

Negative Reflections – How Social Media Affects Body Image Satisfaction in Irish Females

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Abstract

The exponential growth of social media in the last number of years means it has surpassed its original purpose of representing a network of communication channels. Social media has transformed itself to a platform that provides a multitude of opportunities such as the facilitation of promotion, brand engagement and information sources. It can be said that social networking has become an ingrained part of everyday life for individuals young and old, every day people are exposed to a multitude of images via social media. These images often depict women portraying the 'ideal beauty' however this 'ideal beauty' is unrealistic due to photo shopping and online 'filters'.

This study seeks to investigate the affect social media can have on Irish female body image satisfaction and how Irish females ultimately perceive themselves. Particular attention is given to social networking sites and how engagement with platforms such as Facebook and Instagram can evoke feelings of envy and body image dissatisfaction. Whilst there has been a myriad of literature surrounding how traditional advertising can affect female body image satisfaction, this study seeks to fill gaps in the literature by exploring the phenomena through a digital context and from an Irish female perspective.

A qualitative method in the form of in-depth interviews was chosen in order to gain a deeper insight into the study. Six Irish females aged between 18 and 25 were interviewed, thematic coding was used in order to extract themes relevant to the research objective. Phenomenology influences were also used throughout the interview process in order to focus on exploring the women's lived experiences with social media. Upon analysing the themes presented from the interview process, it was found that the women felt negative body image satisfaction when viewing images online through Facebook and Instagram. These negative feelings were predominantly as a result of upward social comparison engagement, it was also found that the social comparison process varied depending on what social networking platform the women were using.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents Terry and Sheila for their endless support and encouragement all throughout my education journey.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The aim of the proposed research is to investigate whether social media, in particular social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, have an effect on Irish female body image satisfaction and how Irish females perceive themselves. The proposed study will look at the relationship between images projected through social media and how it effects Irish women's body image satisfaction, in particular, looking at the main causation of any negative feelings associated with the online images.

The researcher is an avid user of various social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, how these platforms influence a person's self-esteem and body image satisfaction was of particular interest to the researcher. This therefor created the inspiration to conduct an investigation into this area of research.

The study at hand will look at the broader phenomena related to the proposed topic such as how traditional advertising medias have impacted on females body image satisfaction. Much of the existing literature Tiggemann (2003) and Grabe et al (2008), focus on the role of body images in media and how it manifests concerns among pre-adolescent and young women. However there is a gap in the literature as these academic pieces primarily focus on traditional media and are somewhat outdated. They do not take into account the effect that digital media is having on women as the exponential growth of social media and digital marketing means women are constantly subjected to ideal images of beauty which can result in high levels of social comparison amongst women. This is an area that will be covered in greater detail in the literature review.

The current study will attempt to fill the gaps at present by examining whether social media is presenting growing concerns regarding Irish women and their levels of body image satisfaction.

The heavy online presence of women on social networking sites, gives grounds to appreciate how women are affected by the abundance of advertisements and images they are exposed to 24/7 through various online platforms. Statistics have shown that women tend to be the more dominant user when it comes to social media, the percentage of women using social networking is higher at 76% then in comparison to men at 70 % (Clipson et al, 2012, p. 65). Not only are

women subjected to images of celebrities and models portraying the ideal beauty, they are also subjected to images of friends, which can equally evoke feelings of jealousy and appearance dissatisfaction. These findings will also look to fill gaps in the literature where little investigation has been conducted on the different types of social comparison engagement via social media. Previous studies have not emphasised how women's social comparison tendencies can vary depending on what social media platform they are using, moreover, previous studies have failed to highlight how these tendencies can effect a woman's body image satisfaction.

The current study will seek to build on existing research in order to examine if social media has any impact on body image satisfaction amongst Irish women aged 18-25.

1.1 Overview of Research Project

Chapter 1- Introduction

The introduction chapter sets the preface for the research topic at hand. The introduction illustrates the overall aim of the dissertation, whilst addressing gaps in the literature and justification for conducting research on the chosen phenomena.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

The literature review chapter provides a deeper insight into the research topic being investigated. The chapter contains critical application of theories relating to women's engagement with social media and how it can alter their body image satisfaction. Several areas are addressed in this chapter such as, traditional Media's portrayal of the ideal beauty, digitally altered images, social media, the self-concept, social comparison and body image.

Chapter 3- Methodology

Outlined in this chapter is an overview of various research philosophies, details of the research method chosen, justification of method chosen, sample details and ethical considerations. It was important for the researcher to carefully consider the various research methods available in order to decipher which method would be most suited in fulfilling the overall aims of the study.

Chapter 4- Analysis of Findings

This chapter presents the overall findings from the interview process. The findings are based on thematic coding and important points derived from the narratives of the participants. Insightful conclusions to these themes are also provided by the researcher.

Chapter 5- Discussion

Chapter 5 involves a critical reflection by the researcher of the themes presented in chapter 4. The findings are distilled and then supported or contradicted by salient points in the literature review. New insights are also presented and recommendations for future research is discussed.

Chapter 6- Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 6 discusses the overall findings from the primary research, highlights important aspects of the phenomena being studied, and provides recommendations for future studies in a similar field.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

2.1 Advertising images

2.1.1 *Traditional media*

The study of how media can have an effect on male and female body image satisfaction is by no means a new area of research. How mass media, in particular traditional advertising, effects how men and women perceive themselves has been researched by a wide range of academics such as Kilbourne (2010), Tiggemann (2003) and Wykes and Gunter (2005). The proposed study looks to fill the literature gap that is present by investigating if digital media (specifically social media) has a negative effect on Irish women's body image and how they perceive themselves. It is an area that has few academic literature surrounding it from an Irish perspective, perhaps due to social media being a relatively new phenomenon. The current study looks to analyse the transition from how traditional media effects how women perceive themselves to how social media effects how women perceive themselves.

The area of ideal beauty in the media and negative body image is one which has been explored by a multitude of academics, such studies that explore this concept are Tiggemann (2003), Grabe, Ward and Hyde (2008) and Mandel and Smeesters (2006).

"Glossy images of flawlessly beautiful and extremely thin women" (Kilbourne 1999, pp. 131-132) is an example of just one of many references in the myriad of literature addressing the concept of the 'ideal of beauty'. The ideal of beauty or internalisation of the thin ideal is recognised by many authors such as Tiggemann, (2003) and Wykes and Gunter (2005) as being the catalyst to cultivating body dissatisfaction amongst women. Which in turn can lead to self-destructive attitudes and behaviours that can be the causation of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia (Bissell & Rask, 2010).

Often there are strong negative associations with advertising and its portrayal of the ideal of beauty (Myers & Biocca, 1992), in particular with print advertisements. Jean Kilbourne is an American academic who has conducted extensive research in this particular field. Kilbourne's original documentary "Killing Us Softly" was released in 1979 followed by "Still Killing Us Softly" in 1987. Her documentaries review how women are portrayed in advertising and how this notion of ideal female beauty is completely unattainable. In her most recent documentary "Killing Us Softly 4" Kilbourne discussed how the portrayal of women in advertising has worsened in recent years saying that "*failure is inevitable with ideal being based on absolute flawlessness*" which in turn greatly effects "*female self-esteem*" (Kilbourne 2010).

Research pertaining to how traditional media can affect a woman's body image, is investigated by Tiggemann (2003). The author conducted an exploratory investigation into the relationship between media exposure and body image dissatisfaction by looking at both T.V and Magazines together. Tiggemann (2003) noted that print advertisements effected the participants view on the thin ideal and had a direct impact on body image satisfaction, as Tiggemann states "*in which internalization of the thin ideal mediated the effects of magazine exposure on body dissatisfaction*" (Tiggemann, 2003, p. 426). A position is clearly established by the author that exposure to "*large doses of thin idealised images*" will lead to body dissatisfaction, which the current study will use to build upon (Tiggemann, 2003, p. 427).

A second piece of supporting literature that examines the relationship between the media and body image concerns among women was conducted by Grabe, Hyde and Ward (2008). Grabe et al (2008) aimed to identify how strong and consistent the link between mass media and body image is. The authors concluded that media exposure is linked to general body dissatisfaction amongst women which can lead to an increase in investment into appearance and eating disorders that were previously mentioned such as anorexia and bulimia.

A similar study to Grabe et al (2008) was carried out by Smeesters and Mandal (2006). The article examined how exposure to thin or heavy media images can affect women's self-esteem. This study slightly differs from existing literature as it taps into the area of social comparison which will be a reoccurring topic in the current study. The authors state that "*people have a natural drive to evaluate their own attributes and abilities, which they do by comparing themselves with others.*" (Smeesters and Mandal, 2006, p.576). Smeesters and Mandal concluded that woman compare themselves spontaneously with the models they see in advertisements and this can have a negative impact on how the women perceive themselves

but equally it can have positive connotations if readers feel they can attain the thin ideal by purchasing the magazine.

Magazines have often been referenced in literature as being the causation of poor body image perceptions amongst women. Authors Wykes and Gunter (2005) investigate the impact magazines can have on women in their book titled “The Media & Body Image”. In the book the authors argue that fashion magazines are among the most influential media platforms in “*perpetuating and reinforcing*” the drive to reach the thin ideal (Wykes and Gunter, 2005, p. 192). The influence that mainstream magazines can have over women is unsettling considering they are so easily accessible to women and in particular to adolescents. Findings in a study indicated that on average 83% of girls spend 4.3 hours a week reading magazines and 70% of girls endorse magazines as a valid source of beauty information (Thompson and Heinberg, 1999, p. 341).

Furthermore one study that illustrates the influential power of magazines is by Cash, Cash and Butters (1983) cited in Wykes and Gunter’s (2005). The authors argue that women who are exposed to advertisements showing attractive women rate themselves low in physical attractiveness in comparison to the women who were exposed to the lesser attractive women. Therefore concluding on the previously established theory that women often use attractive women they see in magazines as a point of comparison (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

This in turn leads on to the theory of social comparison, which will be a focal point in the proposed study in which an investigation will be carried out to see if social media has a negative effect on Irish women’s body image satisfaction and how Irish females perceive themselves. First the author will discuss how artificial images of women in the media are portraying ideals of beauty that are unrealistic and unattainable. These images can lead to upward social comparison which in turn causes low levels of body esteem amongst women. Social comparison and objectification theory will be discussed in detail further on in the literature review.

2.1.2 Digitally altered images

As mentioned previously there is a myriad of literature surrounding the topic of above the line advertising and its associations with altering body image satisfaction amongst consumers. Authors such as Grabe et al, (2008) and Smeesters and Mandal, (2006) have researched this

area with the conclusion that women are effected by images that promote a thin ideal that is virtually unattainable.

Whilst it is difficult to determine an exact percentage of how many models have been digitally altered it is assumed that the majority of photos consumers see in magazines and online have been edited in some way. Supporting evidence of this was in 2008 when the brand Dove came under criticism after fashion photographer Pascal Dangin claimed that he retouched photos of ordinary women for the Dove 'real beauty' campaign (MarketWatch, 2008).

Authors Westerwick & Crane (1999), conclude that in recent years there has been an increase in the discrepancy between actual body shapes and the body shapes that are portrayed in the media as the thin ideal.

A contributing factor to this increase in discrepancy between body shapes is that the women in the advertisements have considerably different body measurements compared to the average woman. Bissell and Rask (2010), cited from Media and Eating Disorders (2006) that the average US woman is 5'4" in height weighing 140 pounds, in contrast the average US model is 5'11" and weighs 117 pounds (Bissell and Rask, 2010, p. 645). With models being photo shopped to depict an even thinner appearance it is widening the gap between the average body shape and the thin ideal that is glorified within the media (Want, 2014).

The internalisation of the thin ideal that is ingrained in modern advertising is used by companies as means to capitalize on the desire of women to reach the ideal, knowing that this ideal is unattainable companies utilise it to drive product consumption. As authors (Yan and West, 2002, p. 240) note there is a "*profitable niche in marketing the thinness ideal*". This disparity between body images has lead women to frequently compare themselves to others around them which often lead to body dissatisfaction as they strive to meet unrealistic standards (Want, 2014).

In recent years this comparison process has traversed from traditional above the line advertising to a more digital context due to the exponential growth of social media and online advertising.

2.2 Social Media

2.2.1 Socialnomics

Social media can be referred to as “*a set of online tools open for public membership that supports idea sharing, creating and editing content, building relationships through interaction and collaboration*” (Matthew & Martinez, 2014,p. 126).

The growth and popularity of social media means that it has surpassed its original purpose of being a personal connectivity channel between friends to becoming an essential strategic business tool. According to the search engine journal (SEJ) 93% of businesses now use social media in order to successfully gain new customers, generate positive leads and word of mouth (SEJ, 2013). With the continuous growth of social media, Qualman (2013) argues that a new revolution is being driven by people and businesses continuing to use social media to connect and communicate with one another. Qualman coins this socioeconomic shift as “*socialnomics*”, it is defined as simply value created and value shared via social media. This new revolution is so powerful that the author states if the social network Facebook was a country, it would be the third largest country in the world (Qualman, 2013, p. xvii). Social networking is at the heart of this “new revolution”. An online social network can be defined as a type of virtual community that consists of people who share a similar interest. These communities are able to interact with one another almost instantaneously whether they are separated geographically or not (Johnston et al, 2013).

As mentioned previously the current study looks to investigate if social media has any negative effects on women’s body image satisfaction and how they perceive themselves. The term social media is vast with various platforms offering a rich outreach that facilitates a multitude of interactions (Mount and Martinez, 2014). It is important to note that social media doesn’t just represent a network of communication channels, it has transformed itself to a platform that facilitates promotion, brand engagement, open innovation and crowdsourcing (Mount and Martinez, 2014).

2.2.2 Women’s social media engagement

In the current study it will be investigated if social media has a negative effect on Irish female body image and how they perceive themselves. In order to build on the proposed study it is important to analyse what social media networks women are engaged in, as certain studies show that there is significant gender difference in the use of social media.

In a research study by Clipson, Wilson and DuFrene (2012), the way in which male and females use social media was examined. The aim of the study was to raise awareness of social networking differences between genders and to improve their online communication skills. In the author's investigation, the study found that women are a lot more engaged online and tend to be more actively involved in a wider range of online communities, whilst men experience "network fatigue" and lose interest in participating in online communities. The study found that the percentage of women using social networking is higher at 76% in comparison to men at 70 % (Clipson et al, 2012, p. 65). The findings of the study conclude that the driving factors behind men and women using social media differ. For women it is with the intention to establish and maintain a degree of social capital, in contrast men are not concerned with forming online relationships and often lose interest. A similar study by Junco (2011) addresses the "digital divide" by users online due to gender, race or socioeconomic divides. The author uses Facebook as the focus of the study in order to investigate the relationship between college students and social media. In conjunction with Clipson et al, 2012, the study highlights how levels of connectivity vary from user to user.

With regards to what social networking sites women and men use more frequently, Forbes (2010) conducted a study that depicts how genders use social media differently and what networks they use. Interestingly the article discusses why genders use different social media websites by stating that "*experts believe the difference between how men and women operate online mirror their motivations offline*" (Forbes 2010). For example, as mentioned previously women are arch participants in online communities such as Twitter and Facebook because their objective is to manifest online relationships and share details from their personal lives. In contrast Forbes (2010) states that men are more engaged with networking sites like LinkedIn and YouTube for promotional purposes, information gathering and increasing social status. Whilst men are not used as participants in the current study it is worth addressing the difference between genders in order to understand what motivates women to use social media. Women being interested in more visual and engaging websites would support the earlier literature by Mahon and McMillian (2009) that women often respond more to non-verbal stimuli and "*imagery laced interpretations*".

2.2.3 Images depicted in social media

The research above highlights the growth of social media and women's tendencies to be more engaged in online activity. The continuous growth in popularity of social networking means it

has become entwined in today's society (Williamson & Parolin, 2013). Social networking sites act as an exclusive environment in which users are provided with a platform that allows them to communicate with other users in a mediated space (Kapidzic and Martins, 2015).

The advancement of social media can be argued as being symptomatic of a generation that is somewhat narcissistic. Using Facebook to frequently change profile pictures and post pictures of yourself are methods of focusing the attention on the self (Carpenter, 2012). Social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram are often inundated with photos of individuals showcasing their "selfies" often masked by various filters and editing tools. Authors Kapidzic and Martins (2015) cited a study that analysed various profile pictures from the popular social networking site Myspace. The study concluded that "*the users purposefully selected such pictures to highlight their looks and appear sexually attractive*" (Kapidzic and Martins, 2015, p. 279). The findings from Kapidzic and Martins study resonate to what Carpenter (2012) coins as 'self-promotion' within social media.

Catherine Hakim (2010) is an academic that has conducted extensive work on the forms of capital. As discussed earlier creating a degree of social capital is the reason for a lot of women's engagement in social media (Carpenter, 2012), the author sharply describes social capital as "*who you know as distinct from what you know*" (Hakim, 2010, p. 500).

Hakim (2010) also notes another form of capital known as 'erotic capital'. The author describes erotic capital as having 3 central elements, beauty, sexuality and social skills such as charm and charisma. With modern society placing more emphasis on physical attractiveness and sexuality, Hakim (2010) claims that erotic capital is just as valuable an asset as social, economic and cultural capital. The idea of showcasing ones sexuality through erotic capital would support earlier literature by Kapidzic and Martins (2015) that noted participants from a study choose certain profile pictures on their social media accounts that highlighted their looks and sexual attractiveness.

Unlike traditional media that showcases models in their advertising, a user of social networking sites like Facebook are more inclined to be exposed to images of their friends or acquaintances. This could potentially be more damaging in terms of social comparison as individuals are comparing themselves to people they know. This in turn can lead social media users to attain a negative attitude towards their body. These images whilst they still have the potential to be photo shopped and edited to promote the "ideal of beauty", the comparisons made through social media are more relevant as they hit closer to home so to speak.

2.3 Social Comparison

Social comparison can be defined as a basic human motive that involves a person evaluating their self by comparing it to people depicted in images (Solomon et al, 2013, p. 152).

Since the theory was first proposed by psychologist Leon Festingers in 1954 there has been an abundance of literature that illustrates the negative effect social comparison can have on women. However after reviewing the literature there seems to be fewer studies done on how social media can be the causation of negative social comparison amongst young women. The theory will be used to build upon the aim of the proposed study and will be a reoccurring theory throughout the dissertation.

Following Festingers work on the theory of the social comparison process, it has become a reoccurring topic in literature that people are constantly comparing themselves with others. In addition to studies conducted by Smeesters and Mandal (2006), authors Chan and Sengupta (2013) in their study of observing flattery in a social comparison perspective noted that “*the social comparison tendency is so strong that it manifests effortlessly and spontaneously even without an explicit instruction to engage in comparison*” (Chan and Sengupta, 2013, p. 742)

Individuals compare themselves on different dimensions with people who are similar to themselves (Kasey and Serdar, 2015). Theory suggests that there are two types of social comparison in which people will compare themselves to others, upward and downward comparison. Upward social comparison occurs when a person compares themselves to someone who fares better than them, exposure to upward comparison can in turn evoke feelings of envy, jealousy and dissatisfaction with their own appearance. With the increase in use of technology to digitally alter images of models, an unrealistic standard has been set for women trying to emulate the women they see in advertisements (Kilbourne, 2010). These unrealistic standards produced by the artificial images portrayed in the media can increase the level of low self-esteem caused by upward comparison.

In contrast downward social comparison occurs when a person compares themselves to a man or woman who may be perceived as being less attractive or less fortunate. Downward social comparison can “*improve their subjective well-being*” (Bonifield and Cole, 2008, p. 565) by comparing themselves to someone less fortunate than them. This is a result of a person

comparing their outcome with a less favourable outcome which in turn lowers their reference points and elevates their mood (Bonifield and Cole, 2008, p. 565).

Author Bessenoff also considers the impact downward social comparison can have on women in her study conducted in 2008. The study uses the social comparison theory as means to test how strong the correlation is between exposures to thin-ideal images with low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. The results of the study were as expected in conjunction with the findings of similar studies such as Tiggemann and Slater (2013) and Chan and Sengupta (2013), that exposure to thin-ideal images would coerce the upward social comparison process.

2.3.1 Self-Discrepancy

A second conclusion that was drawn from Bessenoff's study (2006), was that there is a strong link between self-discrepancy and social comparison engagement.

Self-discrepancy relates to the notion of the self-concept which is a central aspect of psychoanalysis widely discussed within literature. Whilst this study is not focused around the self-concept it guides the proposed study in developing a deeper understanding of how social media effects women's body image satisfaction and how they perceive themselves.

Most academic scholars agree that the self-concept "*Denotes the totality of the individuals thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object*" (Rosenberg 1979.p 7). The self-concept is a very complex structure composed of different dimensions, According to Sirgy (1982) the self-concept has been conceptualised as having more than one component , it can be sub divided into two components the "*actual self-concept and the Ideal self-concept*" (Sirgy 1982.p 288). The ideal self is often described as a person's conception of how they would ideally like to be and the actual self refers to the "*realistic appraisal*" of the qualities we have or are lacking (Solomon et al 2014, p.153).

Consumers buying behaviour is often driven by buying goods and services that will help reach the ideal standard. This consumer behaviour process is referred to *as impression management* and it essentially involves working to manage people's impressions of one another. This is achieved by what Solomon et al describes as "*strategically choosing clothing and other cues that will put us in a good light*" (Solomon et al 2014, p.153).

There is often an element of discrepancy between consumer's real and ideal selves, with marketers trying to bridge the gap between selves by communicating different appeals to consumers in a way that will compensate for the qualities a person lacks. Marketers can therefore influence a consumer's level of self-satisfaction by exposing them to advertisements that in turn triggers an emotive response that leads the consumer to compare themselves to the people/lifestyle depicted in the advertisement (Hogg and Fragou, 2003).

As stated self-discrepancy is the gap between two selves, the real-self and the ideal self. Bessenoff's (2006) study concluded that participants with high and low levels of self-discrepancy reacted to exposure of the thin-ideal advertisements differently. The author noted that "*High self -discrepant participants were nearly twice as likely to engage in social comparison as low self- discrepant participants*" (Bessenoff, 2006, p. 247).

These findings illustrate that thin ideal is very much a central theme in today's advertising and it can lead to women perceiving themselves in a negative light and engagement in social comparison which can evoke feelings of envy and jealousy.

The examination of existing research indicates that there is a shortfall of studies that explore how social media has effected women's body esteem, particularly from an Irish perspective. The aim of the proposed research is to add knowledge to this area in a digital context, whilst filling the literature gap that exists between traditional media and digital Media's effects on women.

Given the heavy presence of women online, strong visual content and social comparisons mean that the area of social media can significantly impact how women engage in online activities. Women often respond to nonverbal stimuli, elaborate descriptions and "*imagery-laced interpretations*" more than men do (McMahon and McMillian, 2009).

One study that explores this concept is conducted by Tiggemann and Slater (2013). The research topic at hand will build on this study discussed below, in order to extend the investigation of how the internet, particularly social media can alter body dissatisfaction in women. Tiggemann and Slater aimed to further the investigation of the relationship between adolescent girls and the internet. While the proposed study will not be using adolescent girls as part of the methodology framework, it will help guide the current study.

The results of the study concluded that the girl's main use of the internet was to visit fashion, celebrity and shopping websites with Facebook having the highest levels of interactivity.

Time spent on social networking sites had a significant correlation with high levels internalization of the thin ideal reinforcing that there is a growing link between the internet (especially social networking) and body image concern amongst younger girls (Tiggemann and Slater 2013).

Whilst Tiggemann and Slater's piece shares similar goals with the proposed study and helps builds on the literature, there remains a scarcity of literature surrounding the area of how social media is altering body dissatisfaction in women.

2.3.3 Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a quintessential component of the self-concept theory. While this area is not a focus of the proposed study it is important to address the importance of self-esteem and the relationship it has with body image satisfaction in order to further progress the research at hand. Self-esteem differs slightly to the self-concept as it is in reference to the positive attributes of a person's self-concept. It can be described as the "*Degree of satisfaction with the self*" (Blyth and Traeger 2001, p. 91). Different arguments have been brought forward by scholars who have varying opinions on the viable distinctions between self-esteem and the self-concept. For example Rosenberg (1979) who was mentioned previously argues that there are two basic motives of the self, the self-esteem motive which is the "*wish think well of oneself*" and the self-consistency motive which Rosenberg refers to as "*the wish to protect the self-concept against change*" (Rosenberg 1979, p. 53-53). For the purpose of the proposed research, self-esteem will be analysed as an extension of the self-concept in order to build on researching the effects social media has on the Irish women's body esteem and how they perceive themselves.

People have varying levels of self-esteem. People with low self-esteem can demonstrate characteristics such as anxiety, unsureness, and fear of embarrassment or rejection. In contrast people with high levels of self-esteem are seemingly more in control and take more risks. As mentioned previously whilst this study is not focused on self-esteem it is important to discuss its relationship with the research topic at hand. One study that analyses this relationship is conducted by Valkenburg et al, 2006, titled "Friend Networking Sites and Their Relationship to Adolescents Well-Being and Social Self-Esteem". The purpose of the study was to illustrate

how there can be consequences for adolescents using social networking sites to enhance their self-esteem and well-being.

The results of the study concluded that the adolescent's self-esteem was directly influenced by the *"tone of the feedback they received on their profiles"*. A positive tone resulted in an enhanced level of self-esteem and negative feedback meant that the adolescents felt a decrease in their self-esteem levels. The study was based on the surveys of 10-19 year olds, whilst it adds to the understanding of the research topic at hand, there is many ethical issues attached to using minors as a key part of the research process. Therefore 18-25 year olds will be used as participants in the current study to see if social media has an effect on Irish women's body satisfaction and how Irish women perceive themselves (Valkenburg et al, 2006, p. 585-587). The study shows the power of social media and how it can influence a person's level of self-esteem. Body image can be seen as having a direct link to self-esteem, with it often being the root of negative or positive connotations of self-esteem in women.

2.4 Body image

2.4.1 Body image definition

Body image is a complex phenomenon that has different factors which can influence it, it can be described as *"reflecting how you feel your body is aesthetically and how attractive you perceive yourself"* (MNT 2014). Australian Psychologist Paul Ferdinand Schilder first introduced the concept of body image, Schilder proposed that body image is established by sense and feelings which would support the many literature reviews stating that there is a high correlation between body image and self-esteem.

The term 'body schema' is often discussed in literature interchangeably with the term body image. The close relationship between the two terms often leads to conceptual confusion within the psychoanalytic field they operate in. Head and Holmes, (1911) cited in Pillard, (1999) distinguishes the two concepts. The authors describe body schema as *"a combined standard against which all subsequent changes of posture are measured, before the changes of posture enter consciousness"* and body image as *"an internal representation in the conscious*

experience of visual, tactile and motor information of corporal origin” (Head and Holmes, 19112).

The widely discussed topic does present some challenges as the growing number of literature in this area can make it difficult to interpret results and close in on a justifiable conclusion. Body images concerns have been discussed and measured by a multitude of authors as will be shown.

Two research papers that have identified the link between body image and self-esteem that emulate body image concerns, are by authors Goswami et al, 2012 and Fish, 2013.

The first study conducted by Goswami et al 2012 was proposed to determine the body satisfaction among newly entrant woman students in a professional institution. The results of the Goswami study concluded that individuals who perceive to have a low body image satisfaction rating have lower levels of self-esteem and also low satisfaction *“in life and in feeling of inferiority and pose themselves at higher risk for depression, anxiety or eating disorders”* (Goswami et al 2012, p. 168)

The second study by Fish (2013) supports Goswami et al (2012), by stating that from a psychology perspective most researchers would refer to body image as an individual’s self-perceived appearance which would include body dissatisfaction *“i.e. negative feelings about one’s shape or weight”* and body esteem , highlighting the correlation between the two areas (Fish, 2013, p. 1). Similarly to Goswami the results of the Fish study concluded that there is a correlation to positive body esteem and self-esteem. Interestingly the study also suggested that women who feel positive about their bodies may still experience low levels of body-esteem, this could be due to what Fish describes as *“a sort of lingering doubt or periods of regression to former feelings about their body”* (Fish, 2013, p. 31).

Grogan (2008) explores how the influence of media and advertising can have a negative effect on female body image satisfaction. As mentioned previously the majority of commercial messaging intent is to promote the thin ideal (Wykes and Gunter, 2006). In her study Grogan (2008) concludes that societal views can drastically change with the increasing promotion of the thin ideal within the media. The results of Grogans (2008) study was that Fijian women who initially showed relatively high levels of body satisfaction, experienced lower levels of self-esteem once they were exposed to the western ideals of beauty.

The study highlights how advertising and the media can be the causation of social comparison which in turn can evoke feelings of body image dissatisfaction.

2.4.2 Objectification theory

This finding of how women can experience prolonged former feelings about their bodies' ties in with the Objectification theory originally developed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Objectification theory helps shed light on how and why women are affected by negative body image throughout their life span. Fredrickson and Roberts developed the core model of the objectification theory in 1997, since then there has been a wealth of studies further exploring the concept. The theory posits how girls and women are acculturated to in some ways treat themselves as objects to be evaluated and even acquire an observer perspective on their own self. Fredrick and Roberts theorize that women viewing themselves as objects can in turn lead to problems with mental health and the on-set of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Many of these internal body-esteem issues often coincide with adolescence and can set the preface for body dissatisfaction later on in life, which would support Fishes finding of older women experiencing "*regression to former feelings about their body*" (Fish, 2013, p. 31).

A study that sheds a modern light on Fredrick and Roberts's (1997) is a campaign conducted by Dove (2013). The campaign entitled "your more beautiful than you think" was a social experiment set out to build positive self-esteem amongst women. This compelling social experiment ties in with how it has become an innate response for women to be constantly evaluating themselves against others, which in turn can lead to women attaining a negative perspective of their own self accompanied by body image dissatisfaction. The aim of the study as previously mentioned was to inspire women to realise how beautiful they are by using self-esteem as a platform to educate women about the "ideals of beauty". The experiment went viral around the world with over 66 million hits on YouTube, the content of the campaign investigates the gap between how women perceive themselves versus how others perceive them. The results of the experiment show that women described themselves in a significantly more negative way than the observations of other women. Whilst the social experiment was praised for its innovative way of promoting positive body-image amongst women it was also ridiculed for being hypocritical, as Dove is owned by Unilever who is also linked with Axe and Slim Fast. For many critics the campaign came across as patronizing to women as one journalist wrote "*it's a way for the company to pander to women for sales while practising the very evil it preaches against*" (ADWEEK, 2013).

The above pieces of literature indicate that there is strong evidence to support that there is a correlation between self-esteem and body image. As mentioned previously although self-esteem is not the focus of the dissertation at hand, it is evident from Fish (2013) and Goswami et al (2012) that self-esteem is intimately related to negative body-image behaviour.

2.5 Conclusion to Literature Review

The Literatures reviewed both old and current indicate that the media depicting the ideal beauty/ thinness has had a direct impact on how females perceive themselves, resulting in body image dissatisfaction and low levels of self-esteem.

Traditional medias glorification of the thin ideal was discussed as having a dramatic impact on female self-esteem and body image satisfaction as “*failure is inevitable with ideal being based on absolute flawlessness*” (Kilbourne, 2010). Social media was defined as “*a set of online tools that supports building relationships through interaction and collaboration*” (Matthew and Martinez, 2014). The exponential growth of social media as highlighted by Qualman (2013), means that women are heavily engaged in social networking, with Clipson, 2012 stating that the rate of women using social media is higher at 76% in comparison to men at 70%.

The exposure to images depicting the thin ideal in both a traditional and digital context means that it is inevitable for women to engage in social comparison which Solomon et al (2013) coins as “*a basic human motive that involves a person evaluating their self by comparing it to people depicted in images*”. The literature discusses how engagement in upward social comparison can evoke feelings of envy, jealousy and dissatisfaction with their own appearance. It was evident from the literature review that social comparison is a reoccurring theme that can cause feelings of depression and jealousy amongst women (Smeesters and Mandal, 2006), certainly from a traditional media perspective.

The research also highlighted a gap in the literature as there seems to be fewer studies done on how social media can be the causation of negative social comparison amongst young women. The author hopes to further examine how spontaneous social comparison is in a social media context, as social media engagement continues to grow.

Furthermore a gap exists for additional research to investigate if social media has a negative effect on female body image satisfaction. It is a topic that has not yet been dealt with from an Irish perspective, despite the popularity of social media amongst young Irish women.

In summary the current study will build upon existing literature in order to extend the research into the area through a digital context, with particular focus on body image satisfaction.

Chapter 3- Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section will discuss and analyse various possible methods that could be used to investigate if social media has any impact on women's body esteem. In order to verify which method is the most appropriate, numerous methods will be explored, accompanied by their theoretical background. By discussing the rationale of each method and its appropriateness towards the research objective, it will help act as a process of elimination in confirming the method most suited to the proposed study.

3.2 Aims and Objectives

The proposed research will attempt to fill the gaps that are existing in previous research and contribute to existing knowledge within this area. The objective of the current study is to investigate if social media has any effect on Irish female body satisfaction and how Irish females perceive themselves.

The literature review has confirmed that the media has a significant effect on how women perceive themselves. Studies conducted by Tiggemann (2003), Grabe, Hyde and Ward (2008) and Jean Kilbourne (2010) all support the theory that exposure to advertisements that promote the thin ideal can cause women to experience negative body image satisfaction. As Jean Kilbourne states the ideal beauty is completely unattainable as "*failure is inevitable with ideal being based on absolute flawlessness*" (Kilbourne 2010).

Given the nature of the topic at hand the most beneficial way of exploring how social media effects how women perceive themselves is to adapt an interpretivist qualitative approach that will grant full engagement with the participants. The current study will be conducted on Irish females, a nationality that has not previously been explored in this context.

Research Question

To investigate the effects of social media on Irish female body image satisfaction and how Irish females perceive themselves.

3.2.1 Research Objective 1:

To ascertain how the ideals of beauty portrayed in both online and offline contexts affect Irish women.

3.2.2 Research Objective 2:

To investigate women's engagement in digital media in particular social networking sites.

3.2.3 Research Objective 3:

To arbitrate if interactions on social media platforms have an impact on levels of body image satisfaction amongst women aged 18-25 in Ireland.

3.3 Overview of research philosophies

“There is a long history of discussion, debate, and publication regarding research methods” (Venable and Baskerville, pg. 141, 2012).

The above statement sets a preface for the methodology section of the proposed study. The following piece of literature will encompass an overview of the various methodologies that underpin many research projects. Different types of research instruments will be discussed in order to ascertain a level of clarity and justification on the most appropriate instrument to use for the research topic at hand.

All research projects are supported by a philosophical framework that is used to guide the study. Quinlan (2011) notes that there are many different methodology elements to avail of and that some research projects may host more than one philosophical framework. The multitude of philosophical frameworks has led to what academics coin as the ‘Methodological Debate’. As Venable and Baskerville (2012) state there has been a long history of discussion surrounding the topic of social research. Often with the issue of qualitative vs quantitative at the heart of the inquiry. Research philosophies are divided into two categories, epistemological and ontological. Whilst the two philosophies are intimately related their properties differ.

3.3.1 Epistemological

Browaeys and Fisser (2012) define epistemology as concerning *“the thoughts, the intelligence, the knowledge, the consciousness, the imagination, the perceptions, and the sensation”* (Browaeys and Fisser, 2012, p. 208). Also referred to as the ‘theory of knowledge’,

epistemology concludes as a system that connects thoughts and the outside world (Browaeys and Fisser, 2012). Positivism and interpretivism are the two most common terms affiliated with epistemology within the realm of social research.

3.3.2 Positivism

Positivism is a research paradigm that is commonly known amongst academics as a philosophy of science where conclusions are derived from absolute clarity and direct observational experience. Bryman (2008) claims that positivism takes on an epistemological position in which the application of the methods of natural science are advocated. Hunt (1991, p.33) notes that the German philosophers from which the theory was founded argue that their beliefs of positivism is that “*inductive reasoning is impermissible*” and that science should avoid relying exclusively on observables.

Due to the high level of certainty and clarity within positivism, researchers adopting a positivist epistemology approach usually use a quantitative research design method. Quantitative research is suited to the underlying elements of the positivism paradigm such as causality and variation, as it adds objective truth to research.

3.3.3 Quantitative

Bryman (2008, p. 697) defines the term quantitative by stating that “*as a research strategy it is deductivist and objectivist and incorporates a natural science model of the research process*”. Quantitative research methodology has dominated the field of social research, with its influence still remaining powerful despite the growth in popularity of qualitative research (Johari, 2009). Researchers who choose to adapt a quantitative approach use research methods such as data analysis, empirical experiments and questionnaires.

One such study that adopts a quantitative approach is conducted by Valkenburg et al, 2006. The authors surveyed 881 Dutch adolescents online with main reference to the social networking site CU2 (“see you too”). The methodology the authors used was measuring a number of different factors such as

- Use of friend networking site
- Frequency of reactions to profiles
- Tone of reactions to profiles
- Relationships established through CU2

Valkenburg et al, (2006) collected their data by measuring frequency, rate and intensity of the use of the social networking site CU2. Those results were then correlated with three sub-scales from Harters self-perception profile for adolescents.

Harter (1982) developed the perceived competence Scale for children, which acts as quantitative measure design that can evaluate self-perceptions across different areas of the self (Broc, 2014). The scale is a popular choice amongst academics looking to conduct a quantitative investigation on self-esteem amongst children and adolescents.

An additional self-esteem scale that is commonly used within positivist research studies is Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965). The scale is composed of five positively worded items and five negatively worded items (Aluja et al, 2007). The RSES has been the centre of controversy within research methodology academia as it is questioned if the original single-factor scale is the most efficient, or if a two-dimensional scale that is composed of 10 positively/negatively worded items of the self, would be a more sufficient method in measuring self-esteem (Aluja et al, 2007).

A similar study to Valkenburg et al (2006) that used quantitative research design to determine levels of self-esteem and body image satisfaction was conducted by Goswami et al (2012). The study proposed to determine the body satisfaction among newly entrant woman students in a professional institution. Goswami et al (2012) conducted a cross sectional study where a self-rating 5-item based Likert scale was used to determine body satisfaction amongst the participants. The results of this study concluded that individuals who perceive to have a low body image satisfaction rating have lower levels of self-esteem and also low satisfaction *“in life and in feeling of inferiority and pose themselves at higher risk for depression, anxiety or eating disorders”* (Goswami et al 2012, p. 168).

3.3.4 Interpretivism

Interpretivism on the other hand argues that there is no definitive truth or one objective reality that can be uncovered in research.

Bryman (2008) notes a contrasting difference in this particular epistemology to positivism, he states that researchers who take on an interpretivist (sometimes known as post-positivism) approach, do so because they share a view that the study of the social world requires a logic that reflects the *“distinctiveness of humans as against the natural*

order”(Bryman, 2008, p. 15). Additionally Denzin and Lincoln (2008) note a vast difference between the interpretivism and positivism stating that positivist believe that reality can be measured to some degree as opposed to interpretivist who argue that reality can never be fully comprehended.

The interpretivist paradigm has proven to be a popular form of research as it encourages researchers to be inductive rather than actively seeking to confirm or disconfirm various hypotheses (Johari, 2009). Often interpretivist arguments are rooted from theory such as Husserl’s notion of life-world and Alfred Schutz’s idea of phenomenology.

Edmond Husserl coined the term ‘life-world’ as early as 1907 (Zelic, 2007), the term ‘life-world’ has some ambiguity attached to it as the phenomenological meaning of the word is often misunderstood. Weber (2004) describes it by stating “*that our perceptions about the world are inextricably bound to a stream of experiences we have had throughout our lives*”, he also states that Husserl’s life-world has both subjective and objective characteristics.

Alfred Schutz’s (1970) idea of phenomenology also heavily influences the interpretivism methodology, the idea of phenomenology is associated with how individuals each have their own experiences and perceptions of the world we live in. Schutz’s (1970) idea of phenomenology would support the interpretivism paradigm as Creswell (2007) states that postpositivist researchers believe in multiple perspectives from participants rather than a single reality.

3.3.5 Qualitative

Researchers who choose to adopt an interpretivist paradigm often use qualitative based research methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) define qualitative research as involving “*an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world*” the authors additionally note that researchers who use qualitative research methodology study things in their natural settings “*attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them*”. Quinlan (2011, p.105) more sharply defines qualitative data as “*data that represents feelings, thoughts, ideas, understanding – non-numeric data.*” In practice postpositivist researchers will utilise multiple levels of data analysis to ensure a rigorous approach is taken that will acquire various perspectives from participants, this is in contrast to a positivist approach that would approximate a single reality (Creswell, 2007).

Polkinghorne (2005) notes that there has been considerable expansion in the variety of qualitative research methods in the last 40 years. The author also notes that due to the expansion and changes of qualitative research methodology, the current repertoire is “*a matrix of mixed methods developed in different disciplines and on the basis of different ideas of science*” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 137). Qualitative data collection techniques typically involve methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation and ethnography. Despite the various mix of methods, the common theme that underpins qualitative data analysts in their research is that they are seeking to explain their collected data in a way that captures the experience of the people who produced the data or text, rather than using predefined measures.

Susan Fournier (1998) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the intimate relationship between consumers and brands. The study, cited many times within the realm of consumer behaviour demonstrates the effectiveness of phenomenological interviewing. The informants were interviewed for a total of 12-15 hours over a 3-month period, Fournier (1998) then used coding schemes as analysis progressed in order to identify the brand relationships of the three participants.

3.4 Overview of additional research methods

3.4.1 Mixed Research Methods

The mixed method research design is one that has become an increasingly popular choice for many academics and researchers across a variety of disciplines (Cameron, 2011). Different definitions of mixed methods have been proposed by various academics, Ostlund et al (2010) defines it as the integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. However there continues to be an ardent dispute whether the merging of the two research methods is feasible or even necessary. Opposing academics rest their argument on the idea of incommensurability and incompatibility which suggest that qualitative and quantitative research should not be integrated or used within the same context. The justification for this idea is that epistemological and ontological assumptions that influence the paradigms are too different (Molina-Azorin et al, 2012).

Despite the debate, mixed method remains a popular research design choice, on the assumption that a complex research problem can be better understood when the two paradigms are combined then either approach on its own (Molina-Azorin et al, 2012).

3.4.2 E-research methods

The field of E-research is a relatively new and evolving phenomena, with researchers only adopting it in recent years (Bryman et al, 2011). This method has many benefits as it can have a large sample size without location or reach being a problem. Researchers who choose to use E-research methods have the opportunity to collect data from various online platforms such as blogs, chatrooms/online forums, social media/networking sites and emails. Given the digital nature of the research topic at hand it is important to analyse any research methods that have an underpinning digital context.

3.5 Research Method

Upon reviewing the various research philosophies and methodologies, it is necessary to select the most appropriate methodology for the proposed study which will meet the criteria of the research aims and objectives. The overall aim of the proposed study is to gain a better insight into how social media effects young Irish women. The author hopes to explore that if in fact social media has a negative impact on women's body esteem then what is the main causation, is it social comparison that evokes negative feelings or a different thought process.

Women's motivation for using social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram and their engagement with these platforms cannot be analysed in a static, linear process. Applying a positivist approach to the proposed study would not benefit in fulfilling the research aims and objectives. As mentioned previously the conclusions derived from a positivist approach are ones in which there is absolute clarity and direct observational experience, as stated by Hunt (1991, p. 33) "*inductive reasoning is impermissible*". Therefore, for the purpose of this study findings will be found from the participants own experiences through a qualitative approach.

A qualitative approach that accepts that reality can never be fully comprehended will be necessary in order to successful investigate young Irish women's lived experiences with social media engagement. Women's body image satisfaction is a key focus of the research proposal and how body image satisfaction is perceived and experienced by the participants is a major element. Therefor given the nature of the study it is an area that cannot be

measured against positivist criteria and elements of the philosophical movement known as phenomenology will be utilised instead.

Phenomenology as mentioned earlier is closely related to interpretivism, which involves how individuals have their own perceptions and experiences of the world we live in. As highlighted in Fournier's (1998) study, phenomenological methodology is best suited to studies that require a deep understanding of lived experiences in order to answer the research question at hand (Creswell, 2007). Wood and Hayes (2011, p. 291) note that researchers who choose to adopt a phenomenological approach to research do so as they "*seek to understand the phenomenon through the eyes of those who have direct, immediate experience with it*".

In conclusion, the author has identified for the purpose of this study that using qualitative in-depth interviews with phenomenology influences is the most appropriate research design in investigating if social media has a negative effect on Irish female body image satisfaction and how Irish females perceive themselves.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

Mojtahed, et al (2014) cites Collins (1998) definition of qualitative interviews by stating that despite there being different approaches to carrying out interviews, the dominant characteristics is based on the dichotomy between structured and unstructured interviews. There is a distinction between qualitative and quantitative interviews with quantitative interviews naturally being more structured. In order to successfully fulfil the aim of the study, a semi-structured interview approach was utilised to collect data.

The benefits of using semi-structured interviews is that it gives the interviewees some flexibility in answering the questions. Whilst the interview will adhere to a list of set questions to be covered by the researcher, it will allow a level of flexibility, as the questions do not have to be followed in a linear fashion and additional or supplementary questions can be added. The phenomenology influences underpinning semi-structured interviews allow for elements of flexibility in which the participants are more inclined to provide details on their life experiences and perceptions of the phenomena being researched.

To further ensure that participants could openly provide narratives on their views of the phenomena being studied, questions were designed to incorporate an open-ended approach

(see appendix 1&2). Given the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed, the author also used probing questions in order to encourage elaboration on certain topics and to also try and derive honest responses from the participants. Probing techniques are an important part of qualitative research with Henderson (2007) noting that regardless of the type of qualitative research being undertaken, questions will arise that require a probe by the interviewer so that clarity and understanding is gleaned.

3.6 Research Design Justification

Venable and Baskerville (2012) offer that the methodological debate has been long discussed, with qualitative vs quantitative often at the heart of the enquiry. Researchers that favour quantitative based methods would argue that it is a quicker form of data collection that presents an undoubted truth. For example, questionnaires are a popular form of quantitative data collection as it is quick to hand out to participants and can also cover a large sample base, in contrast qualitative forms of data collection such as focus groups and in-depth interviews take considerably more time. Despite quantitative research designs being advantageous in regards to quick administration, it was felt that it was not an appropriate method in fulfilling the overall research objectives. The phenomenology influences of the research method chosen meant that the study focused on exploring women's lived experiences with social media, therefore it was felt that questionnaires would not provide any additional insight to the study.

Other interpretivist research methods were initially considered in order to fulfil the research aims and objectives. One such consideration was focus groups, which Kitzinger (1994) describes as, discussions organised in such a way that allow for the exploration of a certain topic or issue. Given the sensitive nature of the phenomena being researched it was felt that participants may be hesitant to express their honest thoughts in front of a large group of people, particularly if it goes against the views of other participants. Byers and Wilcox (1991) note an additional disadvantage of focus groups by stating that it is important not to generalise the results from a focus group to the wider population, as the participants that volunteer are often outgoing and possibly more extroverted than the average individual.

After reviewing the focus group approach it was confirmed by the author that it would not add any additional insights to the study, therefore it would not be a suitable method in investigating if social media has a negative effect on female body image satisfaction.

3.7 Participants

For the proposed study, participants consisted of women aged 18-25. Irish females were chosen in order to differentiate the study from existing studies where predominantly Australian and English women were used (Tiggemann and Slater 2013). Given the digital context of the current study Participants were contacted through social networking sites, predominantly through Facebook. The participants were invited through Facebook to participate in a one on one in-depth interview regarding their engagement with social media. The social networking tool of Facebook was chosen by the author due to its popularity and convenience. The social networking platform was additionally chosen as it would benefit the coding process if the participants share similar characteristics. By using Facebook it was guaranteed that the participants all had a social media account, therefor adding an element of homogeneity to the procedure. Creswell (2007) notes that it is important to selectively choose individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being investigated, so that in the end the researcher can effectively derive a common understanding.

The data was collected over 3 days with each interview lasting 15-20 minutes with a short break in between. The interviews were carried out in quite location so that the participants felt comfortable and at ease.

In total six women between the ages of 18-25 were interviewed. Due to the qualitative nature of the study a smaller sample was used in order to attain a better understanding of the participant's thoughts, feelings and experiences on the phenomena. From the outset of the study there was no predefined number of participants needed for the interviews, however upon completing the sixth interview the author concluded theoretical saturation had been reached. Holton (2010, p. 32) states that theoretical saturation occurs when "*This process of constant comparison continues until no new properties or dimensions are emerging*". Therefor six interviews was deemed satisfactory in fulfilling the research objectives.

Similarly to Tiggemann's (2003) study the author ensured that confidentiality was maintained in regards to the participant's personal information. Prior to conducting the interviews all participants were informed that the session would be audio recorded. The author Disclosed how the recordings would be used and the participants were given the option of receiving a

copy of the recordings if they wished. Contact details of the author was also provided if the participants had any queries regarding the procedure. It was imperative for the researcher that the participants were reassured that all their narratives would be kept completely anonymous in order to adhere to ethical guidelines.

3.7.1 Participant Information

<p>Participant 1 Gender: Female Age: 22 Occupation: Working full time</p>	<p>Participant 2 Gender: Female Age: 22 Occupation: Student – level 8</p>	<p>Participant 3 Gender: Female Age:23 Occupation: Working part time</p>
<p>Participant 4 Gender: Female Age:21 Occupation: Working full time</p>	<p>Participant 5 Gender: Female Age: 25 Occupation: Working full time</p>	<p>Participant 6 Gender: Female Age: 19 Occupation: Student- level 7</p>

3.8 Limitations

One of the main limitations in conducting the research study was the homogeneity of the participant’s socioeconomic backgrounds. All of the participants came from a middleclass background which makes the generalisability of the findings to the general public questionable. This limitation is based on Fournier’s (1998) study where the researcher interviewed 3 participants with varying sociocultural contexts, by doing this Fournier (1998) was able to eliminate the risk of generalisation.

A second limitation that many researchers adopting a qualitative based research design face is the potential of bias interview responses. Creswell (2007, p. 140) cites Nunkoosing (2005) in stating that one of the issues of interviews is “*distinguishing truth from authenticity*”. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic it was difficult to determine how authentic the participant’s responses were, therefor the potential of bias responses was a major limitation of the research study.

3.9 Method of data analysis

Data was collected via in-depth interviews. Each interview was recorded using an audio device then transcribed into a word document so that the author could make any notes or comments beside the participants responses. The data was analysed thoroughly in order to pinpoint any reoccurring themes from the interviews, thematic coding was used in order analyse the participants responses. Thematic coding is advantageous as it confers accuracy and intricacy which will ultimately enhance the meaning of the phenomena being researched (Ibrahim, 2012). Following Creswell (2007) instructions on thematic coding, the main themes from the narratives collected from the interview were interpreted into codes that would then be divided major and minor themes. Major and minor themes were distinguished by correlating them with reoccurring themes and its relevance in fulfilling the overall research aims and objectives.

Each theme that emerged from the interviews was correlated with the research objectives discussed in section 3.2, the table below (3.9.1) depicts the various themes in line with the appropriate research objective:

3.9.1 Themes based on research objectives

Research Objective 1:

To ascertain how the ideals of beauty portrayed in advertising in both online and offline contexts affect Irish women

Themes:

- Social media marketing more effective [minor theme]
- Digital altered images in advertising

Research Objective 2:

To investigate women's engagement in digital media in particular social networking sites.

Themes:

- Facebook and Instagram are the two most popular accounts
 - Used for different interactions
 - Used multiple times a day
- Visual appealing images important attribute (minor)

Research Objective 3:

To arbitrate if interactions on social media platforms have an impact on levels of body image satisfaction amongst women aged 18-25 in Ireland.

Themes:

- Social comparison through social media
 - Facebook and Instagram different tendencies of comparison
 - Comparison on Facebook with friends
 - Instagram high level of anonymity
- Lower levels of satisfaction due to unrealistic beauty standards

Chapter 4- Analysis of Findings

As discussed in the methodology chapter, six in-depth interviews were carried between the 14th and 16th of August 2015. This chapter will discuss the findings in line with the themes that were derived from the interviews as demonstrated in section 3.9.1 of the methodology chapter.

4.1 Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1:

To ascertain how the ideals of beauty portrayed in advertising in both online and offline contexts affect Irish women

Themes:

- Social media marketing more effective [minor theme]
- Digital altered images in advertising

4.1.1 Social media marketing more effective (minor theme)

One of themes that initially started emerging from the interviews was that the participants felt traditional advertising such as television, print and radio were not as effective when it comes to advertising products or the promotion of campaigns. It was important for the researcher to get an idea of what type of advertisement the participants most was most frequently exposed to and found interesting Two of the interviewees discussed how they preferred advertising in an online based context:

“I think social media is better as there is more details so maybe there will be a picture to catch your eye and if you click into it you will have all the details” (Interviewee 2)

“I think Facebook is more effective, like if you have the Facebook app on your phone you are constantly on it... Well I am anyway, I’m constantly refreshing it so if something pops up I’ll go into it whereas I’m not constantly watching a T.V or constantly listen to the radio” (Interviewee 5)

The term ‘visual or visually appealing’ was a reoccurring phrase throughout the interview process. Many of the participants touched on the fact that they preferred advertisements that were more visual and eye catching particularly ones that featured women showcasing a product or theme they were interested in, I.e. fashion, beauty or fitness:

“Advertisements that would catch my eye are ones that are relative to me, ones that would catch my eye for example would be...well I’m a woman so if there is a picture of a woman I’m going to look and think oh what is that advertising?”(Interviewee 4).

Another participant stated that she prefers advertising through a digital context as she feels it is more targeted towards her specific needs and likes, in contrast to traditional media that advertises to the greater public in a more broad sense:

“I find advertising in the public is more broad and not specifically targeted to anyone, but when it is online or on apps like Instagram they are a bit more targeted at you, so I think you don’t notice it as much when you are online because they are targeting what you like” (Interviewee 3).

Additionally interviewees 5 and 6 both commented on how social media marketing is more effective because the pop up advertisements catch your attention and often the content is tailored to showcase products or brands you have looked at previously:

“I suppose on social media I would see a lot of clothing advertisements, they would pop up of what I had looked at previously” (Interviewee 6).

“On Facebook when things pop up and stuff like articles and then you click into it to see what it is promoting” (Interviewee 5).

4.1.2 Digitally altered images in advertising

One of the major themes emerging from the compilation of interviews was the awareness of photo shop within advertising and how it can have a negative impact on women. All of the six participants agreed that photo shopping and re-touching of images is a negative phenomenon. One participant had quite strong views on the matter:

“I actually would have quite strong views on that, I think as woman it’s not fair that models are shown to be ... you know you get an idea in your head that if I use this product or cream on my face this is what I will look like, it will be this flawless and that’s not a fair representation” (Interviewee 4).

Another participant spoke about how photo shopping can effect young girls and boys as they are potentially more vulnerable to experiencing low levels of body and self-esteem because they may not be confident in their own skin yet, the participant goes on to discuss how images portraying real beauty (for example in the Dove campaigns) would be more beneficial:

“But then if you are imagining that there all young girls and young boys especially that don’t have such an awareness of how much everything is digitally retouched it’s probably good for them to see that” (Interviewee 1).

Interestingly the majority of the participants spoke on some level about automatically assuming that all images portrayed within the media are photo shopped to some degree. One participant discussed how she would describe herself as ‘*quite cynical*’ when it comes to looking at advertisements, in which she automatically assumes that every image depicted in both traditional and digital advertisement has been photo shopped. Another participant confirmed that she assumes photos in advertising or photos on social media platforms have been digitally altered.

“Whenever you do see a picture of a celebrity you always wonder, whether it has been photo shopped and you like kind of presume that it has been” (Interviewee 5).

A common theme that presented itself within this thematic code of digitally altered photos was that photo shopping has become such an ingrained part of modern advertising that the participants would be more shocked to see an untouched advertisement:

“I think that the standard has gotten so high in advertising that it’s just changed the way people view advertising as well so that if there was photos of people who weren’t retouched or anything, people would kind of start asking questions, like why don’t they look perfect?”(Interviewee 3).

Additionally one participant claims that people just expect advertisements to be photo shopped and that if it wasn’t retouched it would be more shocking, it could even promote the product in a negative light:

“It has become something that people learn to expect, I was actually reading a magazine last night and I saw an unretouched advertisement, and I was like that is so clearly not photo shopped or retouched at all, and you could see small imperfections and it does make it more

real but it actually made the product look bad because you are more used to seeing a fully photo shopped image were the face looks flawless” (Interviewee 6).

When discussing how a multitude of advertisements within the media are photo shopped many of participants naturally went on to discuss how it effects them and how they perceive themselves:

“Sometimes I do look at the photos and wish you could look like that as well” (Interviewee 2).

“It has a bad effect on people it changes how you view yourself” (Interviewee 3).

The theme of social comparison and lower levels of body satisfaction due to images depicted in social media is discussed in greater detail in research objective 3, section 4.3 of the findings.

4.2 Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2:

To investigate women’s engagement in digital media in particular social networking sites.

Themes:

- Facebook and Instagram are the two most popular accounts
 - Used multiple times a day
 - Used for different interactions
- Visual appealing images important attribute (minor)

The themes that were derived from research objective two were discussed in the second half of the interview. The participants were asked about their general engagement with social media and their motivations for using certain social media accounts. A sample of the interview questions used can be found in part 1 of the appendix.

4.2.1 Facebook and Instagram

On interviewing the participants about their social media engagement it was apparent that they were all avid users of social media accounts, however some networks more than others. The main accounts that the participants used on a day to day basis was Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and snapchat. Many of the interviewees also expressed that they have a twitter account but never use it.

Used multiple times a day

Upon interviewing the participants it was apparent that Facebook and Instagram were the predominant social media accounts that the interviewees engaged with the most on a day to day basis. The participants struggled to give an exact figure on how many times a day they used these social media accounts. Body language such as ignoring eye contact, pausing and laughing indicated that the participants were somewhat embarrassed about how often they use their social media accounts. One participant stated that she is always on Instagram and whilst she doesn't actively post content herself she enjoys scrolling through the newsfeed looking at what the people she follows are doing:

“I'm always on Instagram...maybe like 10 times a day, (Laughs) always...not me updating it but me scrolling through my newsfeed seeing what are the people I'm following and the people I find are interesting are up too”(Interviewee 4).

Similarly another participant stated:

“I use social media every day. Multiple times a day” (Interviewee 3)

These participants demonstrated that whilst they have these social media accounts and engage with them multiple times a day they are not uploading regular content. It would be fair to make the assessment that the participants are more inclined to view other peoples content then actively post their own, particularly in regards to Instagram:

“I use Instagram a lot but I don’t post, I don’t feel what I’m doing in my day to day life is particularly interesting to post about” (Interviewee 4).

Another interesting point to note, was that when the participants were discussing how often they use their social networking accounts I.e. Facebook and Instagram, they mentioned the context in which they decided to engage with social media. For example one common theme that was presented during this section of the interview was that the participants were more inclined to use their social media accounts when they were bored either at home, on the bus or in work. For example one participant stated that she is most actively engaged with Facebook when she is bored at work and has lots of free time:

“I notice like I use it loads at the moment because I’m in work and I have loads of downtime, so I find myself scrolling past the same things like three times in an hour. Whereas if I was... you know like...out and about and busy and had an interesting day I wouldn’t use it that much” (Interviewee 1).

Additionally a participant states:

“It depends how busy you are , when you are not thinking about it or else you are in your house for the entire day and your just constantly picking up your phone” (Interviewee 5).

Used for different interactions

It appeared that the participants had different motivations for using their various social media accounts. For connectivity purposes Facebook and WhatsApp were the most favoured platforms. The majority of the participants interviewed stated that they used Facebook mainly to connect with their friends and family, use it as a means of staying in touch with people who are abroad and to look at photos of their friends:

“On Facebook it’s more to see what people I know are doing and to connect with them” (Interviewee 3)

“You feel connected in way when your friends are away to be able to see pictures of them and what they are doing” (Interviewee 6).

In contrast the participants who use Instagram said they use it to look at pictures of people they don’t know for example they may follow different celebrities, make-up artists or fitness

bloggers. One participant claimed that she uses Instagram more to look at pictures of people she doesn't know, and because it's more anonymous you can look more into people's lives:

“ Instagram I feel like it's more anonymous, it's not as public as Facebook so if you like something or if you want to search for something no one will really know and you can follow random people and no one gives it a second thought” (Interviewee 2).

The Instagram users liked the visual aspect the platform offered with one participating stating that she is a more visual person so she uses Instagram to look and photos and get inspiration from the images. Another participant stated that she enjoys following accounts on Instagram as the photos are visually appealing:

“I don't know just stuff that is appealing to the eye. Obviously I follow all my friends as well, but like it's nice to follow people that look really perfect” (Interviewee 2).

Whilst looking at these images can cause the participants to have somewhat negative feelings about their self which will be discussed in research objective 3 (section 4.3) two of the participants mentioned that they use the images from Instagram as inspiration. For example it was mentioned by one of the participants that she follows a lot of health and fitness accounts on Instagram and uses the pictures as motivation or “*fitspiration*” as she coins it (Interviewee 6).

“I find fitness really interesting I follow a lot of personal trainers who give food recipes or show workouts and that kind of thing, I find that very motivational!” (Interviewee 4).

In summary the themes derived from the contrasting motivations of using Facebook and Instagram are summed up nicely by a participant who states:

“Instagram is about the images and Facebook is more about what the images are about”. (Interviewee 2).

4.2.2 Visually appealing images important attribute (Minor)

The final theme that emerged from the interviews in relation to research objective two was briefly mentioned in section 4.2.1, it is the importance visual imagery played amongst the participants. In discussing advertising and social media engagement the participants often mentioned how they enjoy looking at pictures that are bright and colourful or ones with less text:

“I also like colourful advertisements not ones that are very black and white” (Interviewee 2).

In terms of social media it was apparent that the majority of the participants enjoyed looking at photos either of their friends and family or Instagram images of different women, celebrities, bloggers, interesting photography or themes that were relevant to them:

“I really like Instagram because I’m more of a visual person anyway, I used it for research in my college projects. I was looking at design based images but then that kind of lead me on to look at images with models so that would lead me to start following the models as well”(Interviewee 3).

“Other stuff I like is nice photographs like random photography, I don’t know just stuff that is appealing to the eye” (Interviewee 2).

This theme derived from the interviews would fall in line with Mahon and McMillian (2009) statement that women often respond more too non-verbal stimuli and *“imagery laced interpretations”* .

4.3 Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3:

To arbitrate if interactions on social media platforms have an impact on levels of body image satisfaction amongst women aged 18-25 in Ireland.

Themes:

- Social comparison through social media
 - Facebook and Instagram different tendencies of comparison
 - Comparison on Facebook with friends
 - Instagram high level of anonymity

- Lower levels of satisfaction due to unrealistic beauty standards

The themes associated with research objective 3 were highlighted during the latter part of the interview, the researcher asked the participants about their experience with social media and if they perceive it to have any effect on young women, be it positive or negative. As mentioned previously the list of questions used to guide the interview process can be found in the appendix, section one.

4.3.1 Social comparison through social media

One of the most salient points highlighted throughout the interview process was that the majority of the participants felt exposed to images and advertisements depicting women that promote the “ideal beauty” or the “thin ideal” on a daily basis. As discussed in the literature review (section 2.2) the exponential growth of social media, means men and women alike are constantly exposed to images and advertisements via digital media. From the interviews it is apparent that the high level of accessibility of digital devices like mobile phones and laptops make it easy to be constantly subjected to images projected through social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram.

One participant makes an interesting comment on the issue of social comparison, by stating that it is now so common for women to compare themselves to others that it has become a reoccurring theme within her friend’s interactions via WhatsApp. This relates to Chan and Sengupta (2013, p. 742) literature on social comparison where it’s noted that the tendency has become so strong it “*manifests effortlessly and spontaneously even without an explicit instruction to engage in comparison*”. The participant describes how her friend’s interactions are sometimes orientated around a photo of a model that someone will put in the WhatsApp group and therefor everyone else is subjected to view the image and engage in social comparison even without what Chan and Sengupta note as “*explicit instruction to engage in social comparison*”:

“I think as well people pay a lot of attention to attractive people and you can see within my own group of friends and in our WhatsApp group that people post these photos of girls being like ‘look how gorgeous she is’ and ‘I want to be her’” (Interviewee 1).

When asked about their experience of social media and what kind of effect it can have on women's body image satisfaction, many of the participants discussed the idea of upward social comparison and how it can evoke feelings of envy, jealousy and dissatisfaction with their own appearance:

"I think it has a big effect because you are constantly comparing yourself to the people that you are looking at on social media , so like whether its people you know , you obviously see what they're doing all the time and then you might think why am I not like that?" (Interviewee 2).

"when you look at pictures of celebrities and models who have had plastic surgery maybe people will look at them and feel less than them and that they are not up to the standards of beauty" (Interviewee 3).

Similarly the participants not only talked about how images in social media can have an effect on your personal appearance but also life style choices. This was particularly relevant for Instagram users where the participants touched on how the celebrities and bloggers they follow have what would be considered a lavish lifestyle. One participant discussed how because she was in Ireland for the summer without a holiday planned, she felt worse about herself after viewing photos of 'instagramers' on holidays.

"So like you might end up feeling shit about yourself if they are going on all these holidays and you are not doing anything for the summer" (Interviewee 2).

Interestingly, even though the participants admitted to engagement in social comparison with the women they see in pictures online, the majority of them were aware that the images are not true to life. Referencing back to the theme of digital altered images in section 4.2.1, the majority of the participants had some level of criticism when it came to photos portraying ideal beauty. For example interviewee 4 discussed how the images on the accounts she follows on Instagram are only a small insight into that person's life, it only shows the positive side. Similarly participant 5 discussed how the fitness models she sees online exercise all the time and have the equipment and facilitates to look amazing, therefor they give a false ideation of what you should look like.

Despite being aware that the images projected through social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram are not true to life, it appears that the participants would still initially engage in upward social comparison.

Another theme that was present in this part of the interview was how the participant's mood would affect the level of social comparison. It was discussed how the mood the person is in can determine the level of social comparison engagement:

“It can be about how that person perceives the picture, like if they are in a really bad place at the moment they will see a really fit girl, (even if they themselves are fit and healthy), they could be like oh my God I’m never going to be like that, but if someone is on a health kick then they are like yes that’s my fitspiration” (Interviewee 6).

Different tendencies of comparison

Upon investigating the participant's social comparison through their social media engagement it was apparent that the tendency differs depending on what account they are using. In line with earlier findings on how Facebook is more interactive and Instagram is more anonymous it was found that the comparison process differed.

For Facebook the participants were more inclined to compare themselves to their friends and people they know which one participant claimed was much worse as they are more similar to the real self:

“I think Facebook hits closer to home because the people on there are friends with so you know them. So you like are comparing yourself more because the people that you know are obviously more like yourself so you are comparing yourself more. But if it’s a celebrity, you think ‘I’m not famous’ so there’s more of a gap” (Interviewee 2).

Due to the level of anonymity on Instagram, the participants were more inclined to engage in upward comparison with people they were not acquainted with, mostly celebrities, bloggers and fitness models:

“Facebook is more to contact with friends it’s not really to just snoop through someone’s life like I would on Instagram” (Interviewee 6).

4.3.2 Lower levels of satisfaction due to unrealistic beauty standards

Upon assessing the narratives from the interviews carried between the 14th and 16th of August, it is clear that all the participants feel to some degree lower levels of body image satisfaction when engaging with social media. The unrealistic beauty standards depicted in the multitude of images the women are exposed to constituted engagement in downward social comparison. This downward social comparison elicited feelings of envy and dissatisfaction regarding their appearance and lifestyle.

“So like you might end up feeling shit about yourself if they are going on all these holidays and you are not doing anything for the summer. Or when they post pictures of themselves in a bikini and you think “oh I wouldn’t look that nice”. Yeah so like it obviously has an effect” (Interviewee 2).

4.4 Summary of findings

It has been discovered from the analysis of findings that young Irish women are affected by the ideal of beauty depicted in the media. It is clear from the research that traditional advertising platforms such as print and television are not as effective in capturing young people’s attention anymore and that advertising through a digital context is much more effective. Throughout the process the constant references to social media suggested that it is an important feature within young Irish women’s lives. They agreed that the phenomena of digitally altering images have a profound effect on how women perceive themselves. All of the participants agreed that photo shopping images of models and celebrities is not fair to real women as it sets an unrealistic standard of beauty.

It was found that the women are strongly engaged with social media, the addictive nature of accounts like Facebook and Instagram were highlighted by the participant’s body language when asked how often they use social media. Many struggled to give a response and seemed somewhat embarrassed to give a truthful answer. Many spoke about how they use different accounts for different interactions, for example Facebook was to connect with friends and family whilst Instagram was to look at photos of people they did not know personally such as celebrities, bloggers and fitness models.

When discussing the effects of social media, social comparison was a reoccurring theme throughout the latter half of the interview. The participants discussed how they spontaneously

compare themselves to the women in the images and feel dissatisfied with their appearance as they feel they cannot attain the standard of beauty that is being showcased. One participant spoke about how your mood can determine the level of dissatisfaction you feel after looking at photos of attractive women on social media, stating that if you are having an ‘off’ day you may be inclined to feel worse about yourself. It was concluded by the researcher that despite the negative feelings associated with upward social comparison it would not stop the participants using social media “*multiple times a day*”.

Chapter 5- Discussion

This chapter will link the key themes derived from the data analysis to the literature review and research objectives in order to highlight the salient points encompassed within the current study.

The current study looked to investigate the affect social media has on Irish females body image satisfaction and how they perceive themselves. The procedure involved interviewing 6 Irish women aged between 18 and 25, in the space of 3 days. Unlike previous quantitative studies (Tiggemann. 2003; Cash et al. 1983; and Smeesters and Mandal. 2006;) who adopted a quantitative approach, this procedure involved in-depth interviewing with phenomenology influences in line with Susan Fournier’s (1998) study on investigating the relationship between brands and consumers. As mentioned previously, whilst the nature of questions were open-ended and discursive, they were designed by the researcher in a way that would elicit the participants to openly discuss themes regarding social media.

5.1 To ascertain how the ideals of beauty portrayed in advertising in both online and offline contexts affect Irish women

It was observed from the interviews that the participants were aware of advertisements in both traditional and digital contexts portraying the “ideals of beauty”. However it appeared that the

participants were more inclined to see advertisements in a digital context as many expressed that they do not watch TV or buy magazines. The study of how advertising can have a negative effect on female body image satisfaction is by no means a new area. The phenomena has been long studied with Kilbourne conducting extensive research in the 90's with her documentaries "*killing us softly*", additionally many other academics have conducted more recent research on the subject such as Wykes and Gunter (2005) and Ward and Hyde (2008). It was noted that all of the participants agreed that digitally altered photographs in advertising can have a negative effect on women and how they view themselves, this is strongly linked to Wykes and Gunter's (2005) thoughts on the phenomena, as they feel the internalisation of the thin ideal is the catalyst to cultivating body image dissatisfaction amongst women.

Many of the participants discussed how this can have a negative effect on women as the images are not true to life and how women feel that they have to reach this unrealistic standard. As one participant states:

"I actually would have quite strong views on that, I think as woman it's not fair that models are shown to be ... you know you get an idea in your head that if I use this product or cream on my face this is what I will look like, it will be this flawless and that's not a fair representation" (Interviewee 4).

The participant's views on the phenomena strongly relate to that of Kilbourne (2010) who states that the portrayal of women in advertising has worsened in the last few years and that "*failure is inevitable with the ideal being based on absolute flawlessness*".

What was interesting was the presence of cynicism amongst the participants when it came to advertisements that depicted attractive women. Many of the participants expressed that photo shop has become such a normal feature in today's advertising that they just assume the pictures have been retouched in some way. For example one participant stated that the standard of beauty has gotten so high in advertising that if there was a photo of an unretouched model it would be more shocking to see. This is supported by Westerwick and Crane (1999) who state that in recent years there has been an increase in the discrepancy between women's actual body shapes and the body shapes portrayed in the media as the thin ideal.

What is also highlighted is that the participants agree that advertisements portraying real beauty would be more effective in increasing the level of body image satisfaction amongst women. The researcher used the Dove campaigns as an example of an advertisement that used 'real women' in order to promote positive self-esteem amongst women of all ages. The majority of

the participants agreed that advertisement campaigns should promote realistic beauty in order to highlight to women that *“it is okay to have imperfections”* (Interviewee 3).

However one minor theme that was highlighted in the interviews was that whilst the participants were aware that promoting the thin ideal is linked to negative body image satisfaction, it is equally negative to promote ‘real beauty’ as being overweight. One participant had quite strong views on the matter, whilst discussing plus size models. She felt it is equally wrong to *“glorify plus size models who are overweight, as young girls will see that and think it’s okay to be overweight”*(Interviewee 6). This is an interesting theme as it somewhat contradicts the idea of advertising models who exemplify the thin ideal. It is an area that would warrant further investigation, but due to the time constraints on completion of the study it was not deemed feasible by the researcher. Perhaps it is an area that future research should consider.

The above findings in correlation with research objective 1 highlights that young Irish women are aware of the internalisation of the thin ideal being glorified within advertisements. From these findings the assumption can be made that the participants are being exposed to these images through a digital context as opposed to traditional media platforms. An obsession of ideal beauty has become paramount in recent years so much so that the participants are accustomed to assuming that every photograph they see has been digitally altered. Despite this, the participants still engage in comparing themselves to the women in the advertisements which in turn drives them to evaluate their real selves. This process ultimately falls in line with Smeesters and Mandal’s (2006) study that concludes that women spontaneously compare themselves with women they see in advertisement’s, the authors state that *“people have a natural drive to evaluate their own attributes and abilities, which they do by comparing themselves with others”*.

5.2 To investigate women’s engagement in digital media in particular social networking sites

Findings from the study indicate that Irish women aged between 18 and 25 are strongly engaged with social media. As Qualman (2013) notes, the exponential growth of social media in recent years means that a new revolution has manifested known as *“socialnomics”*. As discussed in the literature review social networking is at the heart of this new revolution and it would appear that the participants have fully embraced this socialnomics revolution.

The participants discussed how they have multiple social networking accounts but use some more than others. Facebook appeared to have the highest level of interactivity, which correlates with the findings of Tiggemann and Slaters (2013) study that found Facebook to be the most frequently used social networking site amongst Australian adolescents.

Upon questioning the interviewees it was found that their main motivations for using social networking sites differed depending on the platform. For example, for Facebook the main motivation was to interact with family and friends, many of the participants stated that they also enjoyed looking at photos of their friends and keeping in touch with people abroad. However it was noted by the researcher that it appeared the participants themselves did not actively post photos or content online. These findings slightly contradict claims made in a study conducted by Carpenter (2012) who states that women go online to post pictures of them as a method of “self-promotion”. The findings showed that the interviewees participated in developing some level of social capital by connecting with friends, but it was concluded by the researcher that it was not for “self-promotion” purposes, or for developing what Hakim (2010) coins as “erotic capital”.

Findings from research objective 2 also highlight that the majority of the participants liked the visual aspect of viewing photographs online, in particular through social networking platform Instagram. As one participant states in reference to Instagram:

“Other stuff I like is nice photographs like random photography, I don’t know just stuff that is appealing to the eye” (Interviewee 2).

These findings fall in line with the literature of Mahon and McMillian (2009) who state that women often respond more to non-verbal stimuli and “*imagery laced interpretations*”.

One interesting point derived from the findings of women’s engagement with social media, is that they are most inclined to use it when they are bored at home or in work. Three out of the six participants discussed how they are most active online when they have some down time or when they “*don’t have much going on in the day*”. It could be argued that the participants are more inclined to experience a gap between selves when they are bored and feeling vulnerable to engagement in upward social comparison. As discussed in the literature review by Solomon et al (2014) the ideal self is described as the idealised image of the self and the real-self is a person’s actual self-image. It could be said that this boredom the participants are experiencing is subconsciously widening the gap between selves leading to a level of self-discrepancy. This

argument is supported by a study conducted by Bessenoff (2006) who discovered that participants who demonstrated high levels of self-discrepancy were twice as likely to engage in social comparison, in contrast to individuals with lower levels of self-discrepancy. The researcher's theory is exemplified by a statement from interviewee 4 who claims:

“If you are on the bus to work and you are flicking through photos and you see a photo of a blogger on the beach in Florida you start to compare your life to hers”.

These findings demonstrate that Irish women aged between 18 and 25 are highly engaged with social media, in particular social networking sites Facebook and Instagram. Whilst social media engagement is not the core focus of this study, the discovery of the participants interactions and motivations with social media was considered important by the researcher in order to progress the study, which aimed to investigate the affect social media has on Irish female body image satisfaction and Irish females perceive themselves.

5.3 To arbitrate if interactions on social media platforms have an impact on levels of body image satisfaction amongst women aged 18-25 in Ireland.

It was discovered from the previous findings that promotion of ideal beauty and the thin ideal within the media, can have a negative effect on young Irish women. Research objective 3 was designed to decipher the main causation of these negative feelings experienced by the women who actively use social media. As touched on in section 4.3.1 of the findings chapter, social comparison is a reoccurring theme throughout the interview process with many of the participants discussing the phenomena without any probing from the researcher.

The findings from the current study have supported the work of Leon Festinger (1954) who defined the basic human motive of social comparison. Festinger (1954) discussed how process involves a person evaluating their real selves by comparing it to other individuals. Many of the participants discussed throughout the interview process that they spontaneously compare themselves to the women depicted in images. For example one participant stated:

“You are constantly comparing yourself to the people that you are looking at on social media, so like whether its people you know, you obviously see what they're doing all the time and then you might think why I am not like that?” (Interviewee 2).

This spontaneous downward social comparison falls in line with studies conducted by Smeesters and Mandal (2006) and Chan and Sengupta (2013), who both discuss how the tendency of social comparison has become so strong that it manifests spontaneously amongst individuals.

Interestingly, findings from the study showed that the social comparison tendency varies depending on the social networking platform the participants are using. For example on Facebook participants were more inclined to compare themselves to pictures of their friends or acquaintances. However, on Instagram the participants discussed how they engage in comparison with women they do not know personally, for example celebrities, bloggers, and fitness models. It could be said that social comparison via Facebook evokes stronger levels of envy and body dissatisfaction as the people in the images are relative to the participants, it could be argued further that the 'gap' between the real self and the ideal self is somewhat skewed as the people on Facebook are similar to the "real self". For example one participant discusses how she feels worse when she compares herself to her friends on Facebook by stating:

"I think Facebook hits closer to home because the people on there are friends with so you know them. So you like are comparing yourself more because the people that you know are obviously more like yourself so you are comparing yourself more. But if it's a celebrity, you think 'I'm not famous' so there's more of a gap" (Interviewee 2).

Whilst these findings provide a new insight into the study, the researcher found that there is little literature supporting the findings. There appears to be a gap in literature on the effects of social comparison via social media, certainly from an Irish perspective. The gap is particularly highlighted as there appears to be even fewer studies conducted on how the various social networking platforms can elicit different social comparison tendencies. Many studies such as Bessenoff (2008) and Chan and Sengupta (2013) have focused the social comparison process only through a traditional media context.

The phenomenological influences of Edmund Husserl (1907) underpinned the interview process, which allowed the researcher to analyse the participant's real life experiences with social media. The participants discussed how they experienced feelings of dissatisfaction with their appearance after viewing photographs of women depicting the ideal beauty in social media. These findings are closely related to Frederickson and Roberts (1997) theory on objectification, the theory posits how women are acculturated to treat themselves as objects to

be evaluated and even acquire an observer perspective on their own self. This observer perspective on their own self as discussed by Frederickson and Roberts (1997) strongly resonates to some of the comments made by the participants. For example one participant demonstrated how after viewing pictures of fitness models on Instagram she acquired an observer perspective on her own self:

“When they post pictures of themselves in a bikini and you think ‘oh I wouldn’t look that nice’”
(Interviewee 2).

It was noted by the researcher that from a phenomenological perspective a link can be made between the person’s mood and the level of social comparison engagement. It is important to note that a few of the participants discussed how your mood can affect how you interpret the pictures you see via social media. For example one of the interviewees discussed how if you are in a “*bad place*” and you see a picture of a fitness model you might experience feelings of negative body image satisfaction, in contrast if you’re in a positive mood you might experience feelings of motivation, Perhaps this is an area that would warrant further investigation for future research .

Earlier findings highlighted that the participants are aware of the negative impact advertising depicting the ideal beauty can have on female body and esteem satisfaction. A link was also made between the women’s interactions online and engagement of upward social comparison. Despite the negative effects upward social comparison has on Irish females, it is important to note that the participants made no indication that it would prevent them from using social media in the future. This is perhaps due to the addictive nature of social media as can be testified by the participants.

Chapter 6- Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The over-arching aim of this study was to investigate if social media has any effect on Irish female body image satisfaction and how they perceive themselves. The researcher set out 3 main objectives in order to successfully achieve the overall aims of the study, upon completion of the investigation it was felt by the researcher that these objectives were adequately met.

After the initial outlining of the research aims and objectives, various research methodologies were discussed in order to find the methodology best suited to the research topic at hand. Upon reviewing the various research philosophies it was felt by the author that a qualitative approach that accepts that reality can never be fully comprehended would be necessary in investigating the participants lived experiences with social media engagement. In light of this finding the researcher conducted six qualitative in-depth interviews with phenomenological influences in order to fulfil the aims of the research objectives. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, there was no pre-defined number of participants, however the researcher felt that theoretical saturation had been reached by the sixth interview. Whilst the research aims and objectives were adequately fulfilled, the research method chosen did present some limitations , for example bias interview responses was a significant limitation presented to the researcher conducting the interviews.

The current study sought to understand the women's experience with social media by using open-ended, discursive interview questions. Whilst there was list of questions as set out in part 1 of the appendix, the researcher only used them as guide, to ensure that the participants felt comfortable in discussing the somewhat sensitive topic.

The data from the findings was then analysed and presented using a thematic coding approach. The analysis highlighted salient points that the author used to build the study upon and

ultimately fulfil the overall aim of the research project. The data provided interesting insights into young Irish women's engagement with social media. It was evident from the outset that the participants were aware of the negative effects promoting the 'ideal beauty' can have on women. The majority of the participants discussed how women (including themselves) are experiencing negative body image satisfaction, because they are trying to emulate the models they see in the advertisement and reach an ideal of beauty that is virtually unattainable. This ideal of beauty is unattainable due to the high level of digitally altered images present in traditional and digital advertising. The participants expressed that they are more exposed to the images through a digital context as their engagement with traditional media i.e. T.V, radio and print, is somewhat minimal.

Whilst there has been a myriad of literature surrounding how traditional media affects female body image (Tiggemann. 2003; Grabe, Ward and Hyde. 2008; and Mandel and Smeesters 2006), fewer studies have been conducted on how social media can cause body dissatisfaction amongst women. Furthermore there are even fewer studies addressing the effects of social comparison via social media. Social comparison was a notable theme throughout the interview process, this study shows that not only do Irish women engage in social comparison but they compare themselves to other women spontaneously without any instruction to do so.

This finding gave considerable insight into how social media interactions can have a negative effect on women. Moreover the findings also uncovered that the social comparison tendency varies depending on what social media platform the women are using. As mentioned previously women engaging in social comparison via Facebook are comparing themselves to their friends, whilst the women who actively use Instagram are more inclined to upwardly compare themselves to women they do not know personally. It was noted that whilst both platforms can cause participants to experience feelings of jealousy and body image dissatisfaction, a theory was presented that saw the participants feel worse after comparing themselves to people they know on Facebook.

Not all interactions on social media are negative, interacting with friends, looking at visually appealing images and 'fitspiration' were a few of the positive attributes as discussed by the participants. Perhaps the positive attributes of social media outweigh the negative and that is why Irish women continue to actively use it, or perhaps it is the addictive nature of social networking sites that has young Irish women engaging with it "*multiple times a day*".

6.2 Recommendations

Upon analysing the data collected from the findings, the current study has highlighted some areas that warrant further research. For example one area that required a more in-depth look was how social comparison tendencies can vary. In doing this it may shed some light on how and why peoples social comparison engagement changes depending on the images they are looking at. Whilst it is difficult for a researcher to pinpoint exactly why women engage in the process it may be beneficial for future research or studies in a similar field.

Secondly, it may be beneficial for further research to examine the differences between promoting the thin ideal vs promoting 'real' women in advertisements. There were strong views amongst the participants in regards to glorifying the 'thin ideal' in advertising, but interestingly two participants discussed how the promotion of real woman who are overweight is equally as damaging. Exploring both methods of advertising would be beneficial in gaining a deeper insight into how women respond to different ideas of beauty.

It could also be said that future research should consider using imagery within the interview process. Triangulated methods such as photo elicitation can be beneficial within in-depth interviews as it can uncover interesting viewpoints from the interviewees, which in turn can produce valuable insights into the phenomena being studied. Perhaps this a method that should be implemented for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - interview guide:

Advertising traditional and digital discussion:

1. What does the term advertising mean to you?
2. Is there any particular type of advertising campaigns that you look out for?
3. Is there any campaigns at the moment that catch your eye?
4. What do you think the contrasting differences are between traditional and digital advertising?
5. Do you think one is more effective than the other?
6. What are your thoughts on digitally altered images within the media, i.e. Photoshop?
7. Have you ever seen the dove campaigns promoting “real beauty”, what are your thoughts on these campaigns?

Social media discussion

1. What social media accounts do you have at the moment that you actively use?
2. Which sites do you actively use more than others?
3. How often do you use (insert most used social media site)?
4. What would you say your motivations are for using your favourite social media accounts
5. In your experience what kind of effect do you think social media has on women, in terms of body image satisfaction and how they perceive themselves?

Appendix 2- Interview Transcript samples

Interviewee 1 (14/08/15, 11:30, Duration: 15 minutes)

Interviewer: Can you tell me what advertising means to you, how it affects you and what kind of advertisements you look out for on a daily basis?

Interviewee: “Advertising...hmm... I guess in college we did a lot about like deconstructing of advertising and stuff so I am a lot more critical of it now than before I started college. Like I never take anything I see at face value anymore. Like we were taught to deconstruct everything like the image and words they use so I think I would probably be a bit more of a cynical kind of consumer of advertising”

Interviewer: Is there any particular campaigns you are seeing around at the moment? Is there certain campaigns that would catch your eye? For example fashion etc.?

Interviewee: “hmm that’s a tough question...I can’t think of anything off the top of my head I don’t usually read magazines and stuff , so I don’t really see adds that much in print”

Interviewer: Okay, would you be more inclined to see any campaigns online?

Interviewee: “Yeah but I find a lot of the adverts that come up on my newsfeeds (online) are more articles and stuff as opposed to traditional advertisements. I have been listening to the radio loads in work and noticing that the same ads are on all the time.

Interviewer: Okay now I will go on to ask you about social media, can you tell me when you started to engage with it?

Interviewee: “Oh first started engaging with it guess like early teens, like 13 or 14. I suppose I use it quite a lot compared to most people? I don’t know what the average is though! Bebo and MSN were the first ones I used, then I remember I started using Facebook quite early before my friends did because my friends in London used it. Loads of people I met in England had it so that’s why I signed up for it”

Interviewer: What would you say your engagement with Facebook is now?

Interviewee: “I would say quite actively, although I notice like I use it loads at the moment because I’m in work and I have loads of downtime, so I find myself scrolling past the same

things like three times in a hour. Whereas if I was... you know like...out and about and busy and had an interesting day I wouldn't use it that much"

Interviewer: And would Facebook be the primary one you would use when bored in work or a different platform for example twitter?

Interviewee: "Yeah I have twitter but I don't really use it, I have Instagram as well"

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on digitally altered images? Either in a digital context or traditionally.

Interviewee: "yeah I suppose the obvious answer is that it is kind of terrible. But I don't know ...I kind of fall somewhere in between, I know loads of people say it's so harmful and you know is setting such a bad example for younger girls and stuff, but I don't think I see it quite as badly as that because I just assume automatically that everything I see has been digitally altered, again that's probably because of college as they taught us to examine everything at such an intense level. Like I would never look at something and think it's real, I don't know if that is equally as twisted but I just assume everything has been digitally retouched, so any pictures I see either online or in newspapers I automatically assume that's not what they look like in real life, so it doesn't stress me out that much"

Interviewer: Have you ever seen the dove campaigns? What do you think of them, do you think they are effective?

Interviewee: "yeah I think it's really good for people to see like different images to what we normally see. Again it's kind of weird because I see them and I don't see them as anything that shocking, like 'Oh look this is what real people look like' and I am like well yeah I know [Pause for laughter]. But then if you are imagining that there all young girls and young boys especially that don't have such an awareness of how much everything is digitally retouched it's probably good for them to see that"

Interviewer: What are your motivations for using social networking sites?

Interviewee: "Yeah I guess it's just keeping in touch with people and yeah I don't think I use it to look at people I don't know as maybe some of my friends do. You know what I mean like I don't follow like celebrities or anything like that I don't use it for those things. I think I'm correct in saying that the majority of my social media interactions would be like with my friends and people that I definitely know. Like for keeping in touch with them and people who are

away and not living in Ireland. Like I don't use it that much for following those other things that some people do"

Interviewer: What is your experience with social media in regards to its effect on female body image satisfaction and how women perceive themselves?

Interviewee: "Yeah I think definitely it's so available for you to see now that, it's become a really acceptable thing to I don't want to say 'brag' but fitness is becoming really on trend at the moment, and it's not seen as showing off if you post a photo like "look I ran this much today and look how well I'm doing". That is seen to be a really positive thing but it's probably not. I think as well people pay a lot of attention to and you can see within my own group of friends and in our WhatsApp group that people post these photos of girls being like 'look how gorgeous she is' and 'I want to be her' and like I say I take all of it with a pinch of salt because of my college experience"

Interviewer: When you say 'college experience' do you mean in the classroom you were thought to be critical of what you see?

Interviewee: "yes absolutely, gender politics was something we talked about ALL the time"

Interviewer: What is gender politics?

Interviewee: "So like everything to do with the way women are represented so like we looked at all of these kind of things like the dailymail and these like Instagram celebrities and that kind of there's a particular way that the world and the media view women and there's a box that you can be put in. You would never see a dailymail article about like 'Oh look what George Clooney wore to the supermarket' like people just don't do that about male celebrities and males in general"

Interviewer: It's more female orientated?

Interviewee: "I feel like in the media females are more focused on, with regards to how they look, as opposed to with me it will be like 'look what movie he was just in' or like 'he said this cool thing in an interview' it's so much more about your actual talents or personality . I think it's also weird the way, I don't know if WhatsApp is social media...but the fact that that's how my group of friends interact most of the time is also weird because before when we didn't have WhatsApp and we would all be together and someone would say oh she's so gorgeous and

someone else would come back and say don't be silly you look great, whereas when its written in WhatsApp you can't tell someone's tone or how they are really feeling about the picture"

Interviewee 2 (14/08/15. 12:30, duration\; 13 minutes

Interviewer: What does the term advertising mean to you? Is there any specific advertisements you would look out for?

Interviewee: "I like fashion advertising, I don't like hearing them on the radio or TV because you don't have enough time to listen to them"

Interviewer: So would you prefer them in Magazines?

Interviewee: "yeah magazines and social media sites as well and like if you see them on a bus or billboards"

Interviewer: Is there any campaigns on billboards or magazines you have seen recently?

Interviewee: "yeah sprite are always advertising, they always seem to stick out and also skittles are funny as well, it's the stuff everyone knows I wouldn't look at advertisements of brands I didn't know. I also like colourful advertisements not ones that are very black and white"

Interviewer: What do you think the contrasting differences are of traditional and digital advertisements?

Interviewee: "yeah like on TV and radio like I might hear something I'm interested in and if they mention a website where there is more information that's good but I don't like that I can't rewind and hear what they talking about. I think social media is better as there is more details so maybe there will be a picture to catch your eye and if you click into it you will have all the details"

Interviewer: So you quite like the visual aspect of advertising on social media?

Interviewee: "yeah I think it's much better"

Interviewer: what kind of ones would pop up, when you say social media do you mean your Facebook account?

Interviewee: "yeah like Facebook and news websites, like on Facebook they always have them on the side and you can just click no when you see them and they won't pop up. You can

basically pick what you want to see and what you don't, so like there is always ones for clothes. I also get emails from shops and like companies"

Interviewer: would you click into them?

Interviewee: "well sometimes I look in the email, like in the content and if there is something that catches my eye then I'll go on the actual website and have a look"

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on digitally altered images? So like photo shop and that kind of thing.

Interviewee: "I don't think it's a good idea but then sometimes, if you are looking at a picture you don't always know if it is photo shopped, so like in your head you just think that models and celebrities just look that way anyway but if you actually think about it, you realise no they don't look like that because no one can look perfect like that"

Interviewer: So when you're saying you look at the advertisements are you assuming they are automatically photo shopped?

Interviewee: "I don't usually think about it unless someone has said something , like if someone has commented on a photo saying oh this is really badly photo shopped , or if there is an article about it , but sometimes I do look at the photos and wish you could look like that as well"

Interviewer: Would you say it bothers you or affects you in any way?

Interviewee: "It doesn't bother me although it does affect the way you look at yourself, like in a bad way, I suppose in a good way as well"

Interviewer: Would you say you compare yourself to the models in the picture?

Interviewee: "Yes definitely, you think that this is a standard that I have to reach, but then if you actually think about it, I can't look like that because its photo shopped"

Interviewer: What about the Dove campaigns have you ever seen them?

Interviewee: "yeah I have seen them on the TV, were they are like having a makeover but there is a shower there?"

Interviewer: Do you think they are beneficial because they are promoting real beauty?

Interviewee: "Yeah I like that there is real women and women with different shapes and sizes, so that's good and they always look really happy on the advertisements so that's good also. But

yeah it's nice that they don't always just use models and stuff, it feels closer to home because the people on it seem real"

Interviewer: Now I'm going to ask you about social media, so can you tell me what social media accounts you are using at the moment?

Interviewee: "I have Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter but I don't use it, WhatsApp and Pinterest ... and they are all the main ones"

Interviewer: What would be the ones you regularly use?

Interviewee: "I usually go on Facebook to see what's going on in the world, like I go on to see what's happening with people that I know and what everyone's news is. I also go on to see specific things, like look up a person or a celebrity, sometimes there is also good news articles. It can be a good way of actually getting your news if you don't want to go on a news website. I go on Instagram as well but Instagram I don't know I follow loads of random things on it, but it's nice you can search for specific things"

Interviewer: Well that kind of leads on to my next question which is what your motivations are for using social networking sites

Interviewee: "Well for like WhatsApp and Facebook it's probably mostly for connecting with people that I know, and then Instagram I feel like it's more anonymous, it's not as public as Facebook so if you like something or if you want to search for something no one will really know and you can follow random people and no one gives it a second thought. But if you went on Facebook and friend requested a random person they would be like 'who are you?'"

Interviewer: So would you say Instagram is a social media platform that you would prefer?

Interviewee: "eh, I don't know I like Facebook and Instagram both. Instagram is more about the images and Facebook is more about what the images are about. Instagram is good for giving you inspiration and ideas"

Interviewer: Is there any particular themes you follow on Instagram?

Interviewee: "Yeah fitness, fashion, architecture. Other stuff I like is nice photographs like random photography, I don't know just stuff that is appealing to the eye. Obviously I follow all my friends as well, but like it's nice to follow people that look really perfect without having to really look into what their life is about"

Interviewer: How often do you use those accounts on a day to day basis?

Interviewee: “I don’t even know what a rough figure would be, I go on them every day and Facebook I check at least 6 times a day and Instagram I only check once or twice a day”

Interviewer: In your experience what kind of effect do you think social media has on female body image satisfaction and how women perceive themselves?

Interviewee: “I think it has a big effect because you are constantly comparing yourself to the people that you are looking at on social media , so like whether its people you know , you obviously see what they’re doing all the time and then you might think why am I not like that? Like why don’t I have the same lifestyle as they do? Like even people that you don’t know like models and celebrities , like anyone you follow who you don’t know you just see there who life and what they are doing , eating , wearing etc. So like you might end up feeling shit about yourself if they are going on all these holidays and you are not doing anything for the summer. Or when they post pictures of themselves in a bikini and you think “oh I wouldn’t look that nice”. Yeah so like it obviously has an effect. Unless you are one of those people who is always putting up pictures of themselves then it might not have a negative effect on you. People don’t even realise when they go online how it’s effecting them, if you got rid of all social media people would probably feel a lot better about themselves and they wouldn’t be constantly comparing themselves to everyone”

Interviewer: Do you think it is more the case on Facebook or Instagram or a multitude of both?

Interviewee: “I think it’s both, I think Facebook hits closer to home because the people on there are friends with so you know them. So you like are comparing yourself more because the people that you know are obviously more like yourself so you are comparing yourself more. But if it’s a celebrity, you think ‘I’m not famous’ so there’s more of a gap. But I would say both definitely have a negative effect, as much as people love them it’s probably not good for your own self-esteem”

Interviewer: Would the social comparison necessarily stop you from using social media?

Interviewee: “Not really like even though it’s not having a good effect you still want to see what all these people are doing , it’s a bit addictive just to look at what other people are doing and how they are living their lives and how you can make your life more like there’s”.

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