem partially outside the individual. Exclusion as a defining feature of social anxiety was aligned with findings of experiments that have shown how social skills acquisition did not make a difference in the participants' levels of anxiety (Bandura, 1969; Clark & Arkowitz, 1975). Human belonging as a function of social anxiety was also explored in

one study which found that greater perceived closeness between the self and the in-group and the out-group was associated with low social anxiety severity (Meuret et al., 2016).

‘Feeling misunderstood’, suggested a deeper sense of being excluded that did not remain at the level of being rejected by social groups, but also made exclusion contingent upon feeling intellectually misunderstood. This could be a top-down facet of the experience of exclusion which is dependent upon the general expectation to be understood by others. It also begged the question of whether social networking platforms altered the way in which an individual could feel excluded, by expanding it to a more intellectual exclusion that was not as dominant in a pre-information age offline world. The experience of exclusion could occur after disagreeing about a post online or expressing an opinion that is inconsistent with others within that platform. This intellectual form of exclusion sat in stark contrast to the more innate or intrinsic definitions of exclusion in the work of attachment theorists such as John Bowlby. He depicted the fear of exclusion as an experience that occurred before mortality awareness (Bowlby, 1973; Baumeister & Tice, 1990).

The findings show that although the fear of rejection and exclusion were at the centre of the experience of social anxiety, their threshold seems to expand now to include exclusion based primarily on the user’s opinions and what they think about very specific subjects, not only their physical person. However, research also pointed to the idea that socially anxious individuals had an information-seeking bias, and that they tended to jump to conclusions about being excluded or being misunderstood faster than those who do not report social anxiety (Aderka et al., 2013).

This raised questions about how socially anxious users have in this study seemed to be experiencing more triggers for their feelings of exclusion online.

The emphasis on the details within their interpersonal dynamics is echoed through research that adopts a ‘social relations model’ (Ingraham & Wright, 1987) and other approaches that combined cognitive behavioural therapy with a relational component called ‘CBT-R’ (Alden et al., 2018). Voncken et al. (2008) have explored how socially anxious individuals were in fact excluded from social interaction most of the time; and that they spent less time with close companions than those who did not report having social anxiety (Hur et al., 2019). Social anxiety could clearly be explained through dynamic relational processes (Parkinson, 2011) as this investigation does. Likewise, Kopala-Sibley et al. (2014) have found that socially anxious individuals tend to either be struggling with emotional insecurity related to social relationships and fear of exclusion or self-criticism and inferiority, which leads onto the next important dimension of social anxiety: inferiority.

5.5.4 Social Anxiety: Inferiority

The category of ‘inferiority’ in the experience of social anxiety is divided into three kinds of inferiority: occupational, social and being behind in life. This experience was present in eight out of the 12 the participant accounts. It describes the relational aspect of individual experience being dominated by ideas of being inferior to others where socially anxious individuals expected others to evaluate them negatively (Smith & Sarason, 1975). The inevitability of comparison to others is a prominent feature of this category. Research linked unfavourable social comparison to a variety of physical and mental health difficulties (Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; James, 1997;

Gilbert, 2000; Abbott et al., 2003). Some studies pointed to the issue being most prominent in competitive societies, where individuals felt the need to ‘perform’, which may have resulted in ‘self-objectification’ (Gilbert, 2009).

This is echoed greatly by many of the participants who have the tendency to feel inferior, most of them expressed some variation of ‘not good enough’, be it social, occupational or being behind in life in general, as stated in *Chapter 4, section 4.2.1 Social Anxiety*. Research showed that socially anxious people tended to undermine their social skills and rated themselves more negatively and regarded others’ reactions to them as less positive (Cacioppo, Glass, & Merluzzi, 1979; Clark & Arkowitz, 1975; Gilkinson, 2008; Glass et al., 1982; Smith & Sarason, 1975; Waechter et al., 2018; Stefanone et al., 2011). Some scholars explain this through their information-seeking bias and an exaggerated response to others’ negative expressions (Aderka et al., 2013; Blair et al., 2016).

One theory seems to be linked with the finding on the category on inferiority, and that is self-discrepancy theory by Edward Tory Higgins (1987). This theory can be linked with a background of humanistic thought which emphasises consistency and congruence as indicators of psychological health. However, Higgins seemed to be able to explore how different types of discomfort and inconsistency between a person’s actual self and ideal self results in different psychological states. He pointed out that the actual self is who the person is, and the ought self is who the person thinks they should be, and the ideal self is who the person wants to be (Higgins, 1987). He posited that a discrepancy between an ought self and an actual self results in feelings of resentment and guilt, and a dissonance between an actual self and ideal self leads to

disappointment and frustration. More specifically, he believed that inconsistency between the actual self and the ideal self as defined by others tends to produce feelings of discomfort which lead to shame, embarrassment and a feeling of dejection (Higgins, 1987). This seems to be the closest experience that the participants were describing in their accounts, a chronic sense of inferiority and this fixation on the discrepancies led to a preoccupation with social position.

This emphasis on social position and evaluation is highlighted by ‘social rank theory’ (Whetherall et al., 2019), which is quite relevant to the participants. This theory outlined the importance of understanding an individual's perception of their social position compared to others as key to grasping the aetiology of depressive disorders (Whetherall et al., 2019). Socially anxious people, like those with depression, tended to over-utilise the social rank system which is related to viewing the world in hierarchical terms, and the person feeling low on the hierarchical chain (Gilbert & Trower, 2001; Trower et al., 1998; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Some sources have been able to demonstrate the salience of the social rank system for socially anxious individuals (Gilboa-Schechtman et al., 2017; Aderka et al., 2009). In support of social rank theory, one study showed that socially anxious individuals tended to view social interactions as more competitive compared to non-anxious individuals (Hope et al., 1998). On the other hand, socially anxious individuals’ under-utilise the affiliation system. This has also been explored by one study which explained how they found it challenging to form relationships with others as the foundation for socialising behaviour (Trower & Gilbert, 1989).

Several studies that linked perceived inferiority of the individual according to their social status emanated from a cognitive behavioural framework of social anxiety. This framework posited that the allocation of attentional resources to threat and excessive self-focused attention

due to fears of negative evaluation are amongst the cognitive biases that perpetuated the experience of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hirsch & Clark, 2004; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). This linked with the notion of inferiority being a core element in the experience of social anxiety. It was also supported by research on cognitive biases in highly socially anxious individuals which showed that threat bias in social anxiety occurred in early stages of information processing (Yoon et al., 2015; Coles et al., 2008; Jusyte & Schoenenberg, 2014). A few studies showed that bias to angry faces inhibited the performance of socially anxious individuals and resulted in lower accuracy on cognitive tasks (Mogg et al., 2004; Miskovic & Schmidt, 2012). Another article showed that this interpretation bias is also present for socially anxious individuals engaging in an online environment (Miers et al., 2020).

Along the same lines, from a behavioural standpoint, Trower used an experimentally controlled and video-taped conversation between a student and a lecturer. In the video-taped conversation, the lecturer broke certain social conversational rules (e.g., interrupting the flow of conversation), and found that socially anxious students rated themselves as inferior to the lecturer and felt to blame for the cause of the difficulties in the conversation (1998). This showed that an assumption that one is inferior affected the person's day-to-day interaction, and that social anxiety could also behaviourally manifest as a tendency to take on the faults of others. Literature on the limitations posed by the experience of social anxiety will be further explored in the coming section.

5.5.5 Social Anxiety: Limitation

This category was broad; however, it is broken down to limitations in terms of social capital, feeling isolated and misunderstood and identity limitations. The notion of social capital limitation for those with social anxiety was explored frequently in the literature. Coleman (1988) defined social capital as the resources gained via any type of relationship existing between individuals. The idea of social capital being at stake for this population was expressed by six out of 12 participants who reported that their social anxiety and their sensitivity to social stressors hindered their ability to form key work relationships which may have served their career (Farmer & Kashdan, 2015; Rodebaugh et al., 2013). One participant specifically expressed the difficulty with changing her career when she was finding it unfruitful because the thought of getting to know people in the field seemed like an insurmountable obstacle to her. Socially anxious individuals seemed to also have a lower level of self-efficacy than others (Thomasson et al., 2010).

One study showed that perceived isolation predicted more social disconnectedness, and that socially anxious people tended to report that their friendships had a worse quality than their own friends did (Rodebaugh et al., 2014) which in turn predicted higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms (Santini et al., 2020). Moreover, socially anxious individuals seemed to experience an ‘erosion’ of memories for positive events that happened to them in the past (Morgan et al., 2008; Perera et al., 2015). Perceived isolation and the tendency to negatively appraise their own relationships with others is linked with the previously mentioned points on misinterpretation bias, and sensitivity to exclusion cues. Participants in this study expressed that they felt alienated from those around them on many accounts.

This perceived isolation was in the realm of relationships with friends and co-workers. However, another study has shown that individuals who experience social anxiety also report a reduced quality of romantic relationships, and less emotional expression, self-disclosure, and intimacy within these relationships compared to non-anxious individuals (Sparrevohn & Rapee, 2009). For the sample in this investigation, the experiences described by the participants did not necessarily reveal that they could not form close relationships (a few of them mentioned close friends, family, and romantic relationships), however 11 out of 12 participants expressed a lot more difficulty forming new relationships. This again could mean that the limitation for this cohort was not in terms of their intimate relationships, but mainly referred to anxiety around new relationships. Although close relationships were not completely limited for this cohort, they were more prone to being isolated in their experiences of anxiety and feel like no one understood what they were going through even within the sphere of close and intimate relationships.

This lack of being understood in their close circles was captured by the second concept that made up this category: 'social isolation and feeling misunderstood'. This concept referred to being misunderstood and isolated as a limitation; that the socially anxious individual was isolated in terms of being able to ask for help. Six out of 12 participants talked about how difficult it was to garner understanding around their anxiety, and they claimed that this led to further alienation. The limitation posed by a lack of being understood in one's own struggle, also led to disillusionment with the support of others. However, some studies found that socially anxious individuals found it difficult to identify negative emotions felt at a given point in time (Kashdan et al., 2014; O'Toole et al., 2013) which may partly explain the participants' struggle to be understood in this study. The participants' experience of being isolated from support,

compromised social connectedness that is necessary, since bonding and companionship are crucial for survival (Santini et al., 2020). This was expressed by the participants as a feeling of overwhelm or not knowing where to turn to when things got difficult.

The limitation posed by feeling misunderstood or isolated was also expressed by various participants as linked to identity limitations. Being confined to an identity that they felt did not work for them was a large part of their experience of social anxiety that could be a result of their anxiety as well as one of the exacerbating factors. Although emerging adults are expected to experience a degree of social anxiety resulting from identity integration in the transition to adulthood (Ritchie et al., 2013) the participants were not emerging adults but were mostly in their late twenties to early thirties. This suggested that socially anxious individuals expressed identity related concerns that were usually characteristic of late adolescence and early adulthood.

Upon establishing a social constructionist position on the ‘self’ and a review of how the three core categories of social anxiety were contextualised in the literature, it was then important to review some of the literature on the social and emotional processes that took place on Instagram in particular and social media in general, through expanding into cyberpsychology literature as well.

5.6 Literature Review: Social Media Processes

The second part of the literature review was arranged chronologically based on the associations between the features of social anxiety that were previously outlined in this order:

exclusion, inferiority, and limitation; and social media processes that were linked to the defining features of social anxiety according to each participant. Those features are clearly outline in *Figure 9* which is found in *Chapter 4, section 4.4 Theoretical Formulations*.

5.6.1 Comparison is Inevitable

Although Instagram was perceived by participants as a place where connection, education and insight could happen in an engaging way, there was an undeniable process occurring that emerged with 11 out of the 12 participants, which was social comparison. This was the idea that most participants could not resist comparing their present and their lives to images of others on the platform. This was unsurprising as human beings are thought to possess a fundamental drive to compare themselves with others (Young & Schachter, 1959). The role of comparison for socially anxious individuals was explored in a study that looked at the correlations between social comparison, and paranoid and submissive behaviour in socially anxious individuals and found them to be positively correlated (Zaffar & Arshad, 2020). It was also shown to have a significant association with depression and anxiety (Mccarthy & Morina, 2020).

However, there was a specific quality to the comparison that took place on Instagram for the participants of this study, which is that they often referred to this process as involuntary and beyond their control. They mostly perceived comparison as a negative phenomenon and some of them responded to their tendency to compare by tailoring their user experience to avoid it. Five out of 12 participants reported that they unfollowed pages that made them compare their lives unfavourably to others. The participants also reported that the comparisons produced similar feelings and thoughts that they already seemed to be grappling with due to their social anxiety.

These feelings and thoughts were mainly manifested as ‘feeling behind’, ‘feeling like I am not where I should be’, and ‘feeling not good enough’. Kohler et al., (2020) managed to show in their research how exposure to profiles that were focused on beauty, fitness and travel have produced more negative states in participants than other more neutral profiles such as furniture or art. This supported the claims of participants who have knowingly unfollowed profiles that promoted unfavourable comparison. In another study, Facebook use was linked to self-objectification and more comparison which was linked to poorer mental health (Hanna et al., 2017). Additionally, research done on women using Instagram found that women whose self-worth was dependent on social media feedback reported lower levels of resilience and higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms (Sabik et al., 2020; Yurdagül et al., 2019).

This notion of unhelpful comparison fits well with the idea of socially anxious people tending to over-utilise the social rank system, as previously mentioned in section 5.5.4 *Social Anxiety: Inferiority* (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Gilbert & Trower, 2001). Socially anxious individuals are inclined to perceive social interactions as more competitive compared to non-anxious individuals (Hope et al., 1998). This also meant that they would frequently monitor signals of social threat (Gilboa-Schechtman, Foa, & Amir, 1999; Weisman et al., 2011).

However, given this experience was an indispensable part of their social milieu, it stood in contrast to different sources of literature that cited that comparison was integral to a lot of useful processes such as evaluating the self (Festinger, 1954), making decisions (Camerer & Lovallo, 1999), being inspired (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), and regulating emotions and well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1982). One study identified those who were

objects of comparison as ‘proxies’ that people use to compare themselves to and are more useful based on how similar they are to them (Smith & Sachs, 1997). Another study found that performance mastery predicted upward social comparison, whereas performance avoidance predicted downward social comparison (Bounoua et al., 2012).

Comparison as previously mentioned was inextricably linked to the experience of inferiority and could be split into social comparison, occupational comparison, or a more overarching comparison of their lives to others, which led to feeling ‘behind’. This was identified by some researchers in the field as detrimental to an individuals’ wellbeing (Vogel et al., 2014). Other examples of quantitative researchers have demonstrated the link between social comparison and social anxiety, and a positive correlation between both (Jiang & Niegen, 2020), and in specific negative social comparison (Ashbaugh et al., 2005). Another study found that particularly depressed people were more envious, and that envy was associated with higher self-reported inferiority (Appel et al., 2016).

More holistically, ‘Social comparison theory’ states that people seek to compare themselves to others that they believed were similar to them, particularly to determine their own levels of abilities and successes (Festinger, 1954). However my findings suggested that Instagram use opened up comparison to different people at different points in their life that may have been irrelevant to their own ideas of success. The data also suggested that participants’ propensity to compare themselves to others depended on the mood they were in when they were browsing and how they felt about their life. That affective component of Instagram engagement for this population needed to be unpacked further.

One way of observing the salience of comparison was looking at ‘self-evaluation maintenance theory’ which served as a more useful model for understanding the social comparison processes. This theory suggests that people are constantly engaging in self-evaluation maintenance, seeking equilibrium with how they evaluate themselves against others; and when that process is disrupted, it affects their self-esteem (Tesser, 1982). According to this theory it was particularly significant when a close other outperforms the individual on a task that is relevant to them. However, participants’ reported experiences have shown that Instagram as a platform brings people who would otherwise not be close, near them through daily exposure and comparison. It seemed to shift the objects of comparison from people who are like them or in their immediate circle to those who are different and unfamiliar to the individual. Many participants reported comparing themselves to others who were younger or lived in a different country for example. This meant that similarity was no longer the antecedent to comparison, but that other factors were at work, such as the participant’s mood, their aspirations, and the current state of their life, as previously mentioned. In fact, cyberpsychology research points to the notion of passive use of social media being more conducive to unhelpful comparisons, which led to depressive symptoms and reduced global self-worth (Burnell et al., 2019). This was supported by findings which suggested that there are certain elements that exacerbated that sense of comparison negatively affecting one’s self-worth. One of them which was frequently cited in the findings of this study is mood.

Although the concept of mood was used to determine how much social comparison took place, some sources demonstrated that popularity facilitated the association between social comparison, feedback seeking and depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2013; Nesi & Prinstein,

2015). This sat well with the findings, as social comparison was clearly linked to the participants' experiences of social inferiority as previously mentioned in 5.5.4 *Social Anxiety: Inferiority*. One of the participants memorably mentioned how she categorised people online into people who were 'popular' and people 'like me'. She had long been troubled by feelings of social inferiority and declared a level of envy for people whom she observed to be more popular. One cyberpsychology study points to the notion of envy on Instagram being a motivating factor with positive outcomes for well-being as these outcomes relate to the complex motivational state of inspiration (Meier & Schafer, 2018). Another study differentiated between 'benign envy' and 'malicious envy', the difference being that benign envy occurred when a person felt that they were likely to achieve the point of comparison. Malicious envy, on the other hand was when envy was directed towards goals that were somewhat unachievable (Noon & Meier, 2019). This was consistent with a study by Nesi and Prinstein that found that social comparison and feedback seeking behaviours are associated with depressive symptoms. This study found that participants who were low in popularity and female were at higher risk for depressive symptoms (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

Comparison on the grounds of occupation, was linked to occupational inferiority and manifested itself in the data in two distinct ways. The first being a comparison of choice of job, which was expressed by five out of the 12 participants; the second being comparison with others in the same field also reported by five out of the 12 participants. There was limited literature on occupational comparison on Instagram, however, there was an undeniable process of upward comparison related to occupation in the data. Upward comparison is the tendency to compare the self to others who were in better stations/positions in life (Collins, 1996). However, the way

comparison took place on Instagram for those users seemed to challenge the ‘target immediacy’ which stated that comparison is particularly salient amongst those who are most like us (Zell & Alicke, 2010). This is because, participants seemed to compare themselves to people who had completely different career paths as well. One researcher who looked at comparison habits for Facebook users found that those with a higher tendency to compare themselves to others online tended to comment more on posts, which meant that they were also more engaged (Harrad, 2015). The participants in this study however tended to withdraw in response to those comparisons. This was an interesting contrast to the findings of Harrad (2015).

There was some evidence that showed that people can gain momentum from ‘falling short’ of comparison and how this is therefore manifested on Instagram as a motivation to succeed (Norem & Cantor, 1986). According to Festinger’s (1954) formulation of social comparison, he posited that in the absence of objective measures of self-evaluation, people would look to others for a clearer view of the self. This sat well with the third and most universal process of comparison by users on Instagram which was overarching: the idea that one is ‘behind in life’, a sense of not being able to measure up to others in a more comprehensive way. This was present in all of the participants’ accounts, they reported a chronic feeling of being behind. This was also contrary to the ‘selective accessibility model’ which established that people chose which milestones to notice in others in terms of how easily they aided them in assimilating to their standard (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). It would make sense that the experience of comparison would be heightened by having such milestones clearly laid out by other users in the form of self-promotion. However, the comparisons that the users reported were far more arbitrary and variable than simply comparing one’s achievements to others.

Even though comparison was a major process embedded in participants' engagement with Instagram, 11 out of 12 participants elaborated on how it presented new possibilities that would have otherwise been difficult to obtain. One researcher found that those possibilities were most salient for those who reported comparing themselves to other users less on Instagram (Yang, 2016), this finding suggests that there are ways of benefiting from the platform depending on how it is used. The following section will expand on that and delve into literature which explored the possibilities that Instagram engagement presented.

5.6.2 Presents New Possibilities

The first and most widely explored possibility that Instagram provided for participants who were struggling with their social anxiety was the possibility of belonging. Human belonging in this study means to be included in events and invited to gatherings, as well as be heard and be understood. The findings of this investigation showed that social exclusion is a main concern of those who are socially anxious. Eight out of the 12 participants spoke at length about their fear of being excluded. Knowles et al. (2015) found that the need for belonging predicted more Facebook engagement as it supported users in affirming their social bonds. Mesch (2001) found that loneliness was a strong impetus for social media engagement and Kraut (1998) postulated that social media caused more loneliness. Those three studies indicate the link between belonging and social media engagement.

Eight out of 12 of the participants expressed that they often felt excluded when they were not included in pictures posted on Instagram, even if they were in the same place it was taken.

This need to feel included manifests itself through media consumption, this meant that they were sensitive to the fear of missing out, which the acronym 'FOMO' is short for. FOMO is the tendency to experience anxiety over missing out on rewarding experiences of others when they are posted on online platforms. Individuals with high levels of FOMO tended to spend longer on Instagram (Lee et al., 2020). Blackwell et al. (2017) and Fox and Moreland (2015) found that the fear of missing out predicted social media preoccupation. Additionally, Dempsey et al. (2019) and Elhai et al., (2018) investigated how this FOMO is also associated with ruminative behaviour and leads to addictive tendencies.

For this cohort, it seemed too often to present them with an experience where their exclusion from the groups that are relevant to them was broadcasted and produced strong feelings of being left out. One of the participants memorably reported that she felt strong feelings of jealousy when she saw pictures of her friends who have gone out and not told her about it. This is further confirmation that the gap between in-person reality and online relationships is drawing closer (Carruthers et al., 2019).

Instagram gave participants a means of developing social desirability, and a tool to gauge how to belong via a feedback process of engagement and likes. According to Jones & Pittman (1982), self-presentation reflected the motive to augment one's power over others; by shaping others' attributions of one's dispositions, they can impact others' behaviours in certain ways. Self-presentation tactics differed from ordinary behaviour in their need to elicit a response from others. E. E. Jones sparked the interest of psychologists in the notion of self-presentation and impression management (Jones et al., 1963; Jones, 1964; Jones et al., 1965). Sarita and Suleeman

(2017) explored the relationship between social media self-presentation and the need for belonging in adolescents. This study found that the need to belong was linked with ‘ingratiation’ as a self-presentation tactic and that the more an individual expressed a need to belong, the more they posted material for the sake of eliciting a positive response, in the form of likes or engagement from other users.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) described the phenomenon of impression motivation, which was used to describe the tendency for online users to want to portray a certain impression of their lives online, depending on the context or situation they find themselves in, and to achieve a desired self-image which is discrepant from their own. The findings of my investigation presented various forms of how this occurred, one account in particular saw one of the participants discussing how their engagement and posting online was shaped by trending hashtags. He stated how he often felt the need to post things so that he could garner more engagement and that involved sharing content that was most aligned with the trends with the goal of being more relevant and influential. If he did not post trending content, he felt left out (See *Chapter 4, sub-section 4.2.1.1 Social Anxiety: Exclusion*). Besides the low threshold for feeling left out, this showed that impression management was to him one of the tools to succeeding by staying relevant. However, within that experience was his social anxiety interacting with his need to stay relevant by heightening his desire to control how others perceived him. Leary and Kowalski (1990) argued that social anxiety could be explained by the individual’s desire for an image that is different from one’s own, and an inability to achieve that image. They centralised the notion of impression management in their understanding of social anxiety (1990). This was

echoed by other studies that found that the motivation to impress others on social networking platforms was linked with social anxiety symptoms (Lee et al., 2019).

Research on self-presentation also discussed tactics that some researchers associated with certain psychological or emotional needs and categorised them into defensive and assertive tactics of self-presentation. Defensive tactics were described as the user's inclination to post certain content to repair a negative image (e.g., open apologies, accepting responsibility for certain events). Assertive tactics are when users try to get people drawn to them by liking their content or influencing their decisions or opinions (e.g., ingratiation, intimidation, supplication) (Schütz, 1998; Attrill et al, 2015). The process of selective sharing on Instagram showed that assertive tactics were mostly utilised in trying to make others like them and include them.

However, the question that was still unanswered in the literature was whether Instagram provided socially anxious users with more meaningful relationships. Many participants recognised the limits of assertive self-presentation. They noted that building bonds with other people remained a long-term activity, and small bursts of asynchronous interaction rarely produced lasting relationships. One of the participants memorably talked about how when she was going through crisis, it never came to her mind to go on Instagram and ask for help. This links with 'Social Exchange Theory', which states that individuals choose which relationships to keep and maintain in their lives based on the ratio of costs to rewards. The basic premise of social exchange theory is that human beings are looking for more rewards in the form of belonging, satisfaction, safety and fellowship (just to state a few examples) (Cropanzano et al., 2017). However, there is also a cost to those rewards, and the theory states that these costs are

unavoidable. Examples of costs of relationships include time, anxiety and embarrassment; and when the costs outweigh the benefits people tend to walk away from the group situation, or the individual. Linking this to what the participant was mentioning means that she was clearly coming to terms with how little she was gaining from Instagram interaction when she really needed more robust support, compared to how long she was spending on the application.

Despite falling short of being there for people in times of crisis, Instagram seems to be delivering an experience of perceived intimacy. One of the ways Instagram engagement played a role in maintaining interpersonal relationships was highlighted in findings by Valkenburg, Peter and Schoeten (2006) which suggested that spending time with friends online increased the stimulation between people and kept friendships intact, this was referred to as the ‘stimulation hypothesis’. Another similar theory was the ‘electronic propinquity theory’, which stated that a relationship formed entirely online held more psychological closeness (Walther & Bazarova, 2008).

Findings from this research have shown that most participants ultimately wanted a vibrant in-person social life, and that much of the time they perceived that spending too long on Instagram was associated with a lower quality of life. Yet they still found themselves drawn to this platform. One of the reasons that might explain that gravitation towards Instagram was the chance of knowing what others were doing, a few of the most relevant theories regarding that notion of new possibilities is the uses and gratifications paradigm which essentially posits that individuals go online to meet certain needs they have, such as connectedness and competence (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Knowing what others are doing seemed to provide them

with a social ‘fix’. This observational form of relating to others explains the power of self-presentational tactics on Instagram, which are not simply ways of gaining status, but also carried an interesting possibility for a new kind of observational intimacy.

This nuance and complexity sat side by side with how participants reported that they went on Instagram for very real logistical reasons where they felt the need to establish a particular profile to get connected with others in their fields (10 out of 12 said that). This real practical function that Instagram served was recognised by most participants. One of the participants claimed that his Instagram profile was akin to a business card in the area he lived and the career he was in. The uses and gratifications approach aligns with how diversely useful Instagram was to the participants, the next question therefore that needed to be explored was what skills did they need to have to reap its benefits?

The above questions led to the exploration of the tension between the ‘rich get richer’ hypothesis of social media versus the ‘displacement’ hypothesis. The ‘rich get richer hypothesis’ claimed that those who were already adept at forming social relationships offline forged more and stronger bonds online than those who were socially not as skilled (Kraut et al., 2002; Cheng et al., 2019; Abbas & Mesch, 2018; Chan, 2013). As opposed to the ‘displacement hypothesis’ which stated that spending too much time online caused an individual to lose out on offline friendships because the time previously spent socialising and interacting with other people is now being spent on online activities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

The findings in that way, extended the literature regarding Instagram engagement simply because they showed that the perception of those who experience social anxiety was that social relationships could only be forged if their lives appeared a certain way online. Therefore, it is no longer simply a case of 'rich get richer', but it is a situation in which those who were successful in making it look like they have a certain type of life were more likely to make links with others. Assertive self-presentation seemed to be the central way of unleashing the power of Instagram to meet deep-seated needs of assuaging inferiority, being included, and overcoming limitations.

To make sense of the colliding possibilities that Instagram presented there needed to be a sharper focus on the 'self' on Instagram. McKenna and Bargh's (2002) concept of a 'real me' could introduce the self in this part of the review. The 'real me' idea suggested that people were not always able to fully express themselves during social interaction, and thus the 'real me' state is only achieved when a person feels comfortable and able to communicate effectively. For example, those who were shy may have felt less able to interact in a face-to-face setting because they cannot clearly communicate their ideas to others. In a study concerned with social interactions online and offline, Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox (2002) found that introverts were able to locate their 'real me' through online social interaction (in this study, specifically through chat), yet extroverts found their 'real me' through offline face-to-face interaction. Research suggested that the online environment reduced personal and social restrictions that occurred in face-to-face communication (2002). Instagram connected the person with other people, and naturally had the potential of linking the individual up with others by offering them a readily available reservoir of others to connect with unhindered by geographical distance (Attrill, 2005). However, locating one's 'real me' had a substantial influence on well-

being as it meant that the person was better able to ask for support and mitigate some of the limitations that were posed by being socially anxious.

The caveat though is that the possibility of finding authentic self-expression would inevitably fall to the influence of assertive tactics of self-presentation. All participants alluded to choosing their pictures and posts very cautiously. This careful curation of one's image linked robustly to various theories on self-presentation and impression management. According to Erving Goffman, people have always been concerned with their social image and engaged in strategic self-presentation (Goffman, 1959/2007). Self-presentation is the attempt to control images of the self before real or imagined audiences (Schlenker, 1980). It is a goal-directed act designed, at least in part, to generate images of the self which influence how audiences perceive and treat the actor in a favourable way to the actor (Goffman, 1959/2007; Schlenker, 1980). Instagram provides the ultimate platform for meticulous visual self-presentation. Users selectively allow content onto their profiles, posted pictures, and described themselves in ways that best represented their 'ideal self' (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Some researchers found a link between perfectionism, rumination, and negative interpersonal feedback for socially anxious people (Nepon et al., 2011) and ideal self-presentation on Instagram would most likely promote that perfectionism. This is supported by studies which found that individuals with relatively higher levels of a variable termed 'negative emotionality', which included alienation, anxiety and depression were found to be using self-presentational tactics more often than those without high scores (Sadler, Hunger, & Miller, 2010; Clark & Watson, 1991; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). This is very important because it shows how self-presentation is intimately bound up with mental health.

Beyond the logistical or career driven needs that having an active Instagram profile met, there were other processes that presented new possibilities for participants in terms of overcoming their identity limitations (See 4.2.1.3 *Social Anxiety: Limitation*). Some participants expressed that they either directly or indirectly had the chance at creating a new identity (Durante, 2011). The reason being that a lot of them reported feeling that their social anxiety was most pressing when they were socially defined by an identity that they felt did not belong to them, or that they outgrew. One example was a participant who mentioned that she was always known in school for being ‘nerdy’ but that moving on and being able to build her self-esteem meant that she had to change her identity (which changed when she left school). However, Instagram was a way for her to expand on that limited identity that she was prescribed in school if she was able to present herself in the right way. This was also echoed by research on socially anxious emerging adults that showed that there was an association between assertive tactics of self-presentation on Facebook and identity confusion (Michikyan, 2020). The link between social anxiety and identity limitation is discussed in *Chapter 4*, sub-section 4.2.1.3 *Social Anxiety: Limitation*.

Outward appraisal as a function of identity and social anxiety was explained meticulously in an article written in 1991 titled ‘Identity Processes and Social Stress’. Social stress was described as a function of the individual being unable to action a change in outward appraisal by others when they changed their behaviour. The failure of people to take in new information about the individual was the source of social stress (Burke, 1991). Therefore, Instagram could be a tool to remedy that, as the user has ample space and time to manipulate their digital identity and have it seen and validated to some extent through the interplay of trust and privacy (Durante, 2011).

Young people showed that changing their identity through their profiles allowed them to garner social feedback from friends that improved self-concept and self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten, 2006). There is however an ambivalence to that process, as the user risked creating a rigid identity that they themselves could not manoeuvre. However, according to some theorists, like Kenneth Gergen: “The mask may be not the symbol of superficiality that we have thought it was, but the means of realizing our potential” (Gergen, 1991; p. 144). This could also be linked to the Proteus effect which claimed that when individuals have more attractive avatars of themselves, they feel more confident (Fox, Bailenson & Tricase, 2013).

One of the most fitting cyberpsychology theories is the hyperpersonal model of communication theory originally published by Joseph Walther in 1996. This model sought to explore how in the absence of verbal cues, there is an enhanced level of control that senders can practice through selective self-presentation (Walther, 1996; Walther & Whitty, 2020). In a sense, users can perform themselves better and other users collude by reinforcing this performance and there is a much bigger audience than they would have in a physical setting. Much like Erving Goffman’s work on dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959/2007), this model claims that the screen is a stage, and all the users are players (Walther, 1996).

Hyperpersonal model of communication also states that we internalise the most positively reinforced aspects of ourselves (Baym & Ledbetter, 2009). This fits in with the power of social media projections that were shared by the participant, in how she was able to update her own identity. However, this model’s most recent updates integrate how multi-modal communication and multi-mediated communication both play a role in deception or extreme edits of one’s

persona online. This means that there are now many different channels for social media which lead to a reduction in chances of being anonymous. This means that for that participant, she needed to be careful to steer clear from exaggerated caricatures of her identity, because other users have access to other profiles and it is more difficult to lie. However, according to the most recent update of hyperpersonal communications theory, it claims that if an individual's meticulously-crafted grandstanding messages garner numerous likes and reinforcing comments from others (dozens, hundreds) then Walther expects that we see a shift in that person's attitude and tastes (Grubbs et al., 2019). This means that only if the participant can practice falling into the general public's approval and strong support, they would actually be changed by that support. This raises the question of whether this means that socially anxious individuals are generally more sensitive to changes that are triggered by social media engagement.

In contrast with their social experiences before social networking platforms, relationship formation was being mediated through the dynamic and careful process of impression management, the power of identity curation and other phenomena such as stimulation. One very interesting study pointed to the presence of greater idealisation from college students towards their parents due to the frequency of mediated interaction (Sumner & Ramirez, 2016); showing that the stimulation hypothesis of social media engagement has a direct link to important consequences in intimate relationships offline. All the possibilities of gaining social capital and possibly connecting with others seemed only accessible if users were able to assertively present themselves online in a way that served those gains. This changes the core process of 'New Possibilities' to 'New Possibilities for Assertive Self-presenters'. Given the myriad of possibilities that are offered to participants by Instagram engagement, it was evident from this

analysis of the literature and the findings that the quality of relationships that these individuals could foster evolved.

5.6.3 Seeking Compensatory Understanding on Social Media

Belonging is mediated by Instagram for this cohort, and it was important to explore the data from the participants that showed that they sought compensatory understanding for specific difficulties they encountered in life online. Seven of the 12 participants discussed how they frequently sought out people who have similar experiences to them to alleviate some of the isolation they felt around their experiences of feeling misunderstood by others.

This process was consistent with the findings of Mckenna et al. (2002), that indicated that finding similar socially undesirable traits in others online helped users share interests and concerns in a less threatening environment. This was also described by Lee (2009) as the social compensation hypothesis and could be considered a more goal-directed approach to using Instagram (Hoffman et al., 2007). This assumption that individuals had a more intentional attitude to Instagram engagement as mentioned above needed to be excavated further.

Socially anxious individuals may have a sense of increased control and preparation on Instagram, which meant they would find it easier to talk to others online, and agency and narrative control seemed to be factors that enhanced the perceived presence of others (Riches et al., 2019). However, findings by Birnie and Hovarth (2002) suggested that although socially anxious individuals were able to strengthen their current relationships with a few friends online, those who only interacted with strangers online were not able to receive positive benefits of

online communication. This was contradicted by research about stigmatised identity groups that showed that most of the individuals on those groups had strong group identities, a lot of self-disclosure and trust (Wills & Ainette, 2012; Howard, 2014).

Although the chances of finding understanding through online engagement were there, the findings of this investigation have shown that Instagram was not the platform of choice when seeking online connection that is meaningful or deep. One person mentioned Twitter as a place they would search for this type of understanding that they otherwise could not find in their immediate circle. This highlights how Instagram as a medium does not centralise instant messaging as the main form of activity but is mostly asynchronous and curational. Instant messaging specifically was frequently cited as an activity that reduces feelings of loneliness (Seo et al., 2016; Campbell et al., 2006; Peris et al., 2002).

Some participants talked about the compensatory understanding stemming from certain profiles on Instagram with ‘self-help’ content. Five participants mentioned their engagement with psychology pages, inspirational quotes, weight-loss journeys, and marginalised identity profiles which helped them feel motivated and less isolated in their struggles. One study showed that people derived benefits from online communication if it came from people they cared about and has been tailored for them, and that content with wider audiences was not correlated with connection (Burke & Kraut, 2016). However, another study conducted on vloggers on YouTube found that there was a new economy of content-creators displaying honest and authentic behaviour such as crying (Berryman & Kavka, 2018). Some studies indicated that this form of compensatory understanding predicted social media addiction and named it the ‘para-social

compensation hypothesis' (De Bérail et al., 2019; p. 191). Another study showed that although socially anxious individuals sought compensation for lacking in-person relationships, they did not necessarily receive the support they sought on those platforms (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

From the perspective of social identity theory, Spears and colleagues argued that computer mediated communication had a depersonalising effect on users (Reicher et al. 1995; Postmes et al., 2002). The decreased salience of personal accountability made group-level social identities more important, and that the real effect of this communication was an increased conformity to local group norms (Postmes & Spears 1998). However, with Instagram the support was not in the form of belonging to a group as there was no specific feature on Instagram that supported group formation except for the use of hashtags. The engagement seemed more tilted towards being immersed in someone else's life or engaging with live streams or stories on their profile. The feeling of being 'not alone' through watching other individuals' Instagram activity was a compensatory way of connecting with others. What culminated is different from belonging in a group, but rather a sense of companionship that emerged through close review of someone else's content.

Close inspection and this voyeuristic disposition to connection seemed to be meeting the needs for compassion and understanding momentarily through engagement, especially with live content (e.g., stories). Some researchers tried to link theories of attachment to social media use, focusing on the mediating role of anxious attachment (Worsley et al., 2018; Lin, 2015). The notion of social media as a replacement for lacking affection or attachment was also found to be associated with addiction to social media (D'Arienzo et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Young et al.,

2020). The more participants felt others' existence in a virtual environment the more they felt attached to it, mimicking their need for attachment to others (Gao et al., 2017).

Wills and Ainette (2012) described how social support or the perceived availability of it could have many benefits to an individual, including lower likelihood of morbidity, higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of risk behaviour. The point of relevance here is that Instagram provided perceived social presence in the lives of those participants that may have been of benefit for users, especially during COVID-19. One theory that looked at the feeling of connection through social networking platforms was social presence theory, which is a theory that posits that the degree of salience of the other person in the online interaction determined consequent significance of the interpersonal interaction in online relationships (Short et al., 1976). The responsiveness of Instagram users on the platform to the user which some participants have alluded to (Seven out of the 12 participants) seemed to have a direct link with perceived connection. Social presence theory has implications for the findings of this research namely because it shows that the experiences of exclusion for socially anxious participants were somewhat linked to the degree of receptivity of others to their content. However, because that seemed to change based on what was being posted, this meant that exclusion as a personal experience was almost entirely implicated by the feedback of others online.

Seeking compensation for deficiencies in social circles as the main motive behind Instagram use has been argued against by Birnie and Hovarth (2002) who have found that online interaction for their participants was more like an extension to traditional interactions. Wong et al. (2019) found that a greater need to belong significantly positively predicted frequency of

Instagram use, perceived social support, and perceived social support from friends and significant others. However, frequency of Instagram use did not predict perceived social support (Wong et al., 2019); or perceived social capital (Guo et al., 2013). This highlights the dynamic and ambiguous relationship between social support and the use of social networking platforms (Meng et al, 2016).

Other researchers found that online communication often resulted in even higher perceived levels of affection, this is congruent with the previously mentioned theory of, hyperpersonal communication (Walther, 2007) giving users the sense that others are there with them (Tanis, 2007). This is supported by the findings of this study, which show that watching people's posts (and aspects of their lives they want to share) is the mode of connection that Instagram presents.

Investigating the literature allowed the core category of 'Compensatory Understanding on Social Media' to be refined to 'Voyeurism as Compensatory Connection'. The important psychological process that was significant to this cohort was the notion of perceived understanding and connection that was fostered through this voyeuristic engagement. This voyeurism could be linked with some of the addictive properties of Instagram engagement as reported by the participants, which will be explored in the next section.

5.6.4 Preoccupation with Instagram

There is a wealth of literature on the tendency of users to fixate on social networking platforms and technology in general. However, as the previous section outlined it is mired in

deeper social and psychological processes according to this group of participants. Many participants reported that they were feeling preoccupied with Instagram (10 out of the 12). This warranted a search on relevant literature that would aid in contextualising these experiences especially because of the need to understand its effects on wellbeing, which were under question by many researchers (Jagtiani et al., 2019; Apaolaza, 2018; Stronge et al., 2019; Modayil et al., 2003; Marengo et al., 2020). Literature on the health effects of social media overindulgence was conflicted about whether problematic social media use affected sleep quality for frequent users. Some sources said it did not affect sleep (Monks et al., 2021) and others found that it does (Tandon et al., 2020; Alonzo et al., 2021). However, it was important to be specific when it came to the evaluation of the impact of phone use on mental health; recognising that each application or platform came with its own relationship with its users (Lowe-Calverly & Pontes, 2019).

Instagram in this sense could be said to be providing something of value to the participants and that they get consequently preoccupied with it. Lin et al. (2019) found that addiction to social media is associated with gratification sought online through engaging with new material. This mapped well onto neurological research around the tendency for the brain to exhibit novelty bias. New, slightly unfamiliar stimulus enhanced exploratory choices through engagement of neural reward systems, which could be activated by both novelty and reward (Wittmann et al., 2007; Guitart-Masip et al., 2010; Krebs et al., 2009). This was expressed by one of the participants who said: “Never trust an endless scroll”, he was referring to his inability to stop scrolling because he was always being presented with new content.

However, research also pointed to how socially anxious individuals struggled with re-appraisal abilities in daily life and perhaps the need to check Instagram constantly was a way of pausing and re-appraising their thoughts and feelings (Kivity et al., 2016). According to some theorists, this interrupt mechanism created by Instagram was a way of reassessing goals and keeping safe. However, this constant checking could also lead to more ruminative post-event processing, and anticipatory processing which socially anxious individuals already struggled with (Morgan et al., 2008; Perera et al., 2015; Wong, 2016). Some are suggesting that the smartphone is an external tool for emotional regulation, which is what leads to problematic social media use (Zsido et al., 2021).

It is widely acknowledged that most technological platforms are employing basic behavioural conditioning principles such as positive intermittent reinforcement to enhance engagement (Noë et al., 2019), and they also provide a convenient place for people to escape from real-world stress. When this temporary escape brings relief, people return to the platforms repeatedly, which is consistent with the principles of operant conditioning (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Brailovskaia et al., 2020). Some of the participants talked about how Instagram engagement presented them with a welcome escape from their social reality. This was found to be the case in a research study that developed a complex model to examine the mediating role of Instagram in creating a feeling of escape via the use of specific features, particularly the use of Instagram live streams (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018). Many participants talked about the tendency to need to be entertained, distracted, or to gain information about people through Instagram.

One study looked at addiction to social networking platforms in places where young adults experience daily stress through social and political instability in Palestine and found that there were very high levels of addiction to social media (Mahamid & Berte, 2019). In addition, mood management as a primary motivational tool to using social media was also expressed by participants who would cite that they would use it to ‘escape’ reality and feel better (Leung, 2007; Attrill, 2015).

Eriksen found that higher levels of social anxiety and loneliness predicted more passive and active use and longer duration of social media use (2021). Similarly, Neo and Skoric exhibited that oral communication apprehension, and perceived inconvenience of offline communication were significant predictors of ‘problematic’ social media use (2009). Other articles found that depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, general physical appearance anxiety with a social comparison orientation are positively correlated with frequency of Instagram use (De Zavala et al., 2009; Hawi & Samaha, 2017) or are risk factors to problematic SNS use (Pera, 2020; Abbasi & Drouin, 2019; Van Rooij et al., 2017). Research also found a positive relationship between students’ social media addiction levels, social anxiety and loneliness as well as reduced self-reported happiness (Baltaci, 2019; Jiang et al., 2018) in addition to a fear of negative evaluation (Savci & Aysan, 2018). Some researchers went as far as measuring social media addiction based on variables such as psychoticism or neuroticism (Yao et al., 2013; Pontes et al., 2018). One study found that individuals who were given a social media break experienced withdrawal symptoms (Stieger & Lewetz, 2018). Only one study was inconclusive about links with deterioration in mental health and addiction to social media (Huang, 2017)

All the previous findings were congruent with this study's cohort. Instagram usage presents a preoccupation with a platform that is socially intelligible and makes sense when placed within the participants' interpersonal context. This could also be explained by many theoretical models, particularly the 'uses and gratifications' approach which states that users go on the internet to match one's wits against others, to get information and advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one's day, to "prepare oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility", or to be "reassured about the usefulness of one's role" (Katz et al., 1974, p. 20). The uses and gratifications approach requires more 'individual differences' based research to add more in-depth understanding and the findings from this study seem to contribute to the research on uses and gratifications of the internet by viewing it strictly from the vantage point of socially anxious millennials.

Checking Instagram every day, multiple times a day could also be understood as a preoccupation with identity manipulation, impression management and reinforcing a more stable sense of self. From the vantage point of socially anxious individuals, this manifests as concerns around social inclusion and identity formation online (Durante, 2011). This is interesting to contextualise through space-transition theory which states that as an individual moves from the physical space to the cyberspace, their own sense of themselves changes (Jaishankar, 2008). Physical space places certain boundaries on social interaction which govern how people behave and consequently how they feel in social settings. However, being on Instagram means having access to other people's information and what they choose to post. Similar to the previous example of S who mentioned that she 'stalks' certain people online, this new form of relating to others through observing their content is almost entirely unfeasible in real life, S would never closely watch others in person.

This shift in values from the cyberspace to the social space and vice versa is partially due to the dissociative anonymity and identity flexibility offered by the internet (Jaishankar, 2008).

Using Instagram so frequently could be a manifestation of constantly asking the question: ‘will they still like me if I do this?’. Socially anxious individuals already have been proven to have the propensity for overthinking about what observers are imagining (Ashbaugh et al., 2019). One of the participants declared that she went on Instagram when she found herself surrounded by others who were not interested in her. Her experience could be an endeavour to shift from a place where no one was interested in her, and she was at risk of being excluded to an experience where she could not be rejected. The role of Instagram engagement as a safety behaviour was mainly because it gave participants a way of feeling safe in uncomfortable settings. Clark and Wells (2016) found out that exposure to unsafe social experiences was an effective way of working with social anxiety, however they also believed that it would be more effective if safety behaviours were reduced. Some studies also attempted to understand the role of safety behaviour in CBT (Meulders et al., 2016). Some researchers have shown how safety behaviour engagement is associated with less perceived control over anxiety (Boal et al., 2018; Carnahan et al., 2020; Brailovskaia & Margraf, 2021). This shift from discomfort to comfort could lead to more sensitivity in social settings, but it could also be an adaptive mechanism to avoid the visceral anxiety of exclusion. The review therefore allowed the category ‘Preoccupation with Social Media’ to shift to ‘Scrolling as Safety Behaviour’.

5.7 Chapter Summary

The literature review expanded on the findings of this investigation. Incorporating some of the most significant insights from the literature review led to a refinement of the results on social media processes. The plan was to ensure that findings on social media processes contained an extant literature component to reflect their existence as external structures that could be studied. This was previously explained in *Chapter 3*, section *3.4 Grounded Theory*.

The next chapter clearly details how the literature led to a modification of the findings. In addition to outlining the implications of the findings on the many stakeholders that this study involved.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter is split into two main parts. The first part (sections: **6.1** , **6.2**, **6.3**) provides an in-depth discussion on how findings on the social media processes have been refined after conducting the literature review. The second part (sections: **6.4**, **6.5**) discusses the implications of the findings on the fields of psychology and computer mediated communication. It also outlines some insights around artificial intelligence, ethics and policy making from the vantage point of this research project.

Instagram has a reputation for being a fun place, a place where the user was ‘brought closer to the people and the things they love’ (Instagram, n.d.). The Instagram tagline needed to be scrutinised for the claim it was making. Its powerful presence necessitated an inquiry through the lens of those who find it distressing to be around others.

Beyond the public discourse around social networking platforms, which has been polarised by a need to ascertain whether using social media is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This unsophisticated debate ran the danger of social media being dismissed as harmful, when clearly, during the era of COVID-19 it played a major role in connecting users to loved ones and alleviating some of the catastrophic ramifications of seclusion that have resulted from lockdown. The relational impoverishment in the era of COVID-19 was not in mind when this investigation began. However, this impoverishment placed platforms like Instagram as prominent social and digital structures in the lives of their frequent users. In many ways this era was in effect creating a social and emotional space that many people with social anxiety have inhabited for most of their lives. Social interaction became something to be othered, a novelty, suspended outside of us. This distance was bound to generate anxiety buttressed against very intimate and intense closeness to digital platforms that seemingly offer all their users could want. Already there were many participants who voiced a disillusionment with daily engagement on Instagram, making statements that implied that when life got serious, none of those platforms were able to provide the support they needed.

Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, has come out and said that he wanted to prioritise ‘well-being’ on the application, especially for teenage users (Chozick, 2020). This was after a

storm of allegations against the Instagram algorithm promoting triggering material, most recently for sufferers of anorexia (Davis, 2021). This level of influence on mental health sits in stark opposition to the claims of its heads who say that Instagram is an ‘accessory’ and not the main event for most of its users (Chozick, 2020), and an application that prioritises connecting people with their friends (Patel, 2021). The simple truth that this exploration revealed was that it is not just a marginal part of its users’ lives, particularly because the struggle to reduce its use is very real for all the participants and its social and emotional implications are palpable. This lack of clarity on its social and emotional position in the lives of its users provoked a deep interest in this project.

6.1 Revisiting Aims & Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to prioritise the people behind the screens and understand social anxiety and how it interacted with social networking platforms. The first objective was to develop a formulation for social anxiety that expanded on the diagnostic one and told a story that was more relevant to the information age, grounded in the participants’ qualitative accounts. The three emergent core categories of exclusion, inferiority, and limitation formed the foundations of the experience of social anxiety for this cohort, as detailed in *Chapter 4: Findings*. The second objective of the research was to understand some of the social and psychological processes that took place on Instagram as reported by the participants. The following sections will clarify how those processes were refined after conducting the strategic literature review.

6.2 Core Category Development Through Input from Literature Review

6.2.1 Indiscriminate Comparison on Instagram

Most participants reported feeling behind in life. According to the analysis of those statements, that feeling of being behind was both a sense of being left behind (in social gatherings), as well as a more global awareness of being behind in terms of milestones in life, or achievements. The first experience is tied to what is frequently referred to as FOMO, which is ‘the fear of missing out’, this was previously outlined in 5.6.2 *Presents New Possibilities*. The second experience is linked with the notion of self-actualisation, which was introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943 as an idea that encompasses reaching one’s potential (2017/1943). The way participants perceived their own lives was clearly tied to others on Instagram and perpetually reinforced by daily engagement on the platform. The literature review moved the category of ‘Social Comparison is Inevitable’ to ‘Indiscriminate Comparison on Instagram’. Although social comparison was cited by some as a motivating factor to achieve and explore different facets of life, a lot of the time comparison was done in an indiscriminate way. The social media processes for this cohort captured social comparisons that were diverse and general, unlike previous theories on social comparison which highlighted an emphasis on ‘similarity’ (Festinger, 1954).

“Everyone is doing things and I am not doing things, so it affects my self-esteem you know, it makes me feel inadequate” – M.

This notion of indiscriminate comparison was striking in the data since it showed that for this cohort, there was a largely negative and out of place comparison to others by the participants. In other words, Instagram engagement enabled comparisons to a myriad of others that were not particularly strategic to the participant's life. Participants reported that they did not like comparing themselves to others and associated it with not living life to the 'fullest'.

"I don't feel like I am living my life... to the full... you can see what other people are doing on Instagram so when I compare my life to other people's it means I am not actually having those experiences myself" – P.

In the above quote the elements of Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory are made explicit. There is a reference to an ideal self, someone who lives life "to the full" as well as a link with what other people are doing, which is the projected self of another person. This complex relationship between one's ideal self and other people's ideal self is a product of indiscriminate comparison on Instagram. Often participants linked that process to a lack or a deficit in the participants' lives, and that it was a waste of time. The influence of indiscriminate comparison on users of Instagram also led to a bias towards social comparison based on visual characteristics or successes that could be captured and shared. This process indirectly privileges achievements or accolades that could be seen outwardly as a yardstick for success.

This immersive visual comparison could be contrasted with social experiences prior to the advent of social media; social comparison was a slower process and may have been mediated by affiliation with others that we compared to ourselves. However, using Instagram daily led to comparison to others that was disembodied and idealistic. It also created a generally comparative

disposition, and a more competitive stance to others (strangers and loved ones alike).

Indiscriminate comparison made it particularly difficult for those who are already struggling with a thoughts of their personal inferiority to overcome their beliefs about themselves. Nevertheless, despite the inevitability of indiscriminate comparison, Instagram engagement seemed to also carry the potential to provide value in the form of new possibilities, which are discussed next.

6.2.2 New Possibilities for Assertive Self-presenters

The primary concern for many of the participants was the threat of social exclusion, which was frequently referred to as traumatic for the participants, as one participant said:

“Leaving high school was like saying goodbye to the people that traumatised you all those years”
– *W.*

If this person had suffered so much at the hands of other students at school, did Instagram and social networking platforms provide her with the opportunity to finally feel included? This launched questions around what individuals with social anxiety were seeking from online platforms. The digital connectedness offered by Instagram and other social networking platforms altered the nature and implications of being socially excluded. Individuals were seeking more than just being included during lunch time at school, they wanted to feel understood by others. Unlike the depictions of the fear of exclusion as an experience that occurred “before mortality awareness” (Bowlby, 1973, pp. 95-100), or the behavioural focus of classical conditioning theory (Wolpe, 1973). Exclusion for the participants expanded to include a fear of being excluded on the grounds of being unaffirmed by a wider circle of people, not just close ones. This pointed to a difference in the way exclusion took place in the information age, from a process that may have

been restricted to the person's environment, to a more expansive experience and one that necessitated being understood and affirmed in the form of likes and engagement.

The participants have been able to assuage that experience of being excluded by showing others that they are engaging in activities that interest them. This enhanced control and feedback process over what they affiliate online self-presentation with, allowed them to manage their social connections more strategically (Maghrabi et al., 2014). One way of gaining that affirmation was sharing milestones, which seemed to be the most frequent way that participants mitigated their experience of exclusion.

However, this also placed additional pressures on the individual to strategically engage in assertive self-presentation. Instead of trying to be presentable in job interviews and other similar contexts, there was a real and consequential pressure to appear presentable almost all the time; and post about it frequently. Alise Tifentale, a post-doctoral fellow in media studies at Riga Stradins University refers to this form of photographic self-presentation as 'competitive photography' (Tifentale, 2021). If the self-presentation for participants was not assertive enough (or competitive enough), they would not gain the sense of belonging that Instagram could have offered them and that is available to other users.

This brings the discussion to another important point, which is the need to be palatable to others to be accepted, this is expressed on Instagram as a bid for relevance. Engagement is deeply intertwined with relevance on Instagram; relevance thus became the language of inclusion. Posting on Instagram meant that they could figure out how to present their online

persona in a way that made them seem relevant and therefore less alienated from their social circle. It is a space for them to understand what people are doing to make sure that they conform with a consensus asserted by likes and follow requests, or just being observed by others through the 'Instagram stories' feature. This links well to the idea of the self being a construct that is selectively curated, which aligns well with Goffman's dramaturgy (previously mentioned in Chapter 5, 5.5.1 *The Self*). The stage that Goffman was referring to was a stage that incorporated an element of temporal presence and embodiment. He based his theories around a more dynamic stage where the actor on stage did not have the luxury of deliberating his or her actions and gestures. Now Instagram self-presentation is different from Goffman's stage in that it does not involve being there, but is mediated purely through symbolic means. The user is empowered by live feedback and less physical immediacy. In the situation of Instagram self-presentation the user has a carefully curated persona, this might allow the person to utilise the feedback they are presented with in a way that makes them more desirable. However, this might also mean that by comparison to real life, they were a lot more equipped to manage impressions online. This could lead to a skill deficit in managing impressions offline which is one more potential source of anxiety for the person who feels socially anxious.

The second issue is the issue of authenticity. New possibilities were wrapped up with the need to be assertive yet conformist in one's self-presentation on Instagram. The downside to this search for affirmation on Instagram lies in the caveat that participants approached the platform with a sensitivity to exclusion cues. One of the participants confirmed this by sharing her response to a picture of her friends out together.

“Some of my friends went somewhere without telling me or inviting me to come along. It sometimes creates a negative feeling for me that okay, it's not catastrophic, but like it does create some, some feelings. It definitely impacts my relationship with them.” -C.

The act of taking pictures and posting them on Instagram had the power to delineate and decide on who belonged and who did not. Y mentioned this in her transcript, referring to the response she got when she confronted her companions for not including her in the picture they posted. In the quote below she paraphrases what they were saying:

“I'm so sorry, we go way back, we go like 20 years back and we just got to know you recently, but I'm sorry, we love you it wasn't meant to be like that.” – Y

This shows that the struggles to belong persisted. This places Instagram engagement outside the realm of platforms that provided anonymous safety through the ‘online disinhibition effect’ (Suler, 2004). This is not a platform where others were by nature eager to connect, shielded by their anonymity; it was significantly more exposing and decisive. It is a platform that represents their desired, and often unfeasible social network. It showed that Instagram for this cohort was a much more embedded and active agent in their social lives, or lack thereof. Although, some level of safety is afforded due to the asynchronous nature of online communication, the pace of Instagram seemed to emulate a lot of the social interactions of the in-person world and held the same issues, albeit with less interactional fears and a smaller chance of in-person contact. It provided an alternative way of feeling connected to others that had little to

do with affiliation and reciprocity. This will be unpacked further in section *6.2.3 Voyeurism as Compensatory Connection*.

6.2.3 Voyeurism as Compensatory Connection

As previously mentioned, asynchronous communication was the main style of communication for users of Instagram; it set the precedent for another significant social and emotional phenomenon, which is voyeurism. The word voyeurism is used in a non-sexual way to denote the fixation on other people, or a specific person. Connection was possible for users of Instagram through closely following other users. It was sometimes perceived to be a negative experience by the participants.

“Not necessarily just the people I know, but there are people I can just obsess over.” – S.

Sometimes participants felt the need to tailor their experience by unfollowing profiles that were too compelling, or ones that they perceived to be detrimental to their self-evaluation because of indiscriminate comparison.

“I learned to just like... hide them whenever I feel like I’m going crazy observing and stalking and all these things... I just hide them.” – C.

Although the findings revealed voyeurism as a common process on Instagram, it was found to also be present on other platforms such as Facebook (Fisher et al., 2016). Following other people's lives was not just done for status seeking, or educational purposes, however, it made them feel like they were less alone. A few participants have linked their tendency to closely follow others on Instagram as a way of momentarily escaping their reality. This is what one research article referred to as 'para-social interaction', where users would develop close relationships with celebrities or bloggers online and feel a sense of kinship with them (Yan & Yang, 2020).

Para-social interaction and the voyeuristic aspect of Instagram engagement poses implications for the way psychologists need to reconstruct their understanding of socialising in the information age. The way people engage on Instagram, especially in the absence of in-person relationships reveals a novel adaptation to technology. To see someone living, is to feel close to them, even if that means never speaking to them. It also means inherently expecting something from them which they could not deliver, since there is no real relationship. This therefore opens the individual up to the likelihood that they would be disappointed over and over again by a platform that makes people feel close, when they are actually very far.

Before the advent of social media, social interaction was more mysterious and unpredictable; it required individuals to extend their imagination in a strenuous effort to 'feel into' how others lived their lives (Dohrenwend, 2018). Overindulgence on Instagram crowds out the capacity for imagination and conditions individuals to jump to conclusions based on how other users want them to imagine their lives. This position of voyeuristic consumption could be

compromising the necessary work that is expended between people and reduces the need for empathic imagination, which is essential for meaningful connection (Engelen, 2011; Duyndam, 2008). Seeing what others are doing displaces being with others, which is for this cohort, an anxiety provoking experience. This anxiety of being with others is often assuaged by safety behaviour and scrolling on Instagram was one of them.

6.2.4 Scrolling as Safety Behaviour

For participants in this study there was purpose behind the act of scrolling, it was referred to as a safety behaviour for many of the participants as previously mentioned in *Chapter 4, 4.3.4 Preoccupation with Instagram*. Scrolling was described as ‘numbing’, ‘soothing’ and ‘distracting’; in addition to being a crutch when the person sought to avoid social contact in an uncomfortable social situation. This discomfort in face-to-face social settings is resonant with Goffman’s theories around the struggle with face-to-face interaction. Erving Goffman talked about how interaction involved maintaining the ‘expressive order’, which he defined as a set of meanings that are being sustained in an interaction (Goffman, 1967, p. 9). The expressive order also involves understanding who we are in a situation, who the other person is, what the level of intimacy is and what the goal of the interaction is. Goffman believed that anxiety in social settings is a product of the breakdown of the expressive order. Much like actors on stage, we are always trying to hold it up to keep a certain level of safety in the interaction. Scrolling on the phone as a safety behaviour means that the phone user is stepping out of the real time embodied expressive order of the physical environment. This also raises questions about how social anxiety could be seen as a fear of acting in such a way which would break down the expressive order. In his book *‘Interaction Ritual’*, he frequently mentions how the expressive order is impossible to

maintain the entire time, but that it falls apart and that the participants in the interaction need to collaborate to mend it (Goffman, 1967). This also means being able to cope with the anxiety of this breakdown and learning how to communicate in a way that supports the restoration of it. Scrolling could be seen as an impediment to that participation, and while there is definitely a social dynamic on the phone, it is not as temporally sensitive or physically demanding as in-person interaction.

Safety behaviours have been recognised by many psychological disciplines, particularly within the CBT framework. There is one particular study that found a direct connection between social anxiety and preoccupation with the phone (Necula, 2020). Instagram scrolling is a flight from their immediate surroundings to a platform that would not reject them, and its position as a safety behaviour extends beyond simple behavioural conditioning. The repositioning of this category from ‘Preoccupation with Instagram’ to ‘Scrolling as Safety Behaviour’, however, reflects the special significance of that fixation for the participants in this study. Scrolling was contextualised further by the participants’ accounts about how they saw their tendency to be dependent to social media as a need to distract from their immediate reality.

“I don’t want to be in the moment...I’m trying to also escape, but it depends how much I am having fun in the setting as well.” – M.

Most of the participants reported checking Instagram first thing in the morning. Frequently, they talked about how they use it most when they were bored, or uncomfortable.

59% of U.S adults who have an Instagram account use it daily, 38% report using it several times a day (Auxier & Anderson, 2021); the number of registered users who use it once a day are more than half of the total registered users. This is in line with most of the participants who have disclosed that they do not just check it every day, but every hour. Using Instagram so frequently raises questions about the psychological cost of using it when one is feeling down. Feeling down coupled with engaging in upward comparison is an experience that would inevitably lead to more rumination on one's perceived inferior position to others.

There was more that needed to be discussed that fell outside the core categories. Those insights were very important for filling some of the gaps in the theory. Most of these insights were directly extracted from the verbatim accounts of the participants and were significant assumptions and beliefs that those users held regarding their engagement on Instagram. Section 6.2.5 *Insights* details two of those insights.

6.2.5 Insights

6.2.5.1 Insight 1: Instagram content is not real. The first insight is that most participants questioned the reality of the content. They largely held the belief that the content posted by users had a focus on accentuating end goals instead of the long journey. This focus on end goals made them think that there were shortcuts to success that they simply did not understand.

“You feel like everyone has a shortcut to what they want, and you still haven't found your shortcut”. – N.

But besides the display of achievements and accomplishments having that influence on socially anxious users, most of them also held the belief that it was a ‘shallow’ platform, showcasing trivial matters.

“I thought it was really weird. I feel like it’s kind of empty and very shallow”. – T.

They also expressed how when they saw someone else taking pictures to post on Instagram, they generally thought it was a pointless activity. Despite that belief, there was an interesting contradiction in their reports, and that was that they themselves could not stop themselves from engaging in the same activities that they found shallow.

“I feel a lot of pressure on Instagram. As a user, to post stuff.... I feel like whatever I post has to be top notch.” – T.

This systemic contradiction in what they thought and how they behaved is going to be elucidated in more detail in the next section.

6.2.5.2 Insight 2: Systemic Contradiction of Thoughts and Feelings. As previously mentioned, many participants discussed how Instagram use was shallow, yet they realised that there was a great deal of pressure to post and to interact with others on Instagram. Other participants talked about how despite their ability to see through other people’s posts as self-promotional and curated, they could not help but compare themselves and their lives to those curated posts.

“It doesn’t matter how logically I understand it, that this is not their life... I just feel bad about myself even if it’s not real”. – C.

There, the participant was demonstrating the gulf between affect and cognition that Instagram use falls within. Her feelings did not logically make sense because she believed that those posts were not actually representative of real life, yet she still felt inferior in comparison. Other users have also expressed how Instagram content, when self-promotional had a direct effect on their mental health.

“Instagram is really depressing”. – W.

Those insights have brought up the unique significance of expanding research on Instagram use in its ability to make its users think and believe one thing, yet still engage on a platform which they find unreal and shallow despite the impact on their emotional wellbeing.

6.3 Theoretical Formulation

After explaining how the social media processes were updated through reviewing the literature and revisiting the participant accounts in section 6.2 , the integrative diagram below reflects the modifications of the core categories to ones that reflect the literature search and the comparison against the findings from the strategic literature review.

Figure 15

Final Theoretical Formulation

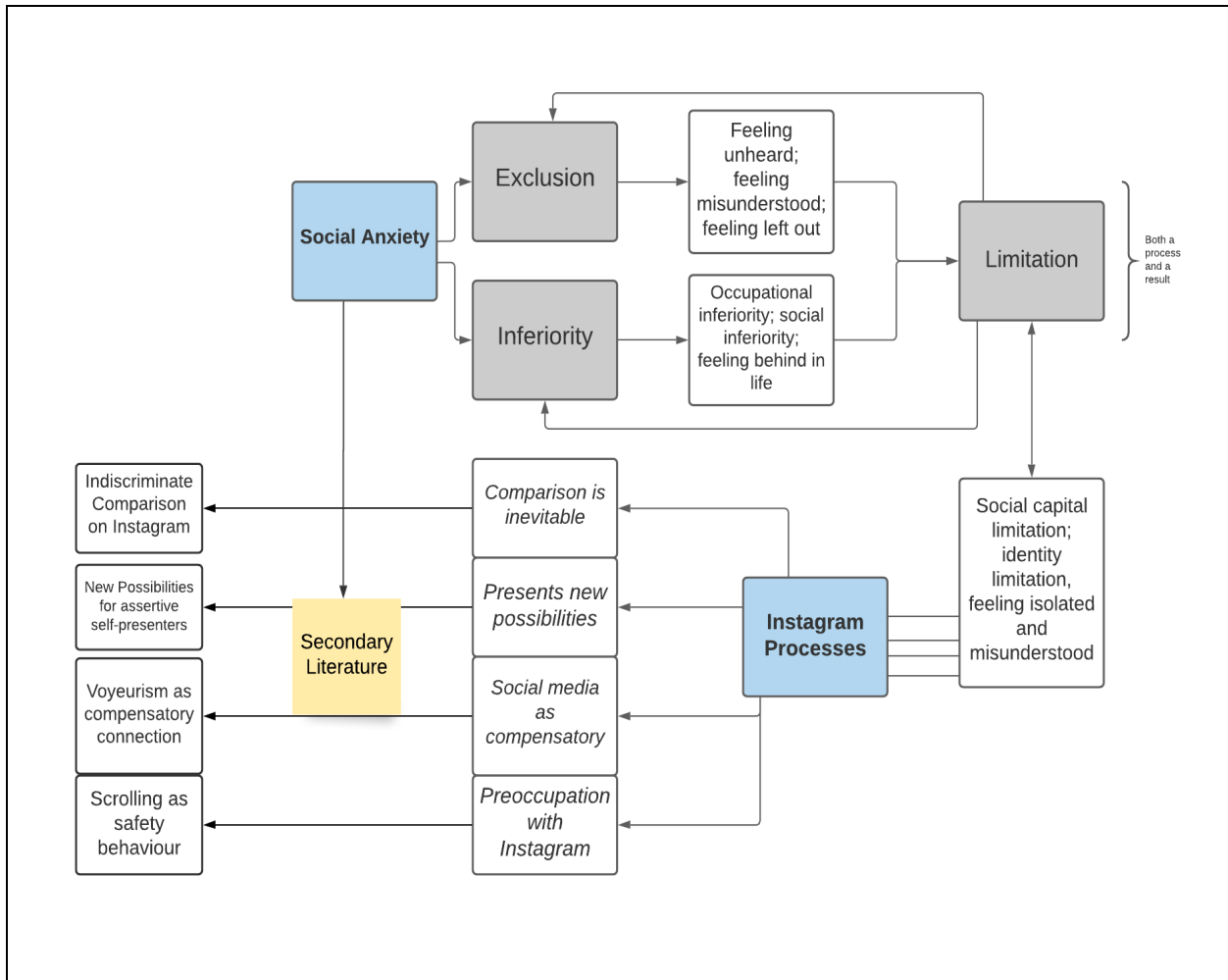


Figure 15, above displays how the core categories for social media processes evolved after integrating insights from the strategic literature review. It starts by outlining the social anxiety processes as they result in limitation. A full description of the first part of the diagram can be found in *Chapter 4, 4.4.1 Integrative Diagram: Social Anxiety X Social Media Processes*.

After the literature review was conducted (as represented by the yellow square), social media processes evolved to reflect the integrated literature. The changes are listed below.

- ‘Comparison is Inevitable’ shifted to ‘Indiscriminate Comparison on Instagram’.
- ‘Presents New Possibilities’ became ‘New Possibilities for Assertive Self-Presenters’.
- ‘Social Media as Compensatory’ was refined to ‘Voyeurism as Compensatory Connection’.
- Finally, ‘Preoccupation with Instagram’ shifted to ‘Scrolling as Safety Behaviour’.

6.4 Implication of Findings

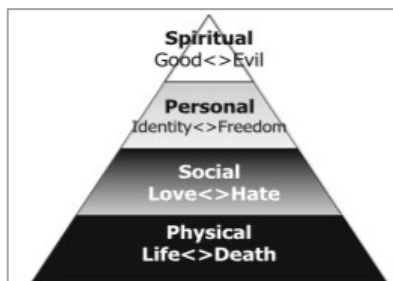
6.4.1 Implication for Counselling Psychologists and Existential Psychotherapists

Counselling Psychologists would benefit from the findings of this study, which highlighted the power of social networking platforms, and Instagram in particular, on individual experience. There is no more scope to dismiss the dominance of social networking platforms and their relevance to social and emotional experience. The first way this study would be beneficial to counselling psychologists at face value is getting them to be curious about computer mediated communication. Counselling psychologists could think of social media engagement for their clients with more sophistication through the prism of their client’s lived experience as one more layer of interaction they get with the world. Instagram as a platform could be used to explore various social and emotional processes that are significant for the client and deepen their awareness around social media use.

This means that social media and the phone could be used in the therapy room as a proxy for real life interaction, as a form of exposure therapy and a tool for exploration. This might support clients in being more intentional about how they engage with their Instagram profile and learn how it would serve them in their in-person interactions. The findings support therapists in working with their clients in a way that is relevant to the information age and consider the relational layer presented by online engagement.

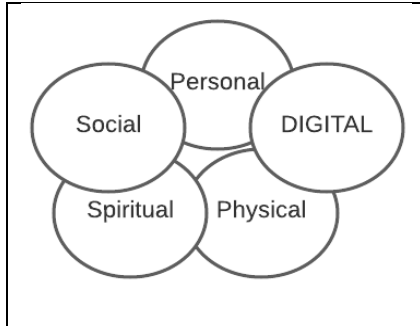
According to the existential ‘Four Worlds’ model, human beings experience the world through four existential dimensions; physical, personal, social, and spiritual worlds which mediate an individual’s experience of life. This framework was inspired by existential philosophers, most notably by Ludwig Binswanger (1958) and was brought to counselling psychology through the work of existential psychotherapist, and professor: Emmy Van Deurzen. The basic assumption of the Four Worlds model is that each person creates a worldview and lives accordingly, forming multiple relationships within different dimensions through ‘relational layers’ (Van Deurzen, 2012; p.76). The tensions inherent in human existence are mapped onto the four relational layers. The below diagram is a representations of the four worlds model as a simple heuristic device. **Figure 16**

Four Worlds and Paradoxes



The above diagram is a direct illustration of how existential philosophy contributes to psychotherapy. Through phenomenological methods of inquiry, existential therapy explores each of those worlds in an effort to identify where the client might be struggling in their four worlds. This simple heuristic device and the idea of the four worlds allows the therapist to stay open to the complexity of the client and the paradoxes they are facing (Deurzen, 2016). It is not a comprehensive device, nor was it meant to be, however its utility in therapy for a nondirective approach such as existential therapy is evident. In an effort to make it more applicable to the information age, I proposed a ‘five worlds model’.

6.4.1.1 The Five Worlds Model. The findings imply that there could be one more dimension to be added, and that is the digital world. This facet considers how the individual relates to technology. The findings of this study imply that the digital world can no longer be perceived as a tool, or a means of communication. The accounts of the participants and the ubiquity of social media have challenged the idea that digital communication is simply a means of communication. The deep and intimate interaction of social media with social and emotional processes of participants imply that it needs to be considered as an autonomous relational layer through which an individual understands their position in the world and is important to engage with in therapy. The figure below illustrates how the five worlds could be represented.

Figure 17*The Five Worlds of the Information Age*

The diagram above shows how the digital world can be incorporated in a nonlinear way as a point of exploration within therapy. The paradoxes of the digital world can be explored through continuums that are guided by the findings of this study. The following are examples of those paradoxes:

- Social comparison vs Authenticity
- New possibilities vs Displacement
- Voyeurism vs Exhibitionism
- Safety vs Exposure

Through introducing the digital world as a dimension that should be explored in its own right, this empowers therapists to learn how to probe it within the context of clinical work. It also supports therapists in practicing in a more relevant way to their client's experience of the world.

6.4.1.2 Instagram Interaction Survey. In an effort to crystallize the findings of this study to support deeper and more impactful clinical work with socially anxious Instagram users, a tentative screening scale was adapted and named the ‘Instagram Interaction Survey’; it is attached to *Appendix U: Instagram Interaction Scale*. This simple survey has not yet undergone widescale validation, and would need to go through that process in order to be appropriate for use. The main utility of this scale would be to create parameters around some of the most pertinent themes that emerged from investigating the social emotional processes that emerged through Instagram use. It seeks to make them explicit and would support the clinician in starting a conversation around those processes. It could be used as a catalyst for exploring the online world.

The main steps involved in the process of validation involve a thorough literature review on other scales and an evaluation by experts to determine the domain that the scale is measuring, as well as pre-testing questions through the use of cognitive interviews with the end users. Additionally, the scale must then be administered to a larger sample size in order to examine its reliability (Boateng et al., 2018) and subjected to tests of reliability such as the Cronbach Alpha and examined using test re-test reliability (Rousson et al., 2002). Finally, the scale items need to be parsimonious through reducing the number of items in the scale.

There are other scales and surveys that measure social media addiction such as the ‘Social Media Addiction Questionnaire’ (Hawi & Samaha, 2017) or the ‘Social Media Disorder Scale’ (Van Den Eijnden et al., 2016). However, most of those scales are centred around gauging

addiction to social media, withdrawal symptoms, preoccupation, and conflict; they do not account for more subtle social and emotional processes taking place on those platforms.

In terms of working with socially anxious clients, this study also provided a broad perspective on socially anxious millennials which would support interventions that seek to go beyond mainstream approaches (CBT and exposure therapy). This study points to the salience of other constructs such as identity, belonging, inferiority and social comparison. These insights enable the therapist to envision their client in the outside world and see their psychological distress as emanating from this constant effort to resolve their sense of inferiority and their fear of exclusion.

This contextualization would also drive therapists to understand their position in the client's bigger picture. The findings suggest that clients need to feel like they can glean a sense of belonging and familiarity from the therapy space to counter the embedded experience of exclusion or isolation that they may be experiencing in their life outside. Even though many mainstream therapies pivot around unconditional positive regard, it is especially important in trying to establish a therapeutic alliance with a client who presents with social anxiety. However, this might also mean that the use of more intrusive techniques such as immediacy in the therapy room needs to be kept to a minimum. Individuals with social anxiety present with a paradoxical struggle to be seen and yet suffer when they are seen. This paradox explains why their need for safety behaviour is so great. Safety behaviour needs to be permitted in therapy and explored as a concept with the client. This means that if they need to use their phone, put on glasses, or not talk about something in the therapy room, it needs to be allowed, and possibly excavated for its

significance in their day-to-day experience. Clients need to practice the dialectic of hiding and confronting at their discretion.

6.4.2 Contribution to Counselling Psychology Research

After considering how this study might permeate the therapy room, it was then important to look at how it contributed to counselling psychology research. To start with, making use of a cross-cultural perspective was a significant one to mention. As previously mentioned in *Chapter 3*, section 3.8.2 *Interviewing*, psychology has always been a ‘WEIRD’ science; relying on research from white, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries. The findings from this study are a result of interviewing people with different demographic profiles, which makes the findings more grounded in diversity.

In addition to exploring a range of cultural backgrounds, the focus on qualitative measures allowed the prioritisation of the lived experience of the participants above other sources of information. This is significant as individual experience is often drowned out in the public discourse around algorithms and data protection, and reductive theories around narcissism and social media addiction. This study’s simple focus on lived experience championed a discursive, in-depth, user-centric approach to studying computer-mediated communication. This will be further discussed in section 6.4.3 *Artificial Intelligence*.

Centralising participants’ accounts also meant steering clear from diagnostic definitions, or cognitive formulations, and enabling a novel way of understanding social anxiety that is more relevant to this digital age dominated by hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1995). This has implications

on the approach psychologists adopt towards social anxiety. Breaking standard definitions down and reconstructing them to suit a digital age is one way of advancing and updating psychological research to keep up with the explosion in digitisation. For example, this study revealed that relating to others through observation has become a big part of our lives as facilitated by social media engagement. The findings point to just how personal those platforms can be, and how we can no longer view the self as detached from the digital realm.

This study has contributed to a new paradigm in psychology, namely cyberpsychology and expanded the body of literature in this sub-field to include authentic lived experience, emphasising the value of conducting qualitative research in cyberpsychology.

The next section, section 6.4.3 *Artificial Intelligence*, will examine how this study situates itself in a broader framework, and will consider the particular significance of artificial intelligence, ethics, and policy in this discussion

6.4.3 *Artificial Intelligence*

6.4.3.1 The Instagram Algorithm. On December 9th, 2020, the official Instagram website published a blogpost outlining details on the design principles of some of its algorithms to the public. The post was mainly referring to the Instagram ‘explore’ page as a ‘Constrained Exploration System’ (Mahapatra, 2020). The name that the author gave to the ‘explore’ page spoke of a systemic contradiction. How could an ‘exploration’ system be ‘constrained’? The author then unpacked the intention of Instagram further by saying that the design principle of the Instagram feed is ‘Feels like home’, declaring: “How can we do the work and make it feel like

they have crafted these recommendations themselves?” (Mahapatra, 2020). This ‘Feels like home’ effect, is achieved through ‘progressive personalisation’, which was the phenomenon of tailoring the content of the feed to come closer and closer to what the user ‘liked’, creating an overall hyper-personal experience for the user. The aim is to get the user to feel like Instagram understands them better than they understand themselves. Moreover, this blogpost seemed to be emphasising the freshness of the experience of being on Instagram, stating that the algorithm works fast to provide fascinating content to users. This component of novelty has a strong grounding in neuropsychological research on dopaminergic reward systems in the brain (Bardo et al., 1996; Molas et al., 2017).

Lived experience from participants brings to awareness some of the real life ramifications of principles of progressive personalisation, and the explore ranking system which launched ‘suggested posts’ for users have built in an irresistible element of novelty in the feed. Additionally, considering socially anxious individuals’ tendency for ruminative behaviour (Morgan & Banerjee, 2008; Nepon et al., 2011; Dempsey et al., 2019), this application presents the user a sense of safety and security, especially when coupled with the voyeuristic mode of relating. This sits in contrast to in-person social experience, which is often about engaging with the unknown, the mysterious, and the embodied.

Besides the safety that Instagram provides to the socially anxious user, as well as the sense of connection that they get from watching others’ content online; the psychological and emotional value of the Instagram algorithm could also be found in its capacity at expanding the user’s social capital. The findings from this research show that this cohort of socially anxious

millennials are able to bridge their social capital on Instagram only by engaging in very specific self-presentational processes which fall in the category of ‘assertive self-presentation’ (Schütz, 1998; Attrill, 2015). This means that socially anxious individuals who struggle with exclusion and want to build their social capital would need to post content that fit the criteria of the Instagram algorithm to stand a chance at meeting someone online or expanding their social capital. The idea of users and participants conforming to self-presentational principles could be likened to computer science researcher Luciano Floridi’s notion of ‘enveloping’ (Floridi, 2011). He refers to enveloping as the process whereby human beings adapt to syntactical technology in a way that makes it easier for this technology to work. This, he links to the notion of technology ‘re-ontologising’ our world to fit the designed functionality. Much like the effort of users and participants to post relevant and palatable content that the algorithm would serve, this has implications on the participants’ experience of their sense of self and their social world.

6.4.3.2 Ethics of CMC. The previous section outlined how the Instagram algorithm could be integrated into the findings around social and emotional processes emergent from this study. Whether these implications are considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is more about the ethical position of the observer. Ethics are moral principles that govern a person’s or group behaviour (Lexico, n.d). Technology has no ethics; its ethical principles are informed by those who design it. Moore’s law states that the power of computers will roughly double every two years. Technology will continue to get faster and more practical and reliable at a consistent rate (Gregersen, 2019). Moore was making that statement almost 40 years before the inception of Facebook; and about technology that did not have such an intimate involvement with the human mind. This recognition of its ever-evolving intimacy calls for clearer and more robust ethical guidelines to

be developed and implemented around the design of those platforms guided by user-centric research on online engagement.

This means that this area of research needs to be kept as inter-disciplinary as possible to continue the inquiry on how social media impacts intangible modes of being that were always part of daily living. Philosophical concepts such as chance, discovery, serendipity and mystery, and how handheld technologies evolve or diminish our capacity to engage with these existential ideas needs to be explored from the vantage point of lived experience. These implications are especially relevant to mental health. Ethical insights need to be refined through curious questions around mental health such as whether the human capacity for boredom was being compromised by constant stimulation, or the avoidance of uncertainty both in the social world and in other aspects of life; in addition to its influence on those who already report feeling vulnerable. To add nuance to the debate around the ethical implications of CMC, a list of recommendations as informed by this research was included in *Chapter 7: Conclusion*.

6.4.3.3 Policy. The discussion on the ethics of social media usage must include a consideration for the place of policy directly shaping user behaviour. There is, however, a wider debate happening around the place of artificial intelligence in the public sector and society at large. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an advisory body in the UK established to advise the prime minister on ethical standards of public life. The CSPL issued a review on artificial intelligence and public standards in February 2020, challenging the status of AI against the ‘seven principles of public life’: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness,

honesty, and leadership. Their work was looking at the position of AI within the public sector and its adherence to those principles and where it might fall short (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2020).

This was not the first time a governmental advisory body evaluated the ethical ramifications of AI. The 2018 report of the House of Select Committee covered ethical and governance issues and made recommendations on how to use AI responsibly. The Department of Health and Social Care also developed a code of conduct for data-driven health and care technology (Shearer, Stirling & Pasquarelli, 2020). These reports were targeting the public, policymakers, and health providers alike; and their focus was on the utility of AI.

On a wider scale, the European Union implemented the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, which was referred to as a ‘solid framework of digital trust’ (The European Commission, 2020, p.4). The GDPR regulations are considered a gold standard for managing data-related practices online, including privacy. There are a few other legal directives and regulations that were also crafted to support governmental regulation of data and issues like cybersecurity, such as the Cybersecurity Act and the Digital Content Directive (The European Commission, 2020). These efforts to protect economies and the public sector both in the UK and the EU are of peak significance. However, these policies overlook the societal impact of day-to-day engagement on social media platforms.

There were a few reports published by the UK government that adopted a more user-centric approach to guidance that were written about screen-time for children and parents

(Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). In addition, a recent report published in 2017 by the Royal Society for Public Health that listed the adverse effects of excessive social media consumption on young people's mental health, made recommendations such as pop-ups for heavy usage warnings, social media usage guidance in schools and a suggestion for youth workers and professionals to have training around social media and computer mediated communication (Royal Society for Public Health, 2017). Most of the official guidance reports focused on young people and mental health, which is fitting as social media has long been beheld as a culprit for declining mental health in teenagers. Instagram famously made headlines when an avid Instagram user, 14-year-old Molly Russell took her own life (Marsh & Waterson, 2019). Yet there seems to be fewer resources around such guidance for adults.

This study's findings, although substantive, contribute to a growing picture of how social networking platforms (in this case, Instagram) interact with various aspects of our social and emotional experience. Policy makers would need to keep the users in the centre by consulting lived experience-based research by psychologists; this would also mean that they recognise the fragility of mental health and social relationships. *Chapter 7* will conclude with a list of recommendations for policy makers.

6.4.4 Implications of COVID-19 on Socially Anxious Instagram Users

After the analysis process took place, the transcripts were mined again for references to the COVID-19 pandemic. The transcripts were searched using key words: 'COVID', 'Corona', 'Virus', 'Pandemic', 'lockdown' and 'home'.

Through extracting relevant excerpts from the transcripts, there were a few points that could be made regarding how this cohort seemed to be adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the participants were based in different countries with different lockdown measures, and that two of the interviews took place before lockdown had officially started, these points were made based on the 10 participants who were interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this meant that they did not all have an identical experience, all 10 interviews were carried out during a time of national lockdown for most of the participants and they were spending most of their time at home.

Through the transcripts there were references to a general rise in anxiety levels. One of the participants reported having physiological responses to the lockdown and spoke to a psychologist to learn how to cope. He reported that his anxiety was directly affecting his social anxiety and that they were related to one another.

“I don't know what physical stuff happens because the first time I actually get the feelings of what is I was in quarantine, I realised when I talked to a psychologist, she said that what happened are the symptoms that sometimes show in social gatherings, but it was also anxiety due to quarantine...”- A.

This was echoed by another participant who said that while he initially enjoyed quarantine, he felt negatively affected by it.

“Yeah, it’s not very bad, I don’t like going out much so it’s fine but staying at home too much is getting to me.” – M.

Although those were participants who had reported generally preferring to avoid social interaction, staying at home too much was making them feel more anxious and stressed. Other participants talked about how COVID-19 arrested their attempts at creating meaningful social relationships, in this case, romantic relationships.

“Like I said I want to have a boyfriend but the I the fact that we can’t go out or hang out because it’s dangerous like okay. This is gonna have to go on hold the idea of wanting a boyfriend. This won’t work because you’re anxious and the fact that you’re more anxious does have a good cost.” – N.

Here the participant was talking about how she would have to put on hold the idea of being in a relationship or finding a boyfriend due to the lockdown measures. This she recognized as a big cost, because she felt like her anxiety was getting much worse during lockdown and would most likely mean she is less able to meet someone in the future. This showed that the prospect of recovery and adaptation to social anxiety was disrupted by needing to stay at home. This was also echoed by another participant who talked about how she felt robbed of one of the few activities she did to make herself adapt to social settings.

“But with hiking because it’s something that I like. And the people usually are people that are kind of like-minded, we have like some common interests, and it’s easy to talk to them. So, like I

said, it's still new, but I've been having like a good experience with it. Then, like the Coronavirus, and the lockdown happened, and I couldn't continue.” – C.

This disruption in the participants' chances at socialising physically with others came at a cost to a lot of the participants. In that situation, engagement with Instagram was recognized as compensatory and useful.

“We can't go outside anymore. So might as well see what other people are doing because we can't really see them.” – A2.

In the above quote, an interesting social process was elicited. The desire to see what other people were doing was in some way substituting the physical encounters with them. This interesting process showed that social media seems to be introducing the act of seeing what others are doing and packaging it as connecting with others.

“Actually, you feel different, you feel different you know... yesterday I just posted this poll between, I was asking people I have on Instagram do you find people you know now there is Tiktok since we are all staying at home. So, people are using Tiktok. There is original content on Tiktok and other people on Tiktok are just doing this thing when you get the voiceover of the movie and you act the movie and there's actually ...and honestly I find this really stupid.” – A.

The use of Instagram (and in this case TikTok) for entertainment was closely linked with very important social processes. This participant felt pulled into this platform simply because

everyone is home, and this is what everyone was doing. This highlights a few things, firstly that the participant had an assumption that this is what most people were doing in lockdown, the second is that he needed to take part to feel included. Thirdly, the idea of seeing what others are doing instead of seeing others echoes the core category of 'Voyeurism as Compensatory Connection'. Although TikTok seemed to come across as an entertainment platform, it carried a very real meaning for the participant. This collision of entertainment and connection was also recognized by another participant who talked about how in lockdown she needed Instagram to relax.

“Sometimes life is a bit sad or like any, especially during the Coronavirus that the peak...I would look to see how people are dealing with it and to also have some icebreakers was a way like to relax. Okay.” – N.

Icebreakers, coping mechanisms as well as entertainment were all on one platform, and the lockdown centralised this platform as a place to meet all of those needs in very close proximity to one another. The participant also talked about how difficult life was for many people, that she realised that people were using Instagram and posting pictures of a better time to feel alive.

“Now people are living on social media so they can feel that they're alive so that they feel like the world is continuing... It's kind of interesting.” – N.

Instagram seemed to be playing an important existential role according to this participant, who was framing social media as a lifeline for many people.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on making sense of the investigation. It started from how this research began and went on to explore how the core categories evolved with the input from literature review to the implication of this theory on the work of counselling psychologists, and academic literature as it stands. Finally, it examined some of the important issues to consider when conducting research on computer mediated communication that is linked with artificial intelligence, particularly ethics and policymaking.

It also referred to the data to scrutinise some of the ramifications of COVID-19 on the participants. The discussion of this research endeavour could expand beyond the scope of this study and this stimulating subject is far from fully grasped. So long as there is an endless scroll greeting millions of people on their phones every day, there will need to be a parallel endless search on the implications of social media on our lives and futures. The next chapter will provide a more robust conclusion of this research which looks at its strengths and limitations, as well as an exploration of future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

“It has 100% changed a lot of people who have been using it, it’s just a huge part of their life” – T.

This chapter presents the strengths and limitations of this investigation in section 7.1. It then outlines recommendations for policy makers, educational institutions, and psychologists on the use of social media in section 7.2. Afterwards, it offers potential areas for further investigation in section 7.3. Finally, it concludes by summarising the researcher’s journey in section 7.4.

7.1 Strengths and Limitations of The Research

One of the unique elements in this investigation was the diversity within the research participant sample. This mixture honoured the ontological position of relativism as well as the researcher's personal journey living in different countries and valuing cross-cultural research in psychology; it also enabled a more universal story around social anxiety. The diversity allowed there to be interesting comparisons across the interviews which led to more questions that ultimately deepened the understanding of the subject. It was only possible because of the existence of advanced and efficient digital teleconferencing software such as Zoom. Using Zoom for interviewing might have enhanced the ecological validity, as the participants were being interviewed in their familiar environment. This may have led to reflections that were more courageous and more authentic self-expression in the data. It may have made them feel a lot more in control than they would have in person, in an unfamiliar office.

The focus on millennials may have narrowed the possibility of exploring other perspectives. Millennials are distinguished from older generations since they grew up as relatively global citizens; their vocabulary is aligned with the western understanding of mental health. This may have made the task of data collection and analysis easier, but it might have overlooked the perspective of those who were older, or less digitally connected. The findings were specific to the participant group, individuals who report experiencing social anxiety, and if there was a control group it may have led to different findings.

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by reliance on lengthy verbatim accounts of participants as well as meticulous memo-writing which elucidated how the coding and

categorising processes took place. The findings in relation to the phenomena being researched were relevant, and they remained centred around the subject. Keeping a record of all the interview transcripts enabled a constant validation of findings against data. Additionally, having clear and thorough feedback from supervisors who were in the realm of qualitative research and cyberpsychology helped reduce the bias of the analysis process and kept it transparent.

One more strength would be my personal involvement with Instagram, and the fact that I am from the same age-group as the participants who were recruited for this study. This enabled me to pick up on nuances in their experience that might have been overlooked by a researcher who was not familiar with Instagram. However, this also exposed the research to the possibility of bias in the interpretations because of my engagement as an Instagram user. This was mitigated by choosing grounded theory which does not make any claims regarding researcher impartiality but involves the researcher in the development of the findings through a reflexive process of memo-writing and journaling. In addition, I had a decision trail explicit in most aspects of analysis, particularly when certain analytic decisions were made through the researcher's own process of memo-writing, see Chapter 4: *4.4 Theoretical Formulations*.

The memos and journaling process as well as the use of literature in this study were tracked through detailed record-keeping. The practices of data collection and analysis were documented clearly to enhance the applicability of both the research method and the findings to other contexts. A summary of those processes can be found in *Chapter 4: 4.1 Stages of Analysis*.

The research strove to stick closely to the properties of thorough and effective qualitative research; however, no research approach is ever without its limitations. One limitation of the

findings would be the drawback that usually accompanies qualitative research which is that this study sacrificed generalisability. Forgoing generalisability was for the sake of honesty, clarity, and originality. One of the ways that this study has encountered limitation was through the number of participants for the research, which was dictated by the time limitations of completing a doctoral program.

This study was also built on a foundation of self-reports, which for qualitative studies are central, however they miss objective measures of quantification. This was partially mitigated by the incorporation of secondary literature in the second stage of the analysis process. This supported the theory to develop from the ground up as initially informed by participant accounts. The secondary sources could have also included data from users online by means of collecting press cuttings or user generated content (UGC), for example. The reason for overlooking those were because they would have added the risk of breaching data protection guidelines and may have compromised this study's adherence to BPS guidelines of internet-mediated research; which is referenced in Chapter 3: Methodology

All the previous points show how the overall aim of the study, which was '*To reach a clearer understanding of what constituted social anxiety in the information age with omnipresent social networking platforms*' was substantially fulfilled through the research method chosen, and the steps taken to implement it (See *Chapter 1, section 1.2.2 Overall Aim*). Through the unique prism of qualitative user-centric research, a few recommendations were developed, those will be presented in the next section.

7.2 Recommendations

The Centre for Humane Technologies was set up by Tristan Harris, a leading founder of a movement with the goal of reimagining the infrastructure of digital systems (especially social networking platforms) and steering society towards the well-being of democracy (Center for Humane Technology, 2017). On their website they have a list of recommendations for users including advice on how to curb the negative emotional and social influence of social networking platforms. This message has been growing in North America, especially after the political failures that have been linked with social media platforms. Those recommendations would be strongly complemented by user-centric research by psychologists, in order to steer the dialogue away from the media frenzy and the sensationalising effects of those political scandals. If there is anything this research has shown, it is that there are very valid reasons people go online.

The emotional and social gains that are facilitated by social media are undeniable, especially in the short-term as cathartic release or point of connection to others. However, psychology needs to continue its bold exploration of online interaction, and this study yielded some recommendations through the findings. This study does not make any recommendations regarding the uptake of virtual or online counselling as this was not the focus of the research, instead the recommendations were crafted to address online engagement in general. The following recommendations are framed broadly to address individuals, policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers in addition to UK representative governing bodies such as the British Psychological Society.

- 1) Governmental advisory bodies such as the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH) should advise on nationally recommended daily screen-time; like the National Health Service daily recommended alcohol units (The National Health Service, 2018). Although there are some reports addressing screen-time for children and academic literature to support those guidelines; more research needs to be done and guidelines should be implemented around how much screen-time should be suggested by the NHS and governmental advisory bodies for adults.
- 2) Individuals who are undergoing treatment or therapy should be encouraged to reflecting on their engagement with social media by managing their consumption through screen-time prompting applications, such as ‘Moment’ or ‘Freedom’. They should be encouraged to explore why they use platforms like Instagram so frequently, while building awareness on which dimension of their life it is displacing. It is also important to explore the positive aspects of using Instagram, within their own life. The feeling of being connected through observation, the comfort of knowing the phone is there in social situations that are uncomfortable, as well as the new possibilities presented to those who invest in their self-image on the platform, those are all relevant social and psychological processes to building self-awareness within therapy.
- 3) Basic information on social networking algorithms needs to be made explicit for users; this is especially relevant for those who use them every day. This could be done by designing workshops in educational institutions dedicated to informing students on how social media algorithms work to maximise engagement. Instead of delivering

workshops around the pros and cons of using social media the workshops could be tailored to build curiosity around how they work.

- 4) Psychologists need to work towards understanding social media from the perspective of users. User-centric research on social media will ensure that the individual is kept at the centre of this discussion around how to better navigate the digital world.
- 5) Disciplines such as cyberpsychology should be incorporated within the wider framework of post-graduate compulsory curricula. Different schools of psychotherapy need to find ways of integrating cyberpsychology within their understanding of mental health problems.

7.2.1 Instagram Guidance for Socially Anxious Users

The above recommendations were not exhaustive and are deliberately broad. The below recommendations below were written specifically for socially anxious users of Instagram. Those individuals made this research endeavour possible and fruitful and they might learn from the substantive findings of this study.

1) Recognise scrolling as a safety behaviour.

It is important for socially anxious users, or anyone struggling with their mental health to recognise their vulnerability to social media applications. There are many studies that found links between mental health and preoccupation with social media, and this investigation elicited qualitative descriptions of a few of the processes that might explain that link. The act of scrolling is a form of behavioural conditioning, and the safety it provides in times of distress or discomfort could be preventing the user from being able to

tolerate a certain threshold of anxiety simply because they are always able to escape the moment. This could be very helpful for those who are struggling to an extensive degree, because it allows them to feel like they have the safety of their phone, however for those seeking more presence in their social experiences it could be in the way of learning how to be in uncomfortable settings.

2) Instagram should not be meeting all your needs.

Users need to find ways of meeting the various needs that Instagram provides through other avenues. This will expand their skill set and resource them in ways that might enrich their confidence and their self-efficacy. For example, if Instagram is meeting a need for affirmation, then this could be done by asking for feedback from a co-worker or a friend. If it is meeting a need for entertainment, then this could be outsourced to television or books. If it is meeting a need for community, this could be done through other applications. This would support individuals in expanding their skill set through exposure to different environments, and expansion in their resources.

3) Interest-based activities are helpful for overcoming social anxiety; when surrounded by others, stop using the phone.

Socially anxious users need to ensure that there are spaces where they experience inclusion in-person. Interest-based communities were generally reported to be an effective way of meeting new people in a non-threatening environment. Having hobbies emerged as a clear protective factor in the transcripts because hobbies created spaces where there was less pressure to engage in self-disclosure; and less likelihood of being

rejected or excluded. Recognise the healing power of belonging in-person, and perhaps also use social media to seek out experiences of belonging in-person.

4) Tailoring towards helpful content is a good start; but it does not replace therapy.

The sense of being not good enough, or ‘inferior’, needs to be explored in-depth in a safe space. This is the work of therapy and journaling; group therapy is also very helpful.

Breaks from Instagram use are essential to cultivate an introspective stance that might be compromised by checking social media every day. Users could explore how they engage in indiscriminate comparison to others and recognise when the comparisons have a destabilising effect on them. Activity-based comparison is not as harmful as overall comparison to others. This needs to be taken to therapy and explored with its own unique meaning to the individual.

5) Do not expect to be understood by everyone, recognise people’s limitations.

Going on Instagram provides an individualised micro-reality that can be isolated from a shared reality with others. This creates pressure on people around you to be as gratifying and fulfilling as the Instagram application. This might never happen, and there needs to be a recognition of unrealistic expectations to be understood by others.

These five basic guiding principles could support Instagram users in navigating their social anxiety.

The next section will present ideas for further investigation into this research subject.

7.3 Future Research

The findings of this study have pointed to the need for more research to take place. This section will outline ideas for further research first by looking at suggestions for qualitative research ideas, and then quantitative research.

7.3.1 *Qualitative research*

Qualitative studies that compared socially anxious millennials who used Instagram every day, to ones who did not check their Instagram profile daily would be useful and expand on the theory generated by this study in a very meaningful way. The scope of this research focused on self-reports of social and emotional processes accompanying Instagram engagement as they relate to the processes that comprise social anxiety; however, this study did not look at specific online behaviour in real time or precise choices by the user that shaped their overall experience. Studies that focus on real time responses to Instagram engagement might lead to an expansion on this inquiry. Focusing on real-time behaviour might make it a lot more specific and unpack more practical ways of managing Instagram engagement. Another interesting area of research would be to expand on Instagram, and include Facebook and Twitter, this could be using the same theoretical model, through examining social media processes on other platforms.

This study revealed the significance of feeling behind in their experiences, and it would be useful to make this the focus of research on social anxiety. Feeling behind was expressed as a sense of not being where they should be or wanted to be, and this experience seemed to permeate the overall experience of social anxiety for the participants. Exploring that phenomenon could be done through carrying out longitudinal studies with the aim of capturing changing personal

narratives through social media use and how much of that narrative is present or co-constructed through online engagement. It is interesting to unpack further how social media engagement interacts with that experience of being behind. This would be one more study that would support understanding how involved platforms are in their life narrative, and their identity formation. Although this has already been done by other researchers, the findings are still inconclusive.

More research on preoccupation with Instagram is necessary, since most of the participants reported struggling to manage their use of the platform. Those reasons need to be clarified through further research and made very explicit for registered users. Longitudinal studies would go a long way in also developing more in-depth understanding for some of the reasons why Instagram use is so compelling across time. Research could also focus on how the use of social networking platforms can support the development of social skills for individuals, by foregrounding the skills deficit theory of social anxiety, since users would be going online to learn about others anyway.

7.3.2 Quantitative Research

Randomized controlled trials could be carried out to establish causation around different Instagram processes and social anxiety led by questions such as ‘Does comparison cause more social anxiety?’ or ‘Does Instagram help certain people feel more included and does this make them less socially anxious?’.

Additionally, further research needs to take place by expanding on the effort to create psychometric surveys to allow for the client's relationship with Instagram to be understood within the context of their presenting issues. The 'Instagram Interaction scale' attached to *Appendix U: Instagram Interaction Scale* could be widely validated, which would make a very useful research endeavour.

The relationship between comparison and social anxiety is one where much could further be explored. This was one of the longest standing categories in this research and warrants further inquiry. Comparison to others needed to be studied on the level of 'big data', by looking at which Instagram profiles stimulate the most upward or downward comparison and how people are responding to that comparison.

After grappling with some ideas for future research, the final part of the conclusion, section will outline the researcher's personal journey with this investigation.

7.4 The Researcher's Journey

Finishing this work felt like a big task. Time took on a remarkably interesting form; COVID-19 was slowing everything speeding up my writing . The relational impoverishment that was brought on by COVID-19 gave this project a surreal feel. The kind of feeling that would come from exploring the world as a complete foreigner to it. This supported my reflexivity and allowed me to maintain a phenomenological and interpretative stance throughout the analysis process.

Even though my creativity was enhanced by my disconnection, I confronted the limits of isolation when I realised that I needed people to bounce thoughts off with. This simple need was the ultimate lesson in the inextricable relationship that we have with others. Reading about the movement in psychotherapy towards more interpersonal theories around understanding human psychology was useful. It helped me stay grounded in the conviction that our social world is not something to be othered or studied as a separate entity, but it is part of us. This was echoed by my endless stream of clients who would come to therapy for problems related to isolation, loneliness, alienation, and discontent with their social lives.

Despite the value of SNSs, my own relationship with Instagram remained deeply conflicted. It would make me compare my present situation to others and at times I caught myself feeling dejected because most people looked like they had their lives figured out. On top of that, it would place demands on my limited attention. Despite knowing that I was not alone in this and knowing that Instagram did not present me with a direct reflection of the ‘truth’ about people’s lives I still felt deeply affected by the comparison to beautiful, fun images. This ‘knowing better’ but ‘feeling anyway’ experience illustrated the cognitive dissonances. It felt like how I perceived Instagram was related to issues other than just my thoughts, it was related to what the rest of my life looked like and how I felt about myself and my circumstances. This was the same with the participants as well. It felt like lockdown compounded vulnerability in the face of social media and its asynchronous version of others and reality it provided. Unfortunately, the way most people resorted to defending themselves against the threat of being negatively affected by indiscriminate comparison was to say, ‘This is not real’. However, that is a very destructive

concept; to navigate the world thinking people are mostly lying about their lives must breed more alienation.

Jean Baudrillard in his famous book '*Simulacra and Simulation*' felt like a very perceptive account of the nature of knowledge in post-modernism. This work has resonances of some of his profound propositions around the nature of reality in a post-modern world, which he called 'hyperreality'. His biggest offering was the proposal that we have no access to reality beyond any image we are presented with. Hyperreality is an era where people's lives are almost entirely mediated by the visible, and for Instagrammers, that meant their world was dominated by 'the Instagrammable' (a word used to describe a picture that is worth sharing). COVID-19 added one more layer to the apparent dystopia and prevented people from experiencing an embodied relational world; Baudrillard's hyperreality became the only reality. I was fortunate enough to have the chance to delve so deeply into a research endeavour so curiously timed, ironically behind my screen away from others!

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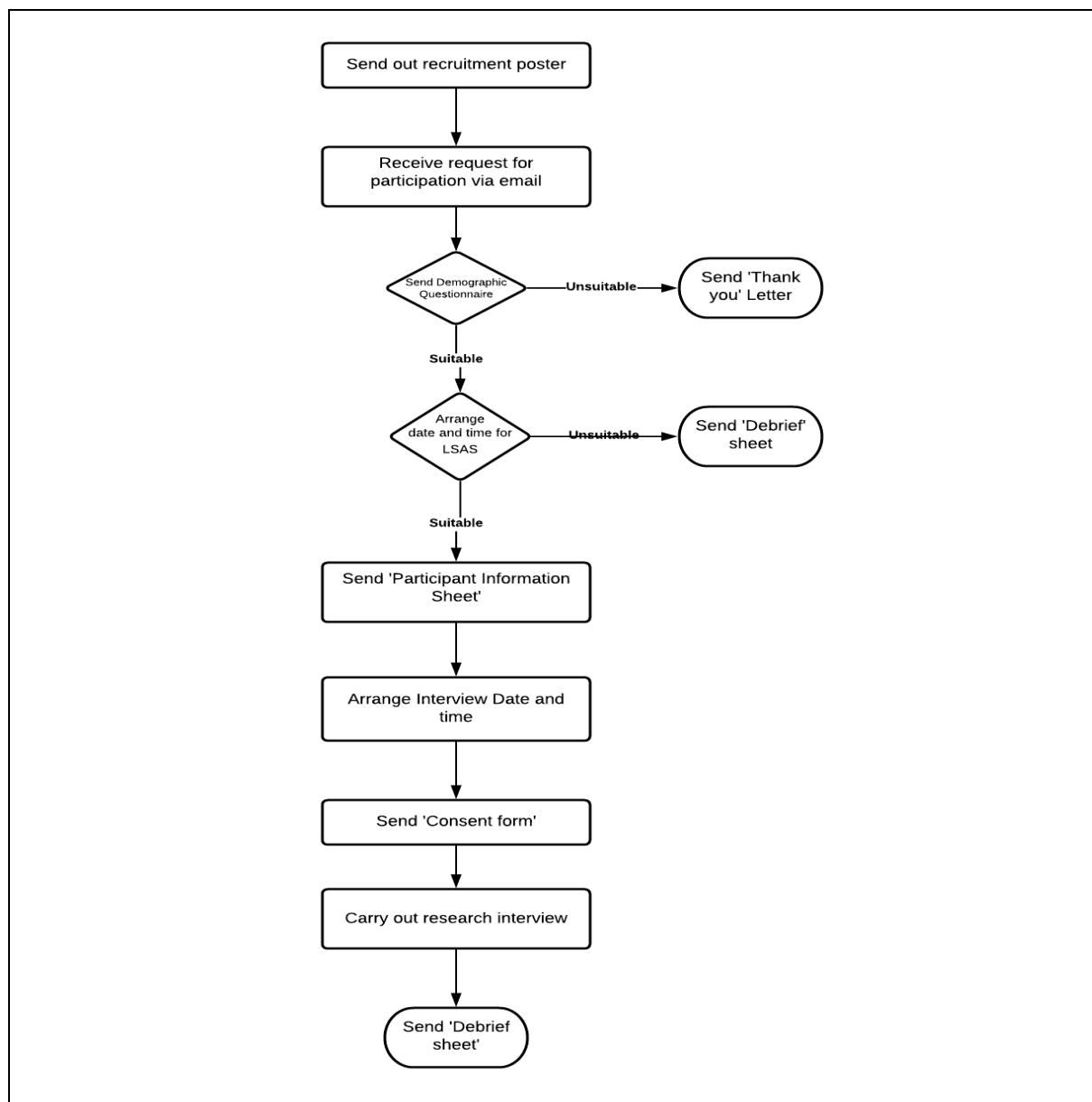
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Appendices

Appendix A

Figure 18

Recruitment Flowchart



Appendix B

Figure 19

Recruitment Flyer



Call for Millenials!

Do you consider yourself someone who experiences social anxiety?
Are you born between 1981 and 1991?
Do you check your Instagram account daily?

You are cordially invited to take part in a research study by Farah el Miligui – Doctoral student at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling – entitled:

‘An Exploration of the Experiences of Frequent Instagram Users Who Report Feeling Socially Anxious’

The aim is to explore what it means to experience social anxiety in a digitally networked world.

Should you be interested, please contact:

Farah el Miligui
FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk

Appendix C

Figure 20

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographics Questionnaire	
Research title: An Exploration of the Experiences of Frequent Instagram Users Who Report Feeling Socially Anxious.	
Researcher: Farah el Miligui Email: FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk	
Supervisor: Ho Law Email: drholaw@gmail.com	
<hr/>	
Please feel free to ask me if you need any of the questions explained to you.	
1.	Do you speak English fluently?
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
	<input type="checkbox"/> No
2.	What is your age?
	<input type="checkbox"/> 18-29 years
	<input type="checkbox"/> 30-49 years
	<input type="checkbox"/> Over 50 years
3.	Do you consider yourself someone who experiences social anxiety?
	<input type="checkbox"/> No
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
4.	How frequently do you check your Instagram?
	<input type="checkbox"/> Rarely
	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a month
	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a week
	<input type="checkbox"/> Three Times a week
	<input type="checkbox"/> Every day

Appendix D

Figure 21



Interview Schedule

- 1) **How would you describe your social world?**
- 2) **How long have you been experiencing social anxiety?**
- 3) **What do you do to feel safe in social situations?**
- 4) **When did you start using social networking websites?**
- 5) **How frequently do you use Instagram?**
- 6) **Do you feel like your social experiences are affected by Instagram?**
- 7) **How would you describe your relationship with Instagram?**
- 8) **What can you tell me about how using Instagram affects your life?**
- 9) **What does it mean to know things about people?**

Appendix E

Figure 22

Participant Information Sheet

<p>The Department of Health and Social Sciences Middlesex University Hendon London NW4 4BT</p>	 
<p>61-63 Fortune Green Road, The New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Participant Information Sheet</u></p>	
<p><u>Title:</u> An Exploration of the Experiences of Frequent Instagram Users Who Report Feeling Socially Anxious</p>	
<p><u>Invitation paragraph</u></p>	
<p>You are being invited to take part in a counselling psychology research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what will be involved. Please take the time to reach through this information sheet, and feel free to ask if there is anything you do not understand and discuss it with others.</p>	
<p><u>What is the purpose of the research?</u></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The overall aim of this project is to explore what it means to experience social anxiety while participating heavily in a digitally networked online world. The focus of this study would be on frequent Instagram users from the millennial generation who are likely to add rich descriptive, qualitative accounts of what it means to experience social anxiety while also engaging with visual social networking platforms. 	

- According to the literature review, although there is a great deal of quantitative research that has been carried out on social media, there is little qualitative research that is designed to elicit the experiences accounts of frequent users of social networking websites.
- It is hoped that this study would enable an understanding of whether or not heavy Instagram engagement has an impact on the experience of social anxiety.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You may have expressed an interest due to the posters that have been disseminated on social media; or someone has referred you due to a perceived interest.

You have been selected because you fit the criteria for this research in terms of age bracket and also frequency of engagement on Instagram.

In addition, you have scored a score on the ‘Social Interaction Anxiety Scale’ that indicates that you experience social anxiety.

What are the consequences of taking part in this research?

It is completely voluntary to take part in this research project. If you decide to take part you are free to abstain from answering any questions and you are free to withdraw whenever you want, without giving an explanation.

What happens when I decide to participate?

You will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and o fill out a ‘Social Interaction Anxiety Scale’ at the start. If the responses to the questionnaire and the scale meet the inclusion criteria for this investigation, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm your willingness to take part in the study and a mutually convenient time and place will be arranged for you to meet with the researcher.

The interview will be recorded using a separate password protected recording device. It is estimated that the interview will last fifty minutes. You will be asked some prompting questions that are designed to open up a conversation about your experiences of social anxiety, and your experiences online on Instagram.

The questions are not designed to test your knowledge; they are mainly designed to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

What are the possible disadvantages and the risks of taking part?

Talking about experiences of social anxiety could be difficult, and it could arouse some discomfort and emotions. You may feel the need to seek further support regarding any difficult feelings that come up, I will endeavour to monitor how you are doing throughout the interview. You are also encouraged to notify me of any distress you may experience while participating.

I will also offer you a chance to withdraw from the study if change your mind about participation.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no direct benefits from taking part in this study; being interviewed about your experiences may provide you with a space to reflect on and express some ideas you may have about Instagram use and how it relates to your personal life. It could be a help in building a clearer understanding of the relationship you develop with it.

Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and if you agree to take part. As mentioned previously, you will be given an informed consent form to sign.

Who is organising and funding this research?

This research is self-funded. It is organised by a doctoral student of counselling psychology.

What will happen to the data?

The digital recording will be saved on an encrypted hard drive till the final submission of this thesis. The transcripts will also remain on a password protected hard drive for the duration of the analysis and destroyed after submission.

The anonymised data will be analysed and written up in a doctoral thesis, which will be assessed in the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling. If successful this research may also be published in publications online (e.g. online journals, or magazines). You will not be identifiable in any publication or report due to your identifying information being anonymised.

The doctoral thesis will be stored in Middlesex University archives for 10 years for future audits and then destroyed.

Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any questions, please contact me at:

Farah el Miligui

FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk

NSPC Ltd. 60-63 Fortune Green Road

NW6 1DR

If you have any concerns about the study, please contact:

Dr. Ho Law

drholaw@gmail.com

Appendix F

Figure 23

Written Informed Consent

Middlesex University School of Science and Technology

Psychology Department

New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling

Address: 61-63 Fortune Green Road, West Hampstead



Written Informed Consent

Title of study and academic year:

‘An Exploration of the Experiences of Frequent Instagram Users Who Report Feeling Socially

Anxious’

Researcher’s name and Email: Farah el Miligui FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk

Supervisor’s name and email: Dr Ho Law drholaw@gmail.com

I confirm that I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet and understand:

- The aims and process of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to be a participant.
- That my participation is entirely voluntary, my identity and personal details will be kept in confidence; the information I disclosed in the interview will remain anonymous.
- That my scores on surveys or response to questionnaires will only be viewed by the principal investigator.
- The information disclosed in the interview will only be accessed by the principal investigator, and later on quoted within the analysis section of the project.
- I have the right to withdraw from participating in the project at any time without any obligation to explain why.
- I can ask for my data to be withdrawn from the project until data analysis begins in April 2020. I could also ask to see the scores of the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale.

- Some of the information selected from the interview and the results of the analysis may be published on social networking platforms, online research digest magazines and potentially in academic journals, and I provide my consent that this may occur.
- The information will be held by Middlesex University for 10 years for the purpose of auditing, after 10 years it would be destroyed.
- That participating in this interview does not denote receiving formal guidance or advice on how to use social networking platforms.
-

Name of the participant (Please print)

Signature

Date: _____

To the participant: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Science and Technology Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits: _____

Appendix G

Figure 24

Debriefing Sheet

**Middlesex University School of Science and Technology
Psychology Department**

**New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling
Address: 61-63 Fortune Green Road, West Hampstead**



DEBRIEFING SHEET

Researcher:

Farah El Miligui
FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk

Supervisor:

Dr. Ho Law
drholaw@gmail.com

RESEARCH TITLE:

'An Exploration of the Experiences of Frequent Instagram Users Who Report Feeling Socially Anxious.'

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this exploration around the experiences of heavy users of Instagram who report feeling socially anxious.

The purpose of my research project is to explore how frequent users of Instagram who report difficulties within their social world experience themselves in this digitally connected era.

The project aims to contribute to the field of Existential Psychotherapy/Counselling Psychology by deepening the understanding of how Instagram may have an impact on the experience of social anxiety. This is because this subject has not yet been investigated within the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

There is an understanding that discussing one's social world could bring a person to a confrontation with their personal difficulties, and some of those insights could be painful. It could also allow for a critical engagement with conversations around how we use those social networking platforms. It is important to note that while participating in this research

project would allow for this exploration to take place, this project does not aim to advise on a right or wrong way of using Instagram.

The digital recording of our interview will be transcribed by the researcher. It will be kept on an encrypted hard drive until the project is finalized (expected in 2021), then it would be destroyed.

In the transcript there will be no identifying details, and you will be given a pseudonym. The transcript will be analysed and the findings will be written up as part of a Doctoral thesis. The results may also be published in peer-reviewed journals. If you wish to withdraw from the study, you can by contacting the researcher provided it has not been transcribed or analyzed yet (April 2020). Your anonymized transcribed data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive which only the researcher will have access to. Paper copies will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Data from this research will be destroyed after 10 years, this is to allow an audit to of the research to be carried out in future years. This is all in compliance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

All stages of the research design, coding and analysis will be recorded and documented to ensure clarity throughout the research process. The results may also be published in peer-reviewed journals, or disseminated in Psychotherapy/Psychology conferences by organizational bodies such as the British Psychological Society.

I hope you have understood the overall aim and purpose of this study and enjoyed your participation in it. Should you be left with any areas of doubt or confusion or have any queries regarding the research please feel free to contact me by email at FE124@live.mdx.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or would like to make a complaint you can contact my supervisor at drholaw@gmail.com.

Should you wish to explore any issues that have arisen for you as a result of participation in this research, you can refer to the list of organisations, support groups and charities listed on the accompanying sheet and/or contact your GP.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Appendix H

Figure 25

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS)		Fear or Anxiety		Avoidance	
		0 = None 1 = Mild 2 = Moderate 3 = Severe		0 = Never (0%) 1 = Occasionally (1-33%) 2 = Often (34-66%) 3 = Usually (67-100%)	
Items	Anxiety (S)	Anxiety (P)	Avoid (S)	Avoid (P)	
1. Telephoning in public. (P)					
2. Participating in small groups. (P)					
3. Eating in public places. (P)					
4. Drinking with others in public places. (P)					
5. Talking to people in authority. (S)					
6. Acting, performing or giving a talk in front of an audience. (P)					
7. Going to a party. (S)					
8. Working while being observed. (P)					
9. Writing while being observed. (P)					
10. Calling someone you don't know very well. (S)					
11. Talking with people you don't know very well. (S)					
12. Meeting strangers. (S)					
13. Urinating in a public bathroom. (P)					
14. Entering a room when others are already seated. (P)					
15. Being the center of attention. (S)					
16. Speaking up at a meeting. (P)					
17. Taking a test. (P)					
18. Expressing a disagreement or disapproval to people you don't know very well. (S)					
19. Looking at people you don't know very well in the eyes. (S)					
20. Giving a report to a group. (P)					
21. Trying to pick up someone. (P)					
22. Returning goods to a store. (S)					
23. Giving a party. (S)					
24. Resisting a high pressure sales person. (S)					
Total Performance (P) Subscore					
Total Social (S) Subscore					
Total Anxiety & Avoidance Subscore					
Total LSAS Score					

Appendix I

Figure 26

Ethical Approval

Farah El Miligui
1, 64 Princes Way
Wimbledon
London
SW19 6JF

10th December 2019

Dear Farah

Re: Ethics Approval

We held an Ethics Board on 19th November 2019 and the following decisions were made.

Ethics Approval

Your application was approved with some conditions.

Conditions

Please see the attached scanned comments and resubmit your application accordingly. You will need to include a covering letter detailing how you have addressed each condition. It will be reviewed for Chair's action once received.

Please note that it is a condition of this ethics approval that recruitment, interviewing, or other contact with research participants only takes place when you are enrolled in a research supervision module.

Yours sincerely



Prof Digby Tantam
Chair Ethics Committee
NSPC

Appendix J

Figure 27

Approval from Dr Michael Liebowitz

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Michael Liebowitz** <mliebowitz@yahoo.com>

Date: Mon, Feb 17, 2020 at 5:23 PM

Subject: Re: LSAS

To: Farah El Miligui <Farah@headstrongcounselling.co.uk>

Dear Farah M

You have my permission to use the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) for the purpose described in your email. Please note that using it for any other purpose requires additional permission from me.

Attached please find the scale, a user manual and a scoring key.

Best wishes

Michael Liebowitz MD

On Sunday, February 16, 2020, 02:24:31 PM EST, Farah El Miligui <farah@headstrongcounselling.co.uk> wrote:

Appendix K

Figure 28

Participant Background Information

No. (Based on order of interviewing)	Participant Initial	LSAS Score	Interview Time (mins)	Age	Occupation	Nationality
1	Y	65 (Marked social anxiety)	42	29	Makeup Artist	Egyptian
2	P	80 (Very severe social anxiety)	50	31	Dentist	British
3	A	87 (Severe social anxiety)	59	36	Actor	Egyptian
4	M	87 (Severe social anxiety)	50	29	Sales	Egyptian
5	M2	65 (Marked Social Anxiety)	60	28	Filmmaker	American
6	S	101 (Very severe social anxiety)	55	36	Arabic language analyst	Lebanese
7	R	87 (Very severe social anxiety)	45	37	UN food program	Egyptian
8	A2	95 (Very severe social anxiety)	49	33	PhD Student (education)	American
9	C	97 (Very severe social anxiety)	50	30	Local NGO	Lebanese
10	N	96 (Very severe social anxiety)	60	24	Product Designer	Egyptian
11	T	95 (Very severe social anxiety)	60	30	Journalist	British
12	W	95 (Very severe social anxiety)	60	26	Graphic Design Student	Egyptian

Appendix L

Figure 29

Transcript of interview with Y

F: The first question is, and the questions are meant to open things, I'm trying to get you to talk about your experience, I don't want you to feel like it's a closed-ended interview. So the first question is, when did you start using Instagram?

Y: Ummm... like it's different. At first, I started opening it to see what's going on there. And then I started my freelance business, ummm... four years ago... so around 2015. And that's when I started to actually post on Instagram, because before that I just checked it. I would never post.

F: Okay, so at the beginning you would go on Instagram on occasion. And then..

Y: Yeah

F: So when you started your own freelance business and you started your own project; your started to use it much more frequently.

Y: Hmm. Yeah. I had to use it more frequently for several reasons. I have to like um check my competition online, and I have to ummm. See..umm like tutorials and new trends globally and stuff like that. And I had to start posting um like once a week... but I could never bring myself to actually post once a week.

F: So this is actually a question about what made you start using Instagram right, so this is kind of the motive for you to start using Instagram, it's to stay up to date in your field, the field that you have chosen... Which is make up.

Y: Yeah.

F: So at the moment, how frequently do you use Instagram?

Y: Ummm.. I'd say once or twice a day.

F: Ok and in the time that you get the app on your phone. How long do you feel like you spend on it, on average?

Y: Hmmm... I mean... If I just woke up... I like to like wake up and just check it, it's about a minute. But if I'm... I don't know like... in a waiting room or something, I like to open ... umm... to open specific accounts and check like the news about makeup, the trends about makeup, makeup tutorials and what's going on. But like when I check it really fast; I just scroll through the stories for like a minute or two that's it.

F: Something about waking up in the morning, and then maybe at a point in your day when you feel like you're waiting.

Y: Yeah

F: So um, I want you to ask you whether your social experiences have been affected by Instagram use?

Y: Can you elaborate on that question.

F: So how do you feel like your social experience have been influenced by Instagram, it's an open question and I'm inviting you to think of how you feel Instagram has had a bearing on the social world around you?

Y: Ummm... I don't know if that's relevant but every time I post something, umm, like I feel insecure the entire day, I'm waiting for likes ... to get likes on this post and I don't know every time I get less likes, every time I get more insecure, every time I get more insecure it makes me not want to post for a longer period of time, and then this affects my work and my sales. (click) So, I, I mean, I once read uhh.. an article regarding how to use Instagram marketing, and they all say like, you're supposed to post uhhhh two pictures a week in order to stay err current ummm.. with your customers umm and potential customers. But I could never bring myself to do this, it's always weighing on me, I'm always like..ukh.. is this gonna be good enough.

F: Hmm..

Y: What if I post a picture and it doesn't get enough likes, it's gonna affect like the whole (click) image of the account.

F: Hmmm..

Y: Every time there's a potentially a bad picture you feel like, oh, you're gonna drop in followers, you're gonna drop in sales, people are always gonna check the last few photos, so I'm constantly worried like... and ...if I post a picture today and it gets like below 30 likes and 30 is even so little... to get below 30 I'm probably gonna be discouraged for posting for about another two months.

F: okay. So, I am going to kind of summarise what you have said to make sure I have heard it correctly. So, at the beginning you feel like every time you time you post a picture it it has a complete influence on the rest of your day and after even after you've attended workshops that advise to post two or three pictures a week in order to keep up you feel like this has been something that was very difficult for you to do. So every time you post a picture, it holds a lot of meaning for you, and if it doesn't kind of do well then this has a bearing on your business and not just have a bearing on your business but also has a bearing on your self-esteem...

So there's this kind of umm... click... I'm going to use the word anxiety and you can correct me if this is not the correct word but there's this sort of anxiety around posting and around the feedback that has a very strong influence on your general mood, your general umm... way of being... your general day.

Y: Ok so, like, I go on Instagram, I see a really cool post uhhh of a friend of my husband's, so I text her, oh my god, this looks like an awesome party. She's like, it's awful actually... and this happened a few times, so I know, I never believe pictures anymore and then we had a laugh about how she's such an awesome Instagrammer and she always puts those awesome pictures of something so, horrible. So I don't believe them.

F: So you feel like in a way, Instagram posts are trying to sort of deceive you in some way?

Y: I think it's always deceptive. Also, one of my close friends, she would post pictures of her husband the day they're fighting, not on a good day... laughs. So I (click) We have been to a party together and I know they had a shit time, and the next day you find their picture on Instagram. So I don't believe it per se. I just like to like know what's going on, what people are doing, if they're doing anything exciting to post about. But I don't automatically believe it was good. Oh it's a party, it's a marathon for that, I don't put uhh... into account like how happy you are. It doesn't matter because its picture and I don't necessarily believe it.

F: Ok umm.. so, how would you describe your social life, your own social life? Your social experiences?

Y: Ummmmmm... well, ok, so I've been married for a year. Things kind of changed. Like I'm always with my friends and my husband and their husbands or his friends and their wives. Ummm... I mean I'm friendly with everyone but I think, I prefer parties because with parties you're out drinking there's music but when it's like ummm.. a calmer atmosphere, it's more difficult... like for example, all of his friends and even the ones that are couples up they're all

like this one clique. They like me and I like them, but if they're all together they always make me feel like an outsider.

F: Ok

Y: And they always have this one clique. That's why I prefer a party somewhere that's loud, I'm gonna throw a word here or there. But like a lunch would be heavy. Having a lunch would be a bit more difficult. A lot more difficult.

F: So, something about the calmness around ...

Y: If it's one on one I get along with them just fine. But if they're like three, and my husband prefers the girls more than the guys, so I'm closer to the girls. So, if it's like two or three of them together, ah its really difficult to get in a word, they would ignore you completely in a lunch. But at a party they would have fun with me.

F: So there's something about that experience you have in a smaller setting that makes you feel excluded, that makes you feel like you're not part of the conversations, you're not part of this intimate exchange or you feel like you can't put in a word. It elicits anxiety, and you much prefer bigger outings and ...

Y: No no... like If they were a big group, sometimes we go to trips together, at this trip we went to a music festival, we were 20 people, so no, the times we were having dinner, that was really gave me anxiety. But the times we were at the party where everyone's dancing and drinking and mingling that was easy because we were divided into groups, but at the dinner we were one big group and I didn't feel comfortable to talk or joke around or anything. I was just very much silent, and if I talk, I talk to the person next to me, I whisper to them. But I wouldn't talk in a big group. I like parties because parties people divide, they're not one big group, they're divided into twos and threes, so I could put a word in here and there, the dinner table was like arghhhhhh...everyone's screaming, everyone's making inside jokes with their group I'm like okay...

F: It does sound like it's something that's kind of heavy for you. Like you said. It's not something you enjoy. I was wondering if you could tell me something about what features of Instagram that you find helpful, for example, being in a small group, in a quiet setting, in a lunch setting, in a place where people are throwing inside jokes. Are there any features of Instagram that help you with your social world? if you can be a little specific.

Y: If I understand your question, I mean maybe if I am sitting, okay, so two things, my husband's friends who post all the time, it's nice to know things about their life that I can open with them, like 'Oh you just went to this event, how was it, it looked amazing'

F: So it allows you an avenue of conversation?

Y: It's a research tool that allows you to keep tabs on people. So that's one side of it, the other side would be, if I am sitting in a gigantic group and I can't get in a word, I would indulge into Instagram and ignore everyone, and ignore how left out they made me feel... so I keep on scrolling, it's like a protective shield.

F: Okay, so two things you mentioned, you mentioned it gives you a research tool to keep tabs, and try to have conversation about their lives in terms of what they've done. It also allows you to have a way out of this group setting that's very difficult for you.

Y: I guess by using my phone, I am communicating that I am not happy with you guys. Like we really like each other, and I really put effort to be friendly with them. And they tend to do that if they are divided, but as a group, you say a word and they won't even listen to you. So yeah, I guess I would be communicating to them that, you know what fine, you're gonna ignore me then I don't need you I will be on my phone

F: Do you feel like it's something that kind of replaces connection in a way with other people? Do you feel like this is an accurate thing to say or is it completely wrong?

Y: Its only accurate to say that, it doesn't work with my closer friends, with my closer friends I am much more comfortable. It is accurate to say that it fills in a social void amidst groups where I don't feel like I fit in

F: Okay. So you've mentioned what you found helpful about Instagram, which is knowing people about people's lives, having conversations with them, and the fact that it's something that you do when you are not being included in a conversation or that you are not comfortable in a social setting. What other dimensions do you feel are worth talking about when it comes to Instagram?

Y: Ummmm...umm... I don't know if this is helpful answer, but it's what I am thinking of. Ummm.. okay so I know this other makeup artist okay, and we bounce work off each other, and I have clients who told me oh she's really not that good, she's just a kid, she's 19 years old and I am 29. And she charges more money than I do... and they're all like yeah thank you for doing my makeup she's not that good, she still has a long way to go and stuff. But then I check her account and her account is much more I don't know, coordinated, it looks better, she has loads of followers, loads of likes, and it's two things, I realised I'm not good at taking pictures like she is. And she's younger, and she gets Instagram way more than I do, so she has 10 times the followers I have, and she probably does have a lot more work than I do, just because of her Instagram account that has more than 10k followers. So, knowing that someone is not better than you, but because of Instagram does work a lot, her sales are way higher, portfolio looks much nicer, so yeah it makes me feel inadequate.

F: So there's something about Instagram being used as a very strong tool for marketing in a way that is not really representative or does not really encapsulate that person's talent or experience. There's something about someone less capable getting more kind of, reward, social reward and financial reward from this app. And you feel like it's about how she utilises that platform rather than how talented she is. This was a lot of information. What would you like to add or change about what I said?

Y: I guess I am just remembering how Instagram as a tool is powerful and how it makes me feel very vulnerable when I have to, like, my account in general, my work account is a very vulnerable account. It looks really bad actually and every few months I get demotivated to pursue this makeup umm... business more and more. And I mean, yes, it is, I don't think this other competitor is unfair, I just think she's lucky, she knows how to use this tool without it weighing down on her like it does on me. And it makes me feel like sometimes I chose the wrong business to get into. I mean, I'm not a very forward person, I'm not outgoing, I try, I don't avoid situations like that. But I guess it affects my work... it affects umm. I don't know... like when I got into freelance makeup four or five years ago, Instagram wasn't so powerful just yet. I didn't realise that I needed to bring my Instagram A game so much. I didn't realise it would be so hard to post really good-looking pictures. Like I learnt how to edit photos, but the picture taking is still such a hassle, it's still awful and they still turn out way below average. And I mean... I can tell all the time, of course I am insecure about my talent, but you can tell all the time when you put makeup for someone, and they get compliments and they're like what? Y did your makeup? Wow, her pictures really don't reflect that. So, you know like, uhh, I haven't been using this tool right. I haven't been getting its advantages like I am supposed. Especially compared to my 19-year-old competitor.

F: So there's something about feeling like it doesn't capture the essence of your work properly. It's something out there that doesn't really represent your work. The way you describe it was very good, it's a 'vulnerable account', and it doesn't represent your work because people seem to get compliments for it. You said something about 4 years ago things were a bit different. What was different about your experience back then?

Y: Like right now, based in Cairo, you type makeup on Instagram, and you get thousands of makeup artists in your area. But 4 years ago, that wasn't the case; it was still becoming something important. Of course there were makeup artists, but like in Cairo, during that time there was just this, it was the beginning of influencers I think. So like umm.. this big makeup artist in Egypt, she was starting this glamour account and how, I don't know, she was like the A class of makeup artists. But she was one. Now I follow like 20 A-class influencer makeup artists. And now people judge you based on Instagram. Whereas four years ago, I would get makeup jobs by word of mouth not by Instagram.

F: Did you feel like it was a preferable experience?

Y: Yes because now I feel like I can't, like I don't know how to compete and I don't know... what something is holding me back. Something makes me not want to advertise myself on Instagram. I don't know what it is, but there are days when I wake up and like... yeah I'm not gonna do shit about it.

F: Can we talk about what this something could be?

Y: I don't know. I think its insecurity. I mean, like, actually I was getting more work when I began as a makeup artist. When like, I was awful, I was getting more work than I am getting now. And now I've been to more workshops, I've had more practice, I, I I..uhh.. and now also the good thing about Instagram that I love so much, I guess, the tutorials, the makeup tutorials globally are amazing. They give you so much insight.

F: Yeah. That's a good point. So it feels like you got more work when Instagram wasn't that much of a thing. There's an inverse correlation between the growth of Instagram and your work. Even though you feel like you have grown, you are a much more experienced as a practitioner, but it feels like it doesn't really capture that sort of growth; as it would for others.

Y: Yeah. Yeah. I do get less work than I did at first. At first, people didn't judge you based on Instagram only. They would judge you by their actual experience of how good your work is. But now no, I guess, I do still get work from like word of mouth. But it is much less.

F: Okay. I am going to recap everything you have said to make sure I haven't missed anything. So the first thing you said is that you started using Instagram at the beginning as an occasional thing. It was something that you did which wasn't a big part of your life, but when you started to work in this field, you understood and realised the importance of having an Instagram account and you started being more engaged. You check it two or three times a day or once or twice a day and you would check it for a minute or two minutes. You also talked about how your social world, your experience with your close friends and beyond that. You weren't comfortable with those quieter smaller gatherings, and you were much more comfortable in bigger parties where people talk to everyone; in an open manner rather than having people have conversations and you feeling like you're not part of them. And you also talked about how it was useful for you in these settings because you would dip into Instagram when people are around you were not including you and it would fill in in that experience. Another thing you talked about was the fact that it helps you 'keep tabs' on people, gives you information about people so that you can start conversations with them. Talk to other people about the events they've been to...etc. Another thing you talked about which is how Instagram affects your life is mostly related to your professional life. And feeling like at the beginning of your career, there was much less need to compete visually and things were easier, and even though you feel like some people are much less experienced they still have a bigger following, and a lot more kind of, footfall whereas you feel like you're perhaps more experienced. Or sometimes you feel like your work is out there and people compliment it, but it's still not captured on this platform, and as you describe it you feel like it's a vulnerable account which doesn't really represent where you are at in your career or how capable you are. Another thing you talked about is the fact that the features of Instagram that were helpful and how sometimes, looking at tutorials is useful.

Y: We also said that keeping tabs on people or competition; and tutorials and keeping up with the news of the marketplace.

F: The updates, like updates on what is happening in the field in general. And what you found unhelpful was feeling like it doesn't capture your growth.

Y: Yeah... okay... so it's a tool that I'm supposed to use for my advantage. But I'm finding myself not using it right, therefore it's not giving me an advantage. I just wanted to add one more thing. I had this trip with my husband and his friends. And we were all in the pool. So, then his girlfriends start to take errrr... photos and put them on Instagram. And then my other friend who is married to my husband's friend, texts me and she is like; "Did you not go to this trip?", Fa I was like uhh... They were being bitchy. They're having a thousand photos together alone and excluding me and I'm obviously sitting alone on the side.

F: So they went into the pool?

Y: I was in the pool with them.

F: They were taking pictures of themselves, and then you get a text from a friend asking, are you even there. And in this picture the experience was like you weren't there in this event happening anyway.

Y: Yeah, I mean, later that night I got drunk and had a fight with them.

F: So, it actually came up after wards?

Y: I mean not all of them, but like the one whom I like the most of them. I was like what the hell, and she was like I'm so sorry, we go way back, we go like 20 years back and we just got to know you recently, but I'm sorry, we love you it wasn't meant to be like that.

F: I see.

Y: They could have taken a couple of photos alone and then included me later. They didn't have to take 10 photos alone when I'm just sitting on the side. I wish they had just handled it better.

F: So, it highlighted how poorly people handled including everyone else.

Y: Then Instagram was like the weapon that pressed on it...it exposed it.

F: I see. So, it exposes it to an outer audience.

Y: Yeah like.... The friend who called or texted me, she was like ...wow they're making a statement out of you not being included. Of course, they didn't mean it maliciously, but they just poorly handled it.

F: Yes, I think what you said about Instagram playing such a key role is very interesting. Would you like to add anything else before the recording ends?

Y: No this was thought-provoking. Thank you.

Appendix M

Excerpt 1


Initial Coding Excerpt

146	F: Ok umm.. so, how would you describe your social life, your own social life? Your social experiences?	
147		
148		
149	Y: Ummmm... well, ok, so I've been married for a year. Things	Microsoft Office User Other people's happiness as ↓
150	kind of changed. Like I'm always with my friends and my husband	Microsoft Office User Not believing Instagram content
151	and their husbands or his friends and their wives. Ummm... I	Microsoft Office User Things changing in her social life ↓
152	mean I'm friendly with everyone but I think, I prefer parties	Microsoft Office User Changing social structure
153	because with parties you're out drinking there's music but when	Microsoft Office User Being friendly but at the same time n ↓
154	it's like ummm.. a calmer atmosphere, it's definitely more	Microsoft Office User Being in parties involves drinking
155	difficult.. like for example, all of his friends and even the ones	Microsoft Office User Preferring bigger parties
156	that are couples up they're all like this one clique. They like me	Microsoft Office User Quiet get together is more difficult
157	and I like them, but if they're all together they always make me	Microsoft Office User Commenting on social structure and ↓
158	feel like an outsider	Microsoft Office User Husband's friends being a group mak ↓
159		Microsoft Office User Feeling left out
160	F: Ok	Microsoft Office User Having a small clique makes her feel ↓
161		Microsoft Office User Preferring bigger parties
162	Y: And they always have this one clique. That's why I prefer a	Microsoft Office User Parties dilute the clique
163	party somewhere that's loud, I'm gonna throw a word here or	Microsoft Office User Describing more intimate experience ↓
164	there. But like a lunch would be heavy. Having a lunch would be a	Microsoft Office User Emphasising how difficult intimate ↓
165	bit more difficult. A lot more difficult.	Microsoft Office User One on one settings are easier
166		Microsoft Office User Husband's preferences affecting her ↓
167	F: So something about the calmness around ...	Microsoft Office User Expression of how difficult she finds ↓
168		Microsoft Office User Being ignored in intimate settings
169	Y: If it's one on one I get along with them just fine. But if they're	
170	like three, and also my husband prefers the girls more than the	
171	guys, so I'm closer to the girls. So if it's like two or three of them	
172	together, ah its really difficult to get in a word, they would ignore	
173	you completely in a lunch.. but at a party they would have fun	
174	with me.	
175		

Note: Below are excerpts from the initial coding process of the interview with Y.

Excerpt 2

Initial Coding Excerpt

421		
422	F: Okay, how was this experience for you?	Microsoft Office User Being on a trip and then pictures started being taken to be put on Instagram
423		
424	Y: So... I just wanted to add one more thing. I had this trip with my	
425	husband and his friends. And we were all in the pool. So then his	Microsoft Office User Someone else commenting that she was not in the photos
426	girlfriends start to take errrr... photos and put them on Instagram.	
427	And then my other friend who is married to my husband's friend,	Microsoft Office User March 05, 2020 
428	texts me and she is like; "Did you not go to this trip?", Fa I was	Not being included
429	like ukh... They were being bitchy. They're having a thousand	Microsoft Office User Taking pictures as an activity to be done and being left out of it
430	photos together alone and excluding me and I'm obviously sitting	
431	alone on the side.	Microsoft Office User Feeling left out
432		
433	F: Can I just ask you about a few facets of this, so they went into	
434	the pool.	
435		
436	Y: I was in the pool with them.	
437		

Appendix N

Figure 30

Above is a memo from the initial coding process of Excerpt 1

*Insecurity seemed directly linked with the prospect of likes on posted pictures.
Every time she posts, she feels insecure. Feeling insecure makes her want to post less. And this affects her work performance.
Contrary to advice on how to keep up with Instagram.
So, the advice on how to grow her business on Instagram seems to be putting pressure on her to post more; but she feels guilty for not listening to the advice she got on how to develop her Instagram profile.
The relationship between the codes here is:
Posting -> Not getting enough likes -> Feeling insecure -> Posting less -> Work suffers because she gets less engagement on Instagram
-> Feeling more insecure -> Doubts her career.
So, the question she asks herself is should she keep going in this career despite not doing so well on Instagram or should she quit.
There is also a temporal element. She keeps referring to feeling anxious "all day" and "always weighing on me". It feels like her engagement on Instagram is like a chronic heaviness that weighs down on her for a prolonged period. So, it is not just during her exposure to Instagram, which is twice a day. It is throughout her day and over time.*

It seems to be occupying a big part of her psychological world. There seems to be a cycle of posting and insecurity occurring here which is self-perpetuating.

Appendix O

Table 9

Clustering Initial Codes

<i>Social/emotional processes</i>	<i>Line Number</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Follow up questions aiming for theoretical saturation</i>
Preferring bigger parties	173, 385, 153, 162	<i>Social Experiences</i>	When did you start feeling socially anxious?
Feeling left out of small cliques	235		
Preferring one-to-one	169		
Staying silent in groups	189		
Feeling unheard	237, 172-173		
Instagram not affecting close relationships	248, 122		
Demotivation in career due to vulnerability on Instagram	76, 26, 299	<i>Career and Instagram</i>	
Feeling insecure about account	83, 84, 297, 298		
Impact on career	303,		
Necessity for success	317		
Career doubts due to Instagram	303		
Learning new material	48, 24, 355, 412	<i>Instagram as learning tool</i>	
Research on People	24, 139, 212, 218, 411,		How does knowing about others help you?
Staying updated	139-141,		
Instagram as a tool	317, 419, 218, 295, 302, 72-73		
Getting few likes	68-70, 83, 92	<i>Feelings of inadequacy</i>	
Fear of not being good enough	78		

Comparison with others	272-274, 318-319,		
Constant worry	90-91		
Feelings of inadequacy due to bad pictures	278-279		
A vulnerable account	278-279		
Looking bad is being vulnerable	298-299		
Other people's success exposes her to more judgement	336-368		
Not being included in pictures is not being included in real life	467-468, 480		
Instagram exposes her exclusion	475		
Not believing pictures	126, 129, 135, 139, 141, 142, 144,		
Conversation starter	122-125	<i>Instagram as social aid</i>	
Instagram as coping mechanism	220-222		
Scrolling for a minute	48-50, 222		Is it just Instagram or would you scroll on your phone as well?
Social protection by indulging in Instagram	249-251		
Fills in void when I do not fit in	251-252		

Note: The above table outlines the process of clustering the initial codes, their corresponding line numbers, categories and the follow up questions that could be used in the future to obtain more data.

Appendix P: Memo-writing for Focused Coding

Figure 31

Memo from Focused Coding of Transcript of Interview with Y

Going over the codes begs the question of what is the anxiety around Instagram doing for her? Is it better to be anxious over Instagram performance than over other things? Does it give her a perceived arena of control over her career? Does it do the same for other people? So instead of confronting her despair, or anger, or anxiety around not doing well at work, Instagram seems to be absorbing the anxiety she has over everything else, and sometimes exacerbating it, but being blamed for her career downs. In addition to her self-esteem. Is it blocking her ability to grow? She has mentioned in other parts of the transcript that it does not capture just how much she has grown as an artist.

So is Instagram useful insofar as it captures the individual's story?

I noticed that there is an inherent paradox present within her experiences of Instagram. The paradox was that even though she did not believe the pictures she saw, they still affected her in various ways.

They had an impact on her perceived belonging in a group, they had an impact on her career choice and her belief in her career choice as well as her talent.

The second thing related to this concept is the idea that Instagram seemed to present her with images that were dishonest about how happy people were. So this implicit statement about people not being happy actually disclosed something about her relationship with other people's happiness. Other people's happiness meant something for her. She did not believe people were as happy as they seemed. Because believing that people were as happy as they seemed was not something she wanted to engage with. There seemed to be an undisclosed truth in the pictures she encountered on Instagram and this truth was present when she talked to people about their posts. So real life conversation made a mockery of Instagram posts. As if there was no such thing as truth on Instagram. This tension between truth and reality seems to be present throughout her transcript.

She talked about how her Instagram page did not capture how hard she has worked, she talked about how belittled she was by a few likes per picture and how this made her anxious.

She also talked about how it was an unfair platform, presenting her competition in a positive light.

She talked about how relationships and events were not as great as they appear on Instagram. Yet this did not drive her away from the platform altogether, but she needed it to advance in her career. She must engage with the game even though she knew that a great deal of it was dishonest and that it did not capture her truth.

Appendix Q

Figure 32

Journaling Sample 1

24.02.2020

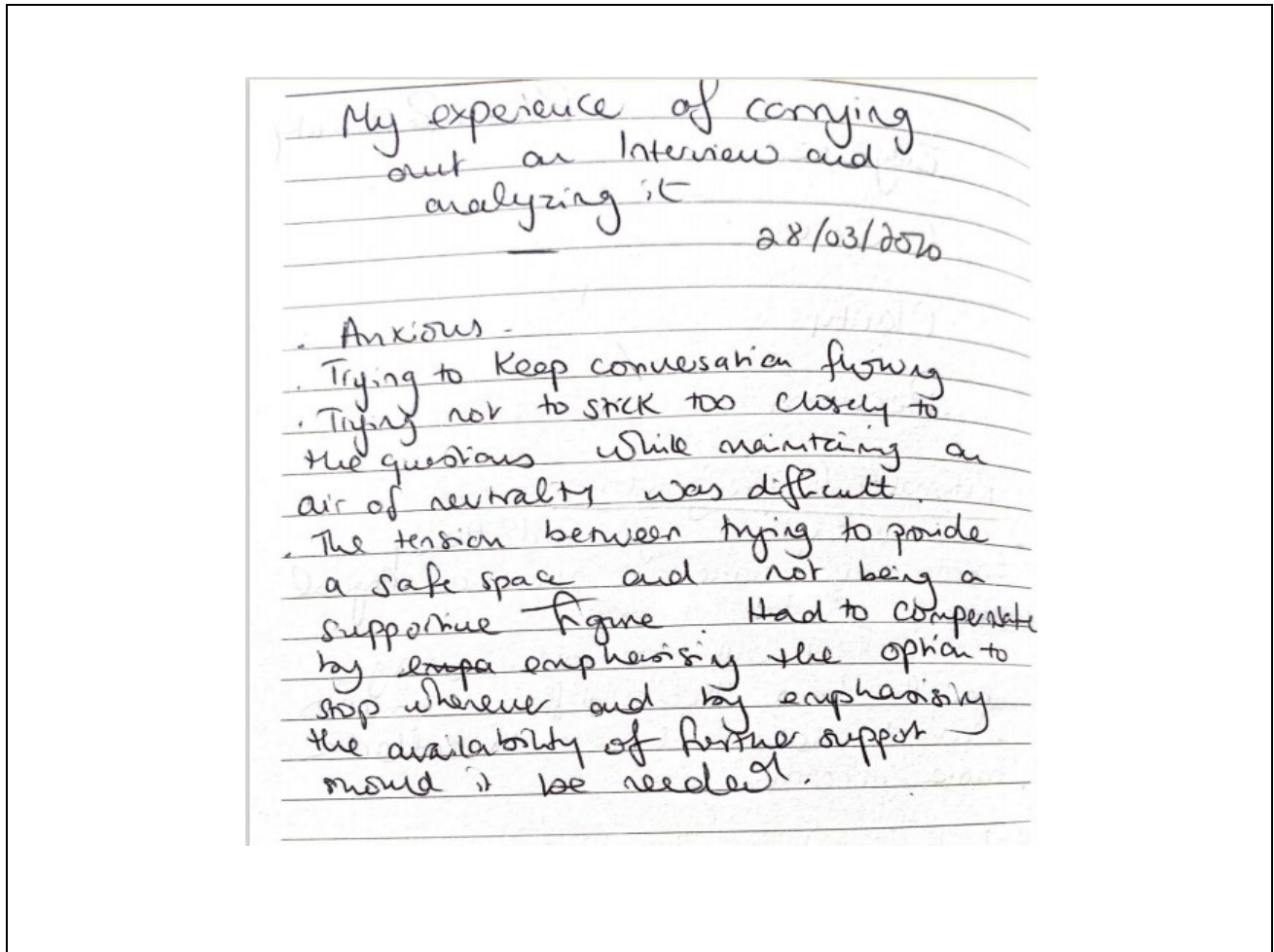
On Interviewing y:

My emotional responses to that interview were few and far between. Everything she said was somewhat understandable. This made me think of what she said as easily over-identified with. This was a person grappling with more than just "fitting in". She wanted success and belonging at the same time. The thing I noticed was that there seemed to be a collapse between success and belonging - they were no longer separate. Does Instagram then produce an eco-system where belonging was more contingent upon visibly succeeding? Her social anxiety made her less able to "get with" others; yet it felt like posing and showing her talent should have been sufficient, this made her shift the blame from the 'world' to herself for not being able to use this new tool. Does Instagram then cause there to be a sense of over-responsibility for those around to care? Creating a schema of "if you don't do well.. you don't deserve to belong". Social anxiety in her situation would therefore make her more susceptible to over-identification. I felt like I wanted to my instinct in the interview was to rescue her.

my need to rescue her, and others who are struggling with the same issue - to "take the pain away", I wanted to tell her to forget about Instagram altogether! and focus on cultivating real-world relationships. Then I realized, Instagram as it fits in her life was a source of power in her real world relationships. If she could pose her worth on Instagram ... then she would be able to convince her immediate relationships ~~one~~ of her worth. Does Instagram invite power, and talent as a means of worth for close relationships?!

Figure 33

Journaling Sample 2



Appendix R

Figure 34

Constant Comparison Across Interviews

Y	P	A	M	S	A	R	C	M2	N	T	W
Vicious Cycle of work and Instagram engagement	Being online means not being 'out there'	Struggling with authenticity and Instagram persona	Fear of evaluation	Being online means not having a life	Relationships are slow, Instagram is fast	Social media perception is contingent on mood	Instagram broadcasts exclusion	Social media is instrumental to career	Scrolling through cat videos is soothing	Social anxiety as a heightened self-consciousness and leads to rumination	Social anxiety is situational and due to feeling unsafe
Instagram as useful for staying updated on people's lives	Fear of being addicted to it	Instagram as a career necessity	Instagram engagement determines self-worth	Social anxiety is because of the feeling of inferiority	Social media needs to be tailored in order to maintain mental health	Instagram communication displaces direct communication with others	COVID-19 lockdown affected her ability to acquire new social skills	Instagram is manipulating for user engagement	Instagram content can be inspiring	Social anxiety stems from the fear of being misunderstood	Overcoming social anxiety was about going through an expansion on self-identity
Social anxiety contingent on being unheard and excluded	Comparison as limiting	Struggling with status anxiety in social life	How he feels determines how social media affects him	Comparison to others online is always there	Posting on social media means not living	Staying updated on people's lives and what they are doing is important	Social anxiety rooted in feeling judged	The necessity of social media to get a job and a house	Social anxiety is limiting	Staying updated on others orients him to his social world	Social anxiety is contingent upon feeling excluded and left out.
Instagram broadcasting exclusion	Social Anxiety is limiting	Being misunderstood by others triggers anxiety	Social media orients him to his social world	Authenticity is empowering when it comes up on Instagram	Body image problems exacerbated by comparison	Social anxiety is misunderstood and that is isolating	Social anxiety is exacerbated by feeling like she does not belong	Scrolling is addictive due to novelty	Social media content is dishonest	Instagram engagement changes behaviour offline	Engagement with social media is emotionally driven and not rational
Instagram pictures as dishonest	Career networking opportunities on Instagram	Posting relevant material leads to more connection	Using social media to fill up existential vacuum	Instagram engagement promotes voyeurism, which is why she tailors the experience	Instagram as useful for information	When someone posts a nice picture of her she genuinely feels like it boost her self-worth	She feels the need to tailor experience of Instagram	Feeling constantly behind	Instagram is addictive	Instagram content is shallow and the relationships are simply competitive	Social media engagement displaces social engagement in real life
Feeling behind or left out	Managing online experience by limiting exposure to profiles that trigger unhelpful comparison	Paradox of being liked vs being authentic	Feeling constantly behind	Feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem affect work	Social anxiety is situational and due to feeling unsafe	Posting relevant material leads to more social capital	Instagram as compensatory	SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT WASTES TIME	Feeling constantly behind	The value of close relationships to him	INSTAGRAM AS DISTRACTING
				Scrolling is addictive and numbing			Being with strangers is useful for dealing with her social anxiety		Social anxiety exacerbated when feeling inferior to others		The value of consistent relationships
									Instagram was not there when I needed it to be.		Social comparison on Instagram is depressing
											Need to post relevant and positive content to prove I am desirable as a friend

Note: Above is a table that was used to compare concepts and codes across the interviews. It is colour-coded to reflect the similarities throughout the categories.

Appendix S: Memo-writing towards Theory Development

Figure 35

Memo-writing towards theory development



Note: The above note shows the researcher's process towards theory development

Appendix T

Figure 36

Memo-writing on ‘Occupational Inferiority’

Y memo:

Insecurity directly linked with likes. “Every time I post I feel insecure” – feeling insecure makes me want to post less and this affects my sales. Contrary to advice on how to keep up with Instagram, it has been weighing on her.

The less she posts the more she feels insecure and the more her work suffers.

Insecurity + = work -, Insecurity + = posting –

Feeling insecure the whole day. It’s weighing on me. Like a chronic nagging anxiety.

P memo:

It stops her from being isolated from news about other people, but it makes her feel isolated from others who have more success and achievement.

A memo:

So instead of working and waiting for this profile to build itself. I am building my profile to find work.

This reverses the relationship we have with work. Instead of building a skills-set and applying for a job. I need to showcase myself. Pictures of my life to get more work. So instead of rejection being purely occupational, it becomes a rejection of my content.

I feel like “less”.

He felt like he needed to compete with people on this platform and found it genuinely overwhelming to keep up. To him it turned into a personal race to be seen and hunted. His career and his job prospects hinged on how visible he was on Instagram and Facebook.

N memo:

Another massive thing that came up was this idea of working hard actually being a very invisible thing on social media - “People have no idea how hard I work to show up”.

Core category development memo: *Given that work performance and perception seemed to be directly linked with Instagram engagement for a lot of the participants who had more visual careers, there seemed to be the same experience of not being recognized for the work they put in for other participants. This meant that it was irrelevant whether the participants had an “Instagrammable” career, there seemed to be an overall sense of not feeling as good as others on Instagram. This element of comparison changed the core category from occupational insecurity to occupational inferiority, which captured the feeling of not measuring up. Inferiority is the qualitative experience of being lower in rank or position than others.*

Note: The above memo captures the comparison of occupational inferiority between different participants

Appendix U

Figure 37

Instagram Interaction Scale

<u>Instagram Interaction Scale</u>	
1. How often do you check Instagram?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Once a day	<input type="checkbox"/> More than 5 times a day <input type="checkbox"/> More than 10 times a day
	<input type="checkbox"/> Countless Times
2. Do you find yourself comparing yourself to others on Instagram?	
<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
(If you answered no to this question skip to question 5)	
3. How do the comparisons affect your self-esteem?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> They make me feel better	<input type="checkbox"/> They don't make me feel different <input type="checkbox"/> They make me feel a little worse
	<input type="checkbox"/> They make me feel a lot worse.
4. Does the comparison support you in achieving your goals or being inspired?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
5. Does Instagram enable you to make more friends you can rely on?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
6. Does Instagram support you in forming key work relationships?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
7. Does Instagram support you in curating an identity for yourself other than the one you were ascribed growing up?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
8. Does Instagram make you feel heard?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
9. Do you find yourself unable to stop using Instagram or checking it?	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	

Appendix V

Figure 38

Search Results on 'Social Anxiety' from APA PsycNet

Document Type	Document Title	Publication Name	Publisher	Publication Year	Publisher City
Journal Article	Exposure and anxiety management in the treatment of social phobia.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1984	US
Journal Article	Parental factors associated with social anxiety: Methodological limitations and suggestions for integrated behavioural research.	Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice	Blackwell Publishing	1998	United Kingdom
Journal Article	Social anxiety and the evaluation of negative interpersonal feedback.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1975	US
Journal Article	Reduction of social anxiety through modification of self-reinforcement: An instigation therapy technique.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1968	US
Journal Article	The relationship between maladaptive cognitions and social anxiety.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1981	US
Journal Article	Information-seeking bias in social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2013	US
Journal Article	Emotion-focused therapy for social anxiety disorder: Results from a multiple-baseline study.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2017	US
Journal Article	Sudden gains in cognitive therapy and interpersonal therapy for social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2013	US
Journal Article	Self-ratings and judges' ratings of heterosexual social anxiety and skill: A generalizability study.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1979	US
Journal Article	Social skills and social anxiety: Are different laboratories measuring the same constructs?	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1982	US
Journal Article	On the self-serving function of social anxiety: Shyness as a self-handicapping strategy.	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology	American Psychological Association	1985	US
Journal Article	Two-year course of generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder with agoraphobia in a sample of Latino adults.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2014	US
Journal Article	A Social Relations Model test of Sullivan's anxiety hypothesis.	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology	American Psychological Association	1987	US

Journal Article	Situational determinants of social anxiety in clinic and non-clinic samples: Physiological and cognitive correlates.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	1986	US
Journal Article	Social anxiety and narrowed attentional breadth toward faces.	Emotion	American Psychological Association	2015	US
Journal Article	Differentiating emotions across contexts: Comparing adults with and without social anxiety disorder using random, social interaction, and daily experience sampling.	Emotion	American Psychological Association	2014	US
Journal Article	Sudden gains during therapy of social phobia.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2006	US
Review-Book	Review of The shyness and social anxiety workbook.		Canadian Psychological Association	2001	Canada
Journal Article	Social anxiety disorder and social skills: A critical review of the literature.	International Journal of Behavioural Consultation and Therapy	Joseph D. Cautilli	2013	US
Journal Article	Blushing and social anxiety: A meta-analysis.	Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice	Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd.	2015	United Kingdom
Journal Article	Treatment of social approach processes in adults with social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2018	US
Journal Article	Stress reactivity in social anxiety disorder with and without comorbid depression.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2012	US
Journal Article	Psychometric evaluation of the Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale in patients with social anxiety disorder.	Psychological Assessment	American Psychological Association	2012	US
Journal Article	Explicit and implicit self-evaluations in social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2017	US
Journal Article	Partner-related attachment as a moderator of outcome in patients with social anxiety disorder—a comparison between short-term cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic therapy.	Psychotherapy	Educational Publishing Foundation	2017	US
Journal Article	Internet-based affect-focused psychodynamic therapy for social anxiety disorder: A randomized controlled trial with 2-year follow-up.	Psychotherapy	Educational Publishing Foundation	2017	US
Journal Article	The latent structure of social anxiety disorder: Consequences of shifting to a dimensional diagnosis.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2010	US

Journal Article	Distinguishing healthy adults from people with social anxiety disorder: Evidence for the value of experiential avoidance and positive emotions in everyday social interactions.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2013	US
Comment/Reply	Assertive behaviour and assertion training as important foci in a clinical context: The case of social anxiety disorder.		Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd.	2018	United Kingdom
Journal Article	Cognitive Mediation of Treatment Change in Social Phobia.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2004	US
Journal Article	Stress sensitivity and stress generation in social anxiety disorder: A temporal process approach.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2015	US
Journal Article	To see ourselves as others see us: An experimental integration of the intra and interpersonal consequences of self-protection in social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2011	US
Journal Article	Virtual reality exposure therapy for social anxiety disorder: A randomized controlled trial.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2013	US
Journal Article	Empirical Validation and Psychometric Evaluation of the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale in Patients with Social Anxiety Disorder.	Psychological Assessment	American Psychological Association	2005	US
Journal Article	Effectiveness of Internet-based cognitive behaviour therapy for social anxiety disorder in clinical psychiatry.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2015	US
Journal Article	Orienting and maintenance of gaze to facial expressions in social anxiety.	Journal of Abnormal Psychology	American Psychological Association	2006	US
Journal Article	Cognitive mechanisms of social anxiety reduction: An examination of specificity and temporality.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2006	US
Journal Article	Group CBT versus MBSR for social anxiety disorder: A randomized controlled trial.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2016	US
Journal Article	Attention bias dynamics and symptom severity during and following CBT for social anxiety disorder.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2016	US
Journal Article	Interpretation training in individuals with generalised social anxiety disorder: A randomized controlled trial.	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	American Psychological Association	2012	US
Journal Article	A contextual approach to experiential avoidance and social anxiety: Evidence from an experimental interaction and daily interactions of people with social anxiety disorder.	Emotion	American Psychological Association	2014	US

Appendix W

Figure 39

Statement of Adherence to BPS Guidelines of Ethical Research

- 1. Consider all research from the standpoint of research participants, for the purpose of eliminating potential risks to psychological wellbeing, physical health, personal values, or dignity.**

This is accounted for by providing participants with a thorough 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Informed Consent' form, attached to 'Appendix E' and 'Appendix F', respectively.

The 'Participant Information Sheet' outlines research interests from the start and how the process will take place by ensuring that they understand where their information is going and who will see it, even if it was anonymised. In addition to ensuring that they receive resources for potential supportive organisations and therapists. It is also explicitly stated that they can stop the interviews or withdraw their data from the research project if they change their minds.

- 2. Undertake such consideration with due concern for the potential effects of, for example: age, disability, education, ethnicity gender, language, national origin, race, religion, marital or family status or sexual orientation, seeking consultation as needed from those knowledgeable about such effects.**

The nature of the inclusion criteria does not inherently require special consideration to be given to demographic concerns. Additionally, since they are from the same age bracket or cultural background as the researcher, this meant that any risks stemming from this demographic would be familiar and easily understood by the researcher.

- 3. Ask research participants from the first contact about individual factors that might reasonably lead to risk of harm and inform research participants of any action they should take to minimise such risks.**

This was done by sending them a 'Participant Information Sheet', and before commencing the interview they are given the chance to leave if they feel like they would be at risk or uncomfortable with proceeding.

- 4. Refrain from using financial compensation or other inducements for research participants to risk harm beyond that which they face in their normal lifestyles.**

No financial compensation was provided at any point in this study.

- 5. Obtain the considered and non-subjective approval of independent advisors whenever concluding that harm, unusual discomfort, or other negative consequences may follow from research, and obtain supplemental informed consent from research participants specific to such issues.**

An 'Informed Consent' was sent to the research participants; in addition to a 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Debrief Sheet', outlining further information about the nature of this research, and thanking them for taking part in it. In addition to providing supportive contacts should they require extra support. Additionally, an Ethics Board and two independent academic supervisors granted ethical approval for this study.

- 6. Inform research participants from the first contact that their right to withdraw at any time is not affected by the receipt or offer of any financial compensation or other inducements for participation.**

- 7. *Inform research participants from the first contact that they may decline to answer any questions put to them, while conveying as well that this may lead to termination of their participation, particularly when safety issues are implicated.***

As previously stated, the participants were not provided any financial compensation for participating. Their right to withdraw was explicitly outlined in the 'Participant Information Sheet' as well as the 'Informed Consent Form' and was further reiterated in the 'Debrief Sheet'. Before beginning the interview, they were also reminded of their right to refrain from answering any questions that they do not want to answer.

- 8. *Inform research participants when evidence is obtained of a psychological or physical problem of which they are apparently unaware, if it appears that failure to do so may endanger their present or future wellbeing.***
- 9. *Exercise caution when responding to requests for advice from research participants concerning psychological or other issues and offer to make a referral for assistance if the inquiry appears to involve issues sufficiently serious to warrant professional services.***

For those two clauses I trusted that the participants were able to seek support for themselves if they felt like they have become aware of a particular issue that needed to be addressed; and I provided them with supportive organisations that they could resort to. I clarified in the aforementioned documents from the beginning that this was not a therapeutic encounter and that the LSAS was not a diagnostic assessment. They are told that the results of the LSAS are simply a measure of their current experiences and do not hold diagnostic authority.

- 10. *Debrief research participants at the conclusion of their participation, to inform them of the outcomes and nature of the research, to identify any unforeseen harm, discomfort, or misconceptions and to arrange for assistance as needed.***
- 11. *Take particular care when discussing outcomes with research participants, as seemingly evaluative statements may carry unintended weight.***

As previously mentioned, they were told that the LSAS is not a diagnostic tool. Additionally, the outcomes of the research were not exclusively shared with the participants. The debrief sheet included details around how to arrange for personal therapy, or any extra support; as well as numbers of therapists in their specific region who were available for sessions.

After proving an adherence to standards of ethics to the Ethics Committee at Middlesex University, the data collection process proceeded as planned. However, in addition to the standard ethical guidelines that needed to be observed to, there needed to be careful considerations of the implications of internet-mediated research because most of the interviews were carried out online, and so was the recruitment process.

Appendix X

Table 4

Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research (British Psychological Society, 2017)

Principles	Considerations
Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities	<p><i>1)Public/private distinction</i> – The extent to which potential data derived from online sources should be considered in the public or private domain.</p> <p><i>Confidentiality</i> – Levels of risk to the confidentiality of participants’ data, and how to minimise and/or inform participants of these risks, particularly where they may potentially lead to harm.</p> <p><i>Copyright</i> – Copyright issues and data ownership, and when permission should be sought to use potential data sources; valid consent – How to implement robust, traceable valid consent procedures.</p> <p><i>Withdrawal</i> – How to implement robust procedures which allow participants to act on their rights to withdraw data.</p> <p><i>Debriefing</i> – How to implement robust procedures which maximise the likelihood of participants receiving appropriate debrief information.</p>
Scientific Integrity	<i>Levels of control</i> – How reduced levels of control may impact on the scientific value of a study, and how best to maximise levels of control where appropriate.
Social Responsibility	<i>Disruption of social structures</i> – The extent to which proposed research study procedures and dissemination practices might disrupt/harm social groups.
Maximising Benefits / Minimising Harm	<p><i>Maximising benefits</i> – How each of the issues mentioned above might act to reduce the benefits of a piece of research, and the best procedures for maximising benefits.</p> <p><i>Minimising harm</i> – How each of the issues mentioned above might lead to potential harm, and the best procedures for minimising harm.</p>

