

**Instagram and the Art of Curation**

By

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To examine the role that reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content has on users and the suitability of participant diaries in collecting this information.

**Methods:** Three female Instagram users took part in a qualitative phenomenological study where they completed participant diaries on curating the content of their personal Instagram accounts. A debrief interview took place after the journaling concluded. Data was then separated into significant statements and coded into themes.

**Findings:** Data presented in this study demonstrates the benefits of this practice experienced by the participants indicating that this is a useful skill for social media users to be aware of and develop as it can have a real-world impact. However, participants are limited by the structural restrictions of Instagram itself.

**Conclusion:** While Instagram's structural limitations impact individual content curation, it was found that users were also applying the skill to areas beyond body image-related content. Findings may also be applied to future digital literacy strategies and initiatives.

Keywords: Instagram, social media, content curation, phenomenology, participant diaries, social comparison theory, cultivation theory, digital literacy, body positivity.

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## Introduction

Numerous studies suggest that media exposure through well-known traditional sources such as T.V. and fashion magazines to unrealistic, thin female bodies can create harmful effects on female viewers (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Grabe et al., 2008; Homan et al., 2012). Negative impacts on the audience can include a large range of effects such as body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin ideal (Grabe et al., 2008), depression, anger, anxiety, and the potential development of eating disorders (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). With the emergence of popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, researchers including Sherlock & Wagstaff (2019), Tiggeman & Anderberg (2020), and Cohen et al. (2019a, 2019b, 2021) have begun expanding on earlier work to examine the impact on users from viewing the various kinds of body image-related content delivered through these new mediums, specifically on the image-heavy social media platform Instagram.

You may question why the narrow focus on this one platform. While women are exposed to potentially harmful images showcasing unrealistic body types and beauty standards on many different types of media, Instagram is an important platform to examine. Young women are increasingly turning to different forms of media for entertainment (Perloff, 2014, p. 364). A 2021 study by the Pew Research Centre found that Instagram is most popular among the 18 to 29-year-old demographic and 73% of those users visit the site at least every day (Smith & Anderson, 2021). Differing from traditional one-way media sources such as magazines, Instagram offers a unique space to create, share and view peer-generated content while interacting with other users (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020a, p. 2184). Along with the assistance of Instagram's algorithms that organize and suggest content (Mosseri, 2021), users explore the platform and follow other accounts or hashtags that will then be shown to them on their personal "feed". This individual

content selection process, built by user and platform “can offer a stream of carefully curated images and messages promoting the thin-ideal” (Cohen et al., 2019a, p. 1547). Some of the worst contributors to this may be items labeled #thinspo, meaning “inspirational images promoting thinness” (Alberga et al., 2018, p. 2) and #Fitspo: “...images intended to inspire people to live healthy and fit lifestyles” (Boepple et al., 2016, p. 132), both of which have documented negative impacts on the viewer. While the prevalence of this content may sound bleak for social media users, Instagram’s format also holds space for users to react to, and challenge conventional body image narratives through user-generated content. This is where body positivity, or #BoPo was able to carve out a corner of the internet and began to flourish.

Body Positivity is a recent, yet fast-growing trend online with the goal of “fostering acceptance and respect for all bodies regardless of shape, size, and features” (Cohen et al., 2021, p. 2366). There is clearly an interest in this type of content, with 9.2 million posts tagged #bodypositivity in 2021 (Instagram, 2021), and it continues to grow and evolve as users interact with and transform it through their own interpretations. Originally categorized as #bodypositivity or #bodypositive, it has expanded to include other hashtags that challenge traditional beauty narratives such as #healthateverysize or #haes, #effyourbeautystandards, and #fatspiration (Cohen et al., 2021, p. 2366) to name a few. This tag continues to evolve as individual users, influencers and corporations interact with it, with the underlying theme of challenging traditional beauty standards.

Exposure to body-positive content has been shown to improve mood, body satisfaction, and appreciation (Cohen et al., 2019, p. 1547) and could be an important factor in mitigating the negative impacts of societal beauty ideals, particularly as a peer-driven movement. Interestingly, while we have insight from psychology-based research into the detrimental effects that exposure

to unrealistic body types can cause young women on Instagram, as well as the potential benefits from #bodypositive content, little is known about how the users themselves can build a more positive experience on social media. Not all content is created equally and impacts will vary across users.

My research endeavors to look into the individual content curation process to address the following research question:

- 1) *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?*
- 2) *Are participant diaries a useful tool for collecting this information?*

Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach my research aims to examine the role of the viewer, the consumer who is exposed to and absorbs the content out there on the platform. Content curation is a personal process and this study has been designed with that in mind, holding space for participants to explore and communicate their own personal experiences. To capture this data, I have decided to use participant diaries, a common tool used in the health sciences for reflective intervention (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005) followed by debrief interviews. Quantitative methodologies, such as surveys were rejected for this study as they did not allow to explore the topic and individual process as in depth as desired. These methodologies will be discussed further in the literature review. The role of the content creator, while also important, will not be examined in this study.

It is my hope that research findings could inform larger education and awareness initiatives surrounding social media use. While it is important to acknowledge the role that the platform can (and likely should play) in protecting its users, digital literacy and content curation are becoming increasingly critical skills required to successfully navigate the amount of content available online



and require attention.

This paper is divided into the following sections: the literature review will discuss the academic literature on which this study is based; the research design and methodology chapter which explains the participant diary approach that I selected for the data collection process and methodology; and lastly, the findings and discussion chapter that both explores the data and implications of content curation and Instagram use for women.

Before examining how to counteract the negative effects of Instagram, it is important to understand previous research on Instagram and body image, the evolution of body image-related content on the platform, and the current knowledge on user-directed digital content curation. This chapter will attempt to accomplish this goal by reviewing research done on the impact of body image-related content on female viewers and discuss several important categories of Instagram content such as #thinspo, #fitspo, and #BoPo. Reviewing some of the common theoretical frameworks and applied methodology of past works reveals an important research gap: while much of the literature focuses on what happens when users are shown different types of content by researchers, we are still missing information on the relevance and role of reflective curation practices for users.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

It is suggested by previous research that body-image-related content can have both positive and negative impacts on female Instagram users. However, before examining how we may be able to amplify the benefits while mitigating the negative effects of Instagram us empower users to take advantage of these findings, it is important to understand the previous research on Instagram and body image-related content, as well as what is known about digital content curation, as my intention is to link these concepts together for the purpose of my research study. While much of the literature focuses on Instagram content and its impacts on a user's mental health, platform features, and even self-reflection for content creators, we are still missing critical information on the role of reflective curation for users who are viewing the materials created by others.

The literature review begins by outlining the search methodology used and how those findings inevitably shaped the topics covered, including both inclusion and exclusion criteria. Several subjects emerged during my search that could not be ignored, including the discussion on body-image-content-related hashtags such as #BoPo, #fitspo, and #thinspo and their effect on female viewers. Two prominent theories, Social Comparison Theory (SCT) and Cultivation Theory (CT) provide important context as to why and how content can impact viewers, or in the case of social media platforms, users. I then delve into the history of digital content curation which provides insight into how these concepts may be utilized to potentially negate the negative impacts of social media content viewed and to perhaps enhance the benefits of such platforms. To conclude, a summary will be provided identifying key findings as well as the gaps in the literature that went on to inform my research study.

## **Literature Review Methodology**

I began my initial search on this topic by completing a few ad hoc searches on Google Scholar to determine some of the common language used by researchers. Following the initial scan, I primarily used the University of Alberta EBSCO database and ProQuest to complete my searches. Applying Boolean logic, I created and recorded my first-round list of search terms, including *Instagram*, *body\** (to cover *body image*, *body positivity*, *body neutrality*, etc.), *social media*, *representation*, and *mental health*. This yielded a fair amount of results but lacked a connection to content curation, consumption, and organization. For my second-round search, I expanded my terms to include *Instagram*, *mass media communications*, *content consumption*, *content curation*, and *social media* to expand my results. As I read my articles, I was able to identify two prominent theories that I became interested in, *social comparison theory* and *cultivation theory*, as well as identify several prominent authors in this field.

Considerations for my search strategy included:

### **Publication Date**

Instagram first launched in 2010 and was sold to Facebook in 2012 (Instagram, 2021). A significant amount of research on the subject of Instagram and body image concerns for female users has been conducted over the past five years. I had originally set a limit that articles concerning Instagram must be published in 2015 and beyond so that they were relevant, however many of the studies I found were published in 2018 or later. For content related to general social media, digital content curation, and other similar items, I was more flexible on dates, extending my range when options were limited or finding the original source material that had been referenced by another author.

## **Types of literature**

I endeavored to use peer-reviewed sources to ensure quality, reliability, and validity of research wherever possible to emphasize the severity and impact of body image content on female users. User-generated content and news surrounding social media platforms appear more quickly than peer-reviewed sources, so there are several instances where it felt necessary to include sources from grey literature. The concept of active content curation surrounding body image and comparison is evident both in the news and on Instagram itself, and I have included several quotations throughout this review to attempt to express the tone of these conversations. The majority of my research was focused on English-speaking countries, primarily the U.S, Australia, and Canada. I was interested in research completed in non-English speaking locations, with different beauty ideals or cultural hashtags to help frame this in a global context but there were limited options available, indicating a future research opportunity.

## **Limitations and scope considerations**

I acknowledge that the issue of negative body image, mood, and social media impacts all genders beyond those identifying as female. At the time of research, I found several papers examining the effects of Instagram fitness (Chatzopolou et al., 2020), and fashion (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b) content on male users. Men have also been identified as potential beneficiaries of body positive content with more research required (Cohen et al., 2021, p. 2370), and it has been noted that “results typically obtained for women cannot simply be generalized to men” (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020b, p. 237). Research has not significantly addressed the experience of people falling outside of cis-binary gender expressions. Given that body image content on Instagram overwhelmingly features female bodies (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015, p. 59) and that much

of the pre-existing research focuses on women's experiences, this is where I have chosen to focus my research.

At the time of writing this literature review, Instagram's parent company Facebook (now housed under the Meta umbrella) was under fire in the media with whistleblower Frances Haugen claiming that Instagram was a dangerous form of social media for youth in particular and that the company's "...own internal research shows that the use of the app, especially with children, formed a sort of "addict's narrative" where children using it aren't happy, but can't control their use of the app and feel as though they cannot stop using it." (Schneider, 2021). As this story develops, there is a chance these recent accusations will affect both future policy development and research on Instagram, particularly around body image and young female users. This topic is growing in the public eye: In December 2021, BuzzFeed News ran a piece called "Here's How Instagram Fails to Protect People At Risk For Eating disorders From Pro-Anorexia Messaging" (Baker-White). Public awareness of these issues may also impact the results of future research if participants are generally aware of Instagram's potential negative outcomes (Englen et al, 2020, p. 43).

My own Instagram experience also informs my project; it is how I was introduced to the body positivity movement, and it is possible that my own bias will affect this work. As will be discussed in more detail in the Research Design and Methodology chapter, I have enlisted several bracketing techniques to identify any areas where this may occur. However, it is important to note that Instagram content and communities can evolve very quickly. Some concepts, such as emerging hashtags or trends are currently more fleshed out on Instagram than by researchers, yet are important considerations that may be best observed by those within the community.

## **Literature Review Findings**

### **The Internet has a history of making people feel bad**

*“Instagram is supposed to be friendly. So why is it making people so miserable?” (Hearn, 2021)*

While researching the issue of social networking sites (SNS) and their effect on body image, it was well-established that traditional beauty standards as communicated by the mass media can and likely do have a negative impact on female viewers. The connection between the media and body-image disturbance found in foundational meta-analyses such as by Heinberg & Thompson (1995) and Grabe et al. (2008) went on to inform many of the scholars in this area and the vast majority of literature I reviewed on the subject cited at least one of these papers. In knowing this link, both communications and psychology researchers have become determined to learn more about what specifically in traditional forms of media causes negative outcomes and how they may be circumvented in the future.

Technology has advanced quickly, however, and as viewers turned to new online sources of entertainment (Perloff, 2014, p. 364), the “digital generation” (Stein et al., 2021, p. 87) drew attention to the internet as a medium. These negative body image associations continued as women went online; in 2010, Tiggemann & Miller found a connection between overall internet use and lower weight satisfaction for adolescent girls. Looking generally at online usage, they were unable to determine what content may have caused this, although they did note social networking sites as a particular cause for concern (p. 86). Cohen et al. (2017; 2018) later challenged and expanded on these findings to claim that it is specifically “appearance focused-social media use that is related to body image outcomes, rather than overall time spent” (Cohen et al., 2019, p. 1548). While this may be true, how much, when, and why someone logs into an SNS platform are all important factors when assessing audience impact: Smock et al. (2011) argued that since not all platforms are used the same way by everyone, we need different ways to

measure impact. Tiggeman & Miller (2010) and Cohen et al. (2017; 2018) may both be correct: overall time spent online could result in more exposure (even accidentally) to say, #thinspo content. The individual factors as to why people log onto SNS, including the potential difference in services and features offered by different platforms could also influence the effect (Stein et al., 2018, p. 89).

Often compared to its sister company Facebook, the “purely photo-based” platform Instagram (Cohen et al., 2017), with the ability for users to “carefully select and enhance the images they post” (Engeln et al., 2020, p. 39), soon warranted its own examination. A number of works published over the last few years by Brathwaite & DeAndrea (2021), Fiorvanti et al. (2021), Alberga et al. (2021), and Cohen et al. (2019a, 2019b, 2020, and 2021) examine the relationship between viewing body image-related content on Instagram. I looked at a wide range of studies, many of which were focused on examining the impacts of specific kinds of body image content on Instagram and analyzing the relationship between frequency of use and impact on a user’s mood. Content curation was not specifically addressed in these studies. However, when examining the benefits of #BoPo content on users, #fitspo and #thinspo often came up as important comparison categories and needed to be acknowledged in this review.

### **#Thinspo, #Fitspo and #BoPo, Oh My!**

*“This is for all my fellow humans who only ever saw soft tummies in someone’s ‘before’ pictures. Your belly now is enough. You don’t need to change. You are stunning as you are. xx.” (Budenberg, 2021)*

While my research intends to focus on the body positivity movement and other types of Instagram content that challenge traditional beauty narratives, it became increasingly inevitable during my research that two categories of content, #thinspo and #fitspo needed to be acknowledged in this review. Not only were they prevalent in the existing research surrounding

#BoPo, but it is also possible that these tags helped inspire its creation, or contributed to its popularity as a kind of push back from users: enough is enough, we want to see something different (or so I would like to hope). It is also relevant to explore them from a content curation perspective: when examining the impact of replacing content with something else we must also look at what has been replaced, and why. Multiple comparisons of #BoPo to #fitspo and #thinspo have been done, finding a generally positive impact upon a viewer after exposure to #bopo, and negative impacts after #fitspo and #thinspo (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Cohen et al., 2019a; Fioravanti et al., 2021). The methodology of these studies will be discussed later on, for now, I aim to review the definitions and documented impacts of #thinspo, #fitspo, and #BoPo, as discussed in the literature.

### **Thinspiration**

#Thinspo or #Thinspiration content promotes a female thin-ideal through images that may be accompanied by “explicit encouragement of advice on losing weight and staying thin” (Lapinski, 2009, as cited by Ghazani & Taylor, 2015, p.54). Analyses of #thinspo content have accounted for the kinds of images posted and even noted minor differences in the types of posts between platforms (Alberga et al., 2018; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015); however, the emphasis on the thin-ideal remained consistent. Boepple & Thompson (2016) noted the similarities between #thinspo to “pro-ana”, or pro-anorexia content, which, when labeled, has generally been banned on SNS due to its obvious and dangerous connections with disordered eating (p. 98).

Thinspiration sites generally featured “content related to losing weight or fat, praising thinness, showing a thin pose and providing food guilt messages” (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). At the time of writing, searching for content labeled #thinspo on Instagram directs users to resources for eating disorder recovery (Instagram, 2021); however, #thinspo content may escape this attempt



at moderation by changing the hashtag associated with it. A quick search on Instagram reveals that attempts to get around the platform settings such as “thin\_sp0”, “thinsp00” and “\_thin\_sp0” were all still active accounts, an accessible example of the easy dodge of Instagram’s security settings that is currently drawing criticism (Baker-White, 2021).

### **Fitspiration**

Fitspiration or #fitspo content claims to encourage a healthy lifestyle, but below the surface may also encourage problematic behaviours through text and image. In a content analysis of fitspiration websites, Boepple et al. (2016) found that 92% of images they examined featured women, 97% of which were considered thin. Text alongside the images was also analyzed, with 92.5% containing “appearance-related messages about exercise (i.e., Would you rather be covered in sweat at the gym or clothes at the beach)” (p. 134). Similarities with #thinspo content were also observed:

“Although relative to fitspiration, thinspiration posts promoted thinness to a greater degree, explicitly encouraged weight loss more frequently, included more objectifying content, and made more references to eating disorders, fitspiration tended to include more messages of guilt about body shape and weight than thinspiration.” (Alberga et al., 2018).

A study examining the impact of daily exposure to Fitspiration Instagram content on young women’s mood and body image found negative impacts on mood and body image and suggests that “fitspiration content should be deemed inappropriate” (Fioravanti et al., 2021, p. 1).

### **Body Positivity**

Body positivity content attempts to break the cycle of unattainable female beauty standards present in the media. There are many expressions of body positivity posts, allowing users to find what resonates with them. Some similarities include:

“quotes, images and captions, ranging from selfies of women proudly displaying their larger bodies with captions like ‘it’s possible to love your belly rolls, it’s possible to have a favourite spot of cellulite,’ before and after photos of ‘real’ bodies encouraging awareness of the use of digital alteration in mainstream media, positive quotes like ‘you are more than a body, go show the world more,’ and images focusing on body functionality” (Cohen et al., 2019a, p. 1548).

Several studies have compared the effect of #BoPo on mood to #fitspo, #thinspo or what is considered to be “neutral content” (such as animals or travel). Cohen et al. (2019a) found that “brief exposure to body-positive content on Instagram was associated with improvements in young women’s positive mood and body satisfaction” compared to thin-ideal posts that were “associated with decreases in positive mood and body satisfaction” (p. 1559). A longitudinal study by Fioravanti et al. (2021) confirmed similar findings, with a specific emphasis that exposure to “fitspiration content showed greater growth of negative mood.” (p.16).

It is important to keep in mind that #BoPo content is not all created equally, and a label or hashtag does not guarantee automatic benefits for the audience. Body Positivity has been criticized for still being very “appearance focused” and may “pressure women to love their bodies; making them feel worse if they do not” (Oltuski as quoted by Cohen et al., 2020, p. 2367). Brathewaite and DeAndrea (2021) drew attention to #BoPo posts made by companies that contained self-promotion or promoted products and found that they were “less morally appropriate and were less effective at promoting body appreciation and inclusivity” (p. 1). Intentions behind posts clearly have a role to play in effective messaging, which may be undermined by the corporate agenda.

Some users may not resonate with the idea of body positivity for a variety of reasons and focus instead on body neutrality. Body neutrality aims to take the pressure off appearances and

may include messages such as “you are more than a body” (Cohen et al., 2020). This may be useful for those who feel body positivity is still too appearance focused, however “previous research has found that young women experienced greater acceptance of their own bodies following exposure to bodies that do not conform to the thin ideal” (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018 as cited by Cohen et al., 2020, p. 2369). Regardless, an awareness of the effects of different types of content and the ability to choose what resonates remains an individual process and one that may be best served by conscious content curation.

### **#Methodology**

In my examination of the studies claiming to measure the effects of #thinspo, #fitspo, and #BoPo content on women, I found an emphasis on quantitative studies measuring mood. Sherlock & Wagstaff (2019), Cohen et al. (2019a), and Fioravanti et al. (2021) also chose and provided participants with content they considered as #BoPo, #thinspo, #fitspo, or neutral (generally defined as animals or travel pictures) from public Instagram accounts and measured the results, which I discussed above.

However, it is important to note that these studies focused only on the effects of viewing materials that were provided by researchers, under predetermined hashtags. In contrast, a study by Engeln et al. (2020) comparing Facebook to Instagram, allowed participants to browse their own social media pages in short bursts, which is more realistic for everyday use (p. 43). They found that Instagram decreased body satisfaction, increased appearance comparisons with others, and inspired an increase in women thinking about their appearances, all compared to Facebook (p. 43). Despite these negative effects, it is unlikely that users will abandon the platform, but “perhaps by taking control of the content one sees in their Instagram feed, users can ameliorate some of Instagram’s negative outcomes” (Engeln et al., 2020, p.43).

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theories emerged during my literature review that have been used by researchers, including the ones cited in this review. While originally used to explain the effects of traditional forms of media such as magazines and television, they have more recently been applied to social media platforms, in particular Instagram.

### **Social Comparison Theory**

*“We are all supposed to look different. We’re not supposed to have the same body shape and size and I need you to hear that!” (Light, 2021).*

Social Comparison Theory (SCT) has roots in social psychology and has provided valuable insight into communications research, particularly in “explaining the interplay between engagement with various media, users self-perceptions and their psychological well-being” (Meier et al., 2020, p. 723). It is a popular theory to apply to social networking sites such as Instagram, as SCT suggests that individuals are driven to evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves to others they feel are close to themselves (Festinger, 1954). Instagram provides a plethora of these opportunities, through real-life connections with peers expressed online, or with personalities or accounts they follow, who may feel similar on the basis of the content they share. Content posted on Instagram has already been curated by the poster, and regardless of the intent behind it, may inevitably trigger different types of comparisons.

SCT has been expanded to include definitions of upward comparison and downward comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Upward comparison, such as what may occur when users interact with #fitspo content as an example, is “elicited by a target superior on relevant comparison criteria” (Meier et al., 2020, p. 722). Downward comparison is directed at individuals perceived to be of lower status or quality and can “serve as a defensive mechanism to improve self-esteem”

(Stein et al, 2021, p. 88). SNS sites may provide a particularly dangerous avenue for social comparison; while viewers may more easily recognize a disconnect between art and reality on TV, for example, the peer-filled “social networking....suggests that beautiful appearances are omnipresent, reaching from one’s closet friends to countless “normal” people all over the world....as a result a vicious circle of upward social comparisons may ensure” (Stein et al., 2021, p. 88). A study by Meier et al (2020) acknowledges a difference in effect between inspiration and envy in upward and downward SNS comparison; in short, a certain amount of envy “may partially explain inspiration, and hence, well-being in reaction to SNS postings” (p 722). However, the subject, or content of the post matters: as an example, Meier et al. (2020) noted that upward comparisons on SNS “in reaction to nature and travel Instagram posts was robustly associated with higher positive affect and eudaimonic wellbeing” (p. 737). The negative “well-being effects of body image-related imagery may be elicited by additional mechanisms other than upward comparisons, such as self-objectification or idealization of an unrealistic body ideal” (Meier et al, 2020, p. 724). A stronger societal emphasis on the importance of female beauty may play a role in the differences of effect between these types of content. However both upward and downward comparisons can play an important role in normalizing or challenging conventional beauty narratives amongst viewers. Stein et al., (2021) believe that SCT is limited by its focus on “self-related attitudes” (p.88) and is strengthened by the addition of cultivation theory.

### **Cultivation Theory**

Given the connection between SNS use and depressive symptoms (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010) and frequency of use, Cultivation theory (CT), introduced by Gerbner and Gross (1976), claims that exposure to similar content through the mass media can impact the actions, beliefs and social realities of the audience, eventually “homogenizing viewers

into a singular mainstream” (Stein et al., 2021, p. 88). While originally focused on the effects of television on viewers, when applied to social media, CT can account for changes in behaviour and attitudes that may be experienced by Instagram users: “As certain beauty ideals and fitness behaviors are promoted repeatedly...recipients are led to believe that these depictions constitute the societal norm, thus assimilating them into their own attitudinal repertoire (thin-ideal internalization).” (Stein et al., 2021, p. 88). This point allows for CT to be applied to research that claims the frequency of Instagram use may impact the user’s experience. While SCT is focused on “self-related attitudes....this theory fails to acknowledge many other potential consequences of this media practice such as the formation of wrong assumptions about society, or the adoption of new beliefs about others.” (Stein, et al, 2021, p. 88). While SCT offers a compelling “why” to the question of those using Instagram, the addition of CT theory adds important background as to the “how” these effects on an individual may come to be.

### **Digital Content Curation**

*“Hit ‘Unfollow’ on Social Media to Improve Your Mental Health” (Flic, 2019)*

Is the practice of improving one’s mental health on social media really as simple as hitting the “unfollow” button? Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are currently drowning in an abundance of information online. We rely on platforms to help us find and organize this sheer amount of data, but users still are exposed to high volumes just on social media: the average Instagram user follows roughly 150 accounts (Task Ant, 2020) and on average has 338 friends on Facebook (Osman, 2021). Backlinko, a search engine optimization company (SEO) claims that the average social media user engages with an average of 6.6 social media platforms (Dean, 2021). We are creating and absorbing at a rapid pace and the skills required to find and make sense of the content we see are becoming critical (Dale, 2014, p. 200); however, they are also not necessarily

intrinsic or automatic to us. While Dale argues this is a task that experts may take on, I believe these skills are essential for everyone, especially the average user, to help them use social media as a positive force. Curation, enter stage right.

Digital content curation has multiple definitions and applications. Hootsuite, a company that helps businesses manage their social media accounts views content curation as a form of strategic communication: “[it is] content created by others that you select to share with your audience” (Newberry, 2020). It is a conscious effort to effectively communicate your message, brand, or identity to make it through the deluge of information to your target audience. Content curation can also occur on an individual scale, what Davis defines as productive curation or “what people document, make, share and with whom” (Davis, 2017, p. 773).

Productive curation can be examined under the lens of *hupomnemata*, or “the shaping or formation of the self through one’s collection and recollection of the fragmentary logos, transmitted through teaching, listening or reading” (Foucault, as cited by Weisgerber & Butler, 2015, p. 1340). It places a high degree of importance on reflecting our experiences as an affirmation of self and identity. Weisgerber and Butler (2015) expanded upon Foucault’s expansion of the Greek concept of *hupomnemata*, modernizing it to reflect the current technological realities, namely SNS. Weisgerber and Butler (2015) claim that this identity-affirming process occurs online through practices such as status updates, blog posts, and other online reflections; however, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stimulus available. This is where the role of digital curators can be useful as “information discovery professionals, adept at plugging into an incessant information stream and building networks of connections” (Weisgerber & Butler, 2015, p. 1341). Both Foucault (1997) and Weisgerber and Butler (2015) focus on the idea of content creators engaging in digital content curation and do not

address the potential role of the viewer themselves participating in this process to increase their control over what information comes their way.

My interest is in how digital content curation can be applied to the role of the consumer, or user as a way to filter what content is part of their online experience; a practice that could be beneficial in negating the impact of damaging content encountered on Instagram or other social media platforms. Davis differentiates between productive curation and consumptive practices as “the active practice of looking and engagement which networked individuals navigate pools of data in discriminating ways....a practice of both necessity and motivation” (Davis, 2017, p. 773). This angle is missing from much of the research on Instagram and body image, yet may complement some of the implications made by both social comparison theory and cultivation theory. What we choose to look at, and how frequently we do so can impact us, therefore we need to have more control over what that is.

There are limitations to what consumptive content curation can accomplish. Dale (2014), importantly reminds us “that much of this is system automated, that is, algorithmically derived, and consequently the quality, accuracy and relevance of the content is only as good as the algorithm” (Dale, 2014, p. 200). In light of privacy scandals, the opacity surrounding algorithmic processes, and whistleblower reports claiming damage to consumers (Wells et al., 2021) platforms such as Instagram, may not have the everyday users’ best interests at heart. While the impacts or goals of Instagram’s algorithm are not fully understood by the public, there are nevertheless still actions that can be taken on the individual level. Instagram itself advertises that “how you use Instagram heavily influences the things you see and don’t see” and recommends taking actions such as “pick your close friends”, “mute people you’re not interested in” and “mark recommended posts as not interested” to help influence what you see on your Feed. (Instagram, 2021). The



prevalence of #thinspo content on Instagram demonstrates that this is far from a perfect system, but a user's awareness of how what they see can impact them, and the conscious use of these functions could help make a difference in day-to-day usage, and raise the awareness required to support the larger policy changes required to make more dramatic changes.

### **Analysis of Findings**

*“Control Your Social Media Happiness. Don’t be scared to delete” (Victoria, 2017)*

Researchers have noted the impact of the incredibly visual nature of Instagram, even in comparison to other SNS platforms such as Facebook on body image (Engeln et al., 2020). This suggests that Instagram on its own may be worth special attention given that negative mental health issues such as anxiety, lower body satisfaction, and feelings of inadequacy seem to be plentiful, particularly when viewing them by the #hashtag. Cohen et al (2019), Fioravanti et al (2021), and Sherlock & Wagstaff (2019) all drew attention to the effects caused by viewing specific types of content on users, such as the more positive #BoPo, and the notorious #fitspo and #thinspo. There are also many differences between the types of content posted even within a hashtag; Brathwaite & DeAndrea noted that intention behind body positivity posts can also impact their effect, as demonstrated by corporate accounts #BoPo posts being less effective (2021). While SCT and CT can provide important context for perhaps why users experience a range of effects while interacting with the platform, most of the positive and negative effects on users have been observed in a research setting, and not much direction has been provided for how these findings may be applied to users in a real-life setting.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge how recent the research on Instagram is, given that the platform itself is still quite new. While SCT and CT have long been applied to traditional forms of media such as TV and magazines, there are new applications of upward and downward

comparisons, and questions about the impact of the frequency of use as the role have changed from that of a one-way consumer to that of a user. The element of interactivity has changed and increased along with the technology itself and must be considered in the analysis and possible solutions moving forward.

### **Addressing the gaps and limitations.**

Despite the potential of Instagram for users to choose and engage with a wide variety of content, the negative impacts and user struggles identified both in research, and in the seemingly common grey literature online cause me to wonder if, and how many users may struggle to format their "feeds" to optimize their experience or even to just enjoy using the platform.

Addressing this is complicated for several reasons: the literature identifies overall time spent (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010), as well as what specific types of content (#BoPo, #Fitspo, or #Thinspo), were viewed (Cohen et al., 2017, 2019; Fioravanti et al., 2021) as potential causes for positive or negative mood or effect on female viewers. The majority of studies focused on the effects of content selected by researchers and shown to participants, yet we lack insight into real-world applications or how users may actually come across this content on their own personal Instagram accounts, working with or against "the algorithm", a concept that seems to loom vaguely in the background for researchers and users alike. There are huge variations in subject material categorized as a specific hashtag, and incentives for applying multiples on a post: the more hashtags used, the more likely the post will appear in someone's search. There are certainly more hashtags available out there than what has been formally studied, with more added every day. Some of these will likely never be examined by researchers, yet will certainly be discovered by users. Different content or even the #hashtags themselves will resonate with different audiences, therefore encouraging users to develop and use the skills required to find them

seems a prudent requirement moving forward. What may be discovered by users as they are empowered to reflect on; and potentially make or remake the choices about what content they consume?

In light of the current ongoing investigations surrounding Instagram's algorithm and the mental health of young female users that are directly associated with the prevalence of #thinspiration content, the conversation about the role of content curation must continue. According to Davis (2017), "consumptive curation is an integral part of the digital media experience, with practices encompassing both technological affordances and simple manipulations of the body." (p. 775). While platforms have a large role to play in protecting their users, it is also important to build awareness of the systems we use and the skills required to safely and effectively navigate them. Given the many angles from which we can examine the impact of body-image-related content on the viewer, and the potential for both positive and negative effects it is essential to examine the journey behind this process to create more agency and empower SNS users to build a better online experience for themselves to the best degree that they are able.

### **Summary**

*"Your experience on Instagram should be intentional and inspiring. These tools can help you manage your time online" (Instagram, 2022).*

The purpose of this literature review was to explore the existing research around the impacts of body-image-related content as experienced by women on social media platforms. The impacts of traditional one-way media, such as TV and magazines on women's wellbeing have been well documented but the rise of social media as an interactive medium has greatly changed the playing field. Content can be passively consumed by users, but it can also be created and viewed

by anyone with an account. While Instagram is home to the potentially damaging #fitspo and #thinspo hashtags, it also holds space for #BoPo or other alternative communities associated with positive effects on users to thrive and flourish.

The idea of online content curation is developing and evolving. With several definitions of an online “curator” present in the research, such as those provided by Davis (2017), this idea is growing as a concept for Instagram users to discuss on the platform. It is also being gently, if not vaguely suggested by Instagram itself, although certainly not directly in relation to body image. While the research discussed in this review has focused on the effects of viewing different types of body image-related content on users’ wellbeing, we lack clarity on what being a curator actually entails, and what this process would look like for individual users.

Inspired by findings from the researchers discussed in this chapter, my research project aims to explore how we can improve the Instagram experience for women using this platform. While past research projects have examined the effects of viewing specific types of content in controlled settings, I aim to see what data can be collected by those using the platform organically. To capture this information, I am using participant diaries, a method typically employed to encourage reflective intervention (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). Using a phenomenological approach, my research aims to examine the role of reflective content curation in creating a more empowering social media experience while attempting to discover a holistic way to collect this information. My research questions are as follows:

1. *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?*
2. *Are participant diaries a useful tool for collecting this information?*

The next chapter will introduce my proposed research design and methodology and the data collection process used for my study to answer the above research questions

## Research and Methodology

### Introduction

The literature review suggests that body-related content viewed by female users on Instagram can have an impact on their physical and mental well-being. While previous studies have focused on understanding the differences between the effects of particular types of content such as #BoPo, #Fitspo, and #Thinspo (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Cohen et al., 2020a; Fioravanti et al., 2021); they do not account for the individual experiences encountered during natural individual Instagram use, which can be heavily impacted by what accounts the user follows and what they are shown by the platform's algorithms. Another consideration is the variations that exist within content categories; something labeled #BoPo for example, has many expressions and some of these may resonate more for some than others. As suggested by Engeln et al. (2021), an approach to mitigating the negative impacts of body-image-related content may be to "...encourage users to more carefully curate their feeds" and to take "control of the content one sees on their Instagram feed" (p. 43). To better understand how this type of strategy might occur in practice, this study aims to explore individual processes of reflective, conscious content curation on Instagram, and to determine if participant diaries are a useful tool for collecting this information.

This chapter will overview my phenomenological examination to explore individual Instagram content curation using participant diaries. Participants for this study were Instagram users who were recruited from the "Acts of Beauty Insiders" Facebook group, a body-positive online community run by local Edmonton business owner Star Newman. While all participants were located in the Edmonton area, all activities related to this study were conducted online. This research offers a more naturalistic approach to understanding the issue of body image, social

media use, and the well-being of female users with the hope of creating a more enjoyable and empowering social media experience for all.

### **Research Design**

Examining one's own Instagram content choices is a personal and reflective process, and this project has been designed with that in mind. Given the necessary focus on the individual experience for female users demanded by this topic, this study applied a qualitative phenomenological approach using participant diaries. Phenomenology aims to "describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it" (Neubauer et al, p. 91, 2019). I choose to apply transcendental phenomenology which specifically endeavors to discover the "...underlying, fundamental aspects of experience - features that are universal and that lie at the very heart of human experience" (Denscombe, p. 100, 2010). As this study aims to examine the individual experiences of social media content curation, using transcendental phenomenology means that "the stories will be told from the participants' voices and not those of the researcher or from individuals reporting studies in the literature, an approach consistent with human science research" (Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, p. 32, 2004). This is an important feature in addressing the methodological gap previously identified in the literature review, where researchers were examining participant reactions to specific types of content in controlled, but unnatural settings for social media use. Using this approach of describing and interpreting the thoughts and experiences collected in the participant diaries, themes or similarities may be discovered that will help with understanding and creating future initiatives in this area. The reflective process itself may also play a role in creating an empowering social media experience.

Solicited participant diaries are often used for reflective intervention and "can provide

clues as to the importance of events for the participants and their attitudes about those events” (Jacelon & Imperio, p. 992, 2005). A wide range of experiences can be had while using social media platforms and using a daily participant diary, allows for the collection of “data that may not be recalled accurately, other than immediately after the activity had taken place...and enables the collection of a complete picture” (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 217). Similar to other participant diary studies such as by Jacelon & Imperio (2005) and Lewis et al. (2005), interviews were conducted at the beginning and completion of the diary. The pre-interview allowed me to build rapport with participants and fully explain the study, whereas the post-diary interview allowed to “both expand on what was reported in the diary and provide an opportunity to question features that were not directly observable” (Lewis et al., 2005, p. 222). The post-diary interview also allowed me to confirm my interpretations of the data were correct with the participant (Chan et al., 2013, p. 5) and ask any followup questions.

My own experience as an Instagram user brings a unique insight and awareness to this project, however, I had to bracket out as much of my own expectations as possible to fully interact with the participant data. The emotionally-charged nature of the subject matter also posed challenges: “...an emotionally challenging topic can infuse the researcher with its inherent challenges...and...skew the results and interpretation” (Newman, 2012, p. 81). I enlisted several bracketing techniques including reflexive journaling prior to the research proces and “writing memos throughout the data collection and analysis as a means of examining and reflecting” (Newman, 2012, p. 86). This proved to be both grounding for myself, and beneficial for the data collection process moving forward.

## **Participants**

Purposive sampling “intentionally focus on the target group to the exclusion of other



groups” (Smith as quoted in Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 66) and is ideal for qualitative research (Patton, p. 458, 2008). My study aims to understand the process of content curation within a specific demographic in great detail. The participant demographic was chosen to align with the past research on social media and body image previously identified in the literature review, although slightly expanded for participant recruitment purposes. Much can also be learned through this method by identifying and examining “exemplars of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, p. 458, 2008), which can only occur through purposive sampling. Random sampling has the advantage of potentially estimating the statistical precision of findings and being able to potentially generalize to a larger population (Bamberger & Mabry, p. 298, 2020). It could also, however, potentially miss significant important and individual qualitative details among participants (Patton, p. 459, 2008), which is the goal of this study.

Using purposive sampling, I identified my sample population as women residing in and around the Edmonton area; between the ages of 18 - 40 with an Instagram account they view daily, or at least 5 times a week; and who had an interest in exploring the relationship between body image and Instagram use. To increase participation prospects, I slightly expanded the 18 - 30 age range criteria used by Cohen et al., 2019; Fioravanti et al., 2021; and Engeln et al 2020 to 18 - 40. This age range covers the 18 - 29 year old demographic with which Instagram is the most popular (Pew Research Centre, 2021). In starting with “the instances which will best illuminate the research question at hand” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 35), findings may be useful in directing future research to a more general population.

To recruit participants, I approached a local Facebook group “The Acts of Beauty” run by local Edmonton business owner Star Newman. This Facebook group had about 4200 female members at the time of recruitment who, though pre-existing membership requirements, already

met most of my participant selection criteria. The group already excluded men and those outside of the area, meaning that I only had to screen for age and interest. I reached out to Star through email to ask if she would allow me to recruit from the group and, additionally, if she would post a recruitment notice on my behalf. She agreed, and also provided feedback on how to best interact with her community members, including a slight change of language to the recruitment post.

I chose a sample size of four maximum, as per recommendations from my supervisor to align with the scale of a capstone project and to keep the amount of data collected manageable. The study recruitment post linked to a secure Google Form for participants to fill out their information. I had exactly 4 participants fill out the form who met the eligibility criteria. They were all invited to participate in the study with an introduction email that included a consent form. Three interviews were scheduled, with the fourth participant choosing not to proceed with the study. These three participants went on to successfully complete the pre-interview, 10 days of journaling, and post-interview. All of the data that was collected will be password protected and stored on a local digital device for a minimum of 5 years as per U of A policy.

### **Setting**

This study took place in Edmonton, Alberta and was conducted entirely online using Google Meet and Google Forms. The decision to collect data virtually was originally made with safety concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in mind, however, this format ultimately provided other benefits such as reducing travel costs and stress, removing the need to rent space or equipment, and increased efficiency and ease of data collection and interpretation (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 113). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many people online for over 2 years, which also may have increased familiarity and comfort with being online for many. This familiarity “using varied communications technologies in daily professional, social and daily life

enhances their comfort in the medium and...these developments open the door for online researchers to build on participants positive associations with online communication and establish rapport” (Salmons, 2015, p. 77). While I consider this to be largely a positive benefit, this online format requires that participants have “capacity to read and write in the language in which the research is conducted...and have the vision to read and the hand coordination to type” (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005, p. 992). This would remove any potential participants who were unable to meet these requirements, as well as anyone without a reliable internet connection.

In-person interviews were dismissed due to safety concerns around COVID-19 and to ensure comfort for both participants and myself. I considered having the participants write in physical notebooks, which was an option offered in the participant diary study by Jacelon & Imperio (2005) but decided against this primarily due to the high possibility of error in interpreting others' handwriting and additional complications in providing materials.

### **Instrument**

The majority of data collected was self-reported in the form of participant diaries, which were supplemented by pre and post diary interviews. Participants were asked to journal daily for 10 minutes in an online Google Form for a 10 day period; according to Jacelon & Imperio (2005) the ideal length of time for recording solicited diaries is between 1 and 2 weeks as “less than a week, and the diaries did not have sufficient depth of data; more than 2 weeks and participants grew tired of making regular entries” (p. 995). In order to gain descriptive, rich data, the diary writing exercise was constructed similarly to a semi-structured interview to prompt personal reflection.

I built the participant diary form similar to what Jacelon & Imperio (2005) used for their study, a fairly open space with several prompt questions to help start the process. Unlike Jacelon

& Imperio (2005) who, in a time before COVID-19, were able to engage with their participants in person, I kept my data collection fully online. I decided to use Google Forms to collect the participant diaries because they are easily customizable and user friendly and can be completed on whatever device is most convenient for the participant (phone, desktop, tablet). The same form can also be submitted multiple times using the same link to reduce the number of steps taken. Participants would also type their responses, as opposed to handwriting, which also reduced the chance for error in interpretation as the text would be easier to read.

Before opening into a free journal space, the daily form started by asking several structured questions to trigger participant reflection on the day's activities:

Q1:	Did you visit Instagram today? (y/n option)
Q2:	What did you use to view the platform? (Cell phone, tablet, desktop computer, etc). (short answer)
Q3:	How much time did you spend on Instagram today (approximately)?

After that, the diaries were mostly unstructured to prompt reflection; a list of suggested topics was provided to help get them started, and direct their reflection to Instagram and body image as opposed to general platform use. The Google Form Diary Log is available in the appendix. The participant debrief interview followed a similar, unstructured format. The open journal section allows for the potential to capture data that I would not have thought to ask, as was experienced in the Jaceleon and Imperio participant diary study (2005). This created space for the collection of a range of experiences and emotions that may be felt or experienced over a period of time, as opposed to how someone was feeling on a particular day.

The use of language was an important consideration for me in both recruiting participants, and interacting with them during the study. My goal was to come across as professional, yet

approachable and to respond with feeling if appropriate: “If the aims of the research are to help or empower the people being researched, rather than dispassionately learn from them, the approach of the interviewer will need to alter accordingly” (Oakley as quoted by Denscombe, 2010, p. 180). This proved to be especially an important addition during the exercise debrief sessions when participants wanted to talk freely about their experiences and sensitive items were disclosed. This also fit the overall style of my research design and felt both appropriate and necessary to authentically engage with participants.

While self-reported data may experience bias or systematic sources of error (Merrigan et al., 2012, p. 62), this tool can provide a reflective space for participants to engage with their own personal content curation process. It was not necessary for me to accurately know how long each participant spent on the platform; rather than it provided a cue for the participant to engage with that number. Completing an entry consistently over the 10-day period allowed participants to become more comfortable with writing and reflection, therefore increasing introspection and decreasing self-conscious comments (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005, p. 994). The nature of this exercise directly answers the research question: What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?

## **Procedures**

Once ethics approval for the research project was granted, I provided a Facebook post for Star to post on my behalf in the “Acts of Beauty” Facebook group. The post provided a link to a Google Form where they could sign up for the study and an image to help catch attention. The Google Form outlined the full-time commitment of the study: 15-minute pre-interview, daily 10-minute journaling for 10 days, followed by a 20 -30-minute post-interview to attract serious interest only. A formal introduction email and consent form was sent to each participant to read,

sign and date along with a Calendly link to schedule the first session. The text for the Facebook recruitment post, as well as information and consent forms, are available in the appendix.

I scheduled the 15-minute pre-interview using Calendly. Michelak (2022) recommends using scheduling software such as Doodle or Calendly to simplify the booking process for virtual interviews to cut back on the need to email back and forth (p.104) which could impact a participant's willingness to proceed. I decided to use Calendly, as my past experience with this service has proven it to be both simple and easy to use for new users and allows individuals to directly book an appointment slot. Participants selected a time slot on Calendly and were automatically sent a Google Calendar invitation that included a Google Meet link. This short session allowed me to explain the study, time commitments, and detail the terms around privacy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time during the study.

The pre-interview served to allow me to explain the introduction and consent forms and hold space for the participants to ask any questions. Importantly, it also allowed me to build rapport between the participants which could help motivate them to finish the project. All three of my participants signed the forms immediately after the first session and after my suggestion, requested some form of daily reminder to complete the journals. I was very conscious of the size of the request of journaling daily and wanted to make participating in the study as easy as possible. Two of the participants were emailed a reminder with the Google Form link every day to fill out, while the third received a text message reminder at a set time. While the original intention was to schedule the session part way through the journaling exercise, two of the three participants requested to schedule their debrief session during the initial interview. I had originally discounted requesting this so as to not overwhelm the participants during the initial consult, however, I was grateful that this suggestion emerged unprompted. It helped to simplify

the process and reduced the number of communications between myself and the participants, a factor that I believe contributed to the successful completion of the study. The third participant scheduled their debrief partway through the journaling process.

While the journaling went according to plan, a challenge encountered during data collection was the internet connection at the participant debrief sessions. Two out of the three sessions experienced a loss of connection at some point during the interview, ejecting either me or them from the Google Meet. The cause of this was unknown and quickly resolved, however it did jar the session slightly and required a few extra minutes for us to ground ourselves and be able to continue the discussion. This also had a slight impact on Scribbl, the Google Meet transcription extension that I was using. Breaking up the meetings caused it to create multiple transcripts which then had to be merged, and matched up into one document.

I was initially concerned that the participants would not complete the diary entries, or provide enough written content to analyze. Two of the three participants completed most of their entries (one participant included extra entries), while one participant finished just under half of them. This was ultimately not an issue as the debrief interviews provided more than enough information, including relevant explanations as to the lack or, or extra entries provided so I was able to proceed with my original analysis as planned.

## **Analysis**

I followed the five stages of data analysis as outlined by Denscome (2010, p. 240). This complemented Moustakas's (2004) transcendental phenomenological analysis, outlined in more detail below.

### *1. Data preparation:*

I scanned the diaries and made notes of any incomplete or missing entries to address in the post-exercise interview. After each interview was completed, the files were downloaded and saved in a password-protected folder on Google Drive. I took the text that was automatically transcribed by Scribbl, a Google Meet extension, then listened to the audio file twice to correct any errors made by the software. Overall, Scribbl was quite accurate and only minor corrections were required.

2. *Initial Exploration of the data*

Looked for recurrent themes or issues as presented in the participant diaries and interview transcripts; adding notes to the data. This was an iterative process as the data began arriving in the daily journal entries.

3. *Analysis of the data*

Using NViVo software, I began grouping the data into categories and themes. These were later developed into the “Significant Statements” section in the following chapter.

4. *Presentation and display of the data*

My written interpretation of the findings; illustrating points by quotes. Word clouds were also generated on NVivo for a general snapshot of the journal entries.

5. *Validation of the data*

Member validation: this was completed in the post-interview and allowed me to confirm that the data collection was correct (Chan et al, 2013, p. 5) and ask any followup questions.

Once the data collection was completed, I used the rigorous systematic analysis procedure outlined by Moustakas (1994) for transcendental phenomenology, which was also used by Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell in their 2004 study on mentors. I began by describing my



own experiences with the phenomenon, a process that Moustakas calls the epoches (p. 2, 1994) and Neuman (2012) refers to as bracketing. This process is completed by the researcher so that they can “...set aside the views of the phenomenon and focus on those views being reported by the participants” (Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, p.22, 2004). While I was originally a bit skeptical, it proved to be incredibly useful in helping me to separate my own experiences from that of the participants.

The next step in this analysis is to identify “significant statements from participants, clustering them into units and themes” (Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, p.21, 2004). This iterative process began as soon as I began receiving data from the participant diaries. While I was briefly scanning the entries daily to check for completion, key themes and quotes emerged that I made note of. This contributed to the final step, creating a “composite description of the meanings and the essences of the experience”(Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, p.21, 2004). This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## **Summary**

The research design employed by this study explored the process of conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content and provided a reflective space for participants to engage with the subject matter. The data collected addresses the original research question: *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?* and additionally examines the suitability of participant diaries to collect this data. The findings and discussion are provided in the next chapter and provide a more in-depth exploration of the data collected, as well as future action that may be taken to help improve the Instagram experience for women.

## Findings and Discussion Chapter

*Please note that this chapter will be reporting on the participant experience verbatim which includes a small amount of profanity.*

### Introduction

Researchers have identified Instagram, a highly visual social media platform, as a medium that may negatively impact the body image and well-being of the women who use it. The idea of content curation has been suggested by researchers such as Engeln et al. (2020, p. 43) as a way to potentially mitigate some of the negative effects of Instagram. My research project addressed the following questions: *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform? And Are participant diaries a useful tool for collecting this information?*

To further explore these questions, three participants from the Acts of Beauty Insiders Facebook Group were recruited to participate in a 10-day participant diary study where they reflected on their Instagram use and the concept of content curation. After completing the writing exercise, the participants took part in a debrief interview, which also contributed greatly to the results of the study.

This chapter will present an exploration of each participant's experience with curating their Instagram accounts, which includes data collected in the participant diaries and post-exercise debrief session. I analyzed the data by using Moustakas (1994) transcendental phenomenological analysis: identifying significant statements from the participants, then dividing them into common themes. After presenting the data and analysis, my key findings and insights are discussed in response to the study research questions.

## Data Presentation

Three female participants, each assigned a pseudonym, took part in the research study, completing 10 days of journaling followed by a 20 - 40 minute debrief interview. The participants were recruited from the Acts of Beauty Insiders Facebook Group, an active online body positivity community with the goal of “supporting and uplifting other women” (Acts of Beauty, 2022). This group was chosen as its members were already familiar with the concept of body positivity and were social media users; all were active members of this group at the time of study recruitment. The participants, identified by their pseudonyms below, engaged with in the study in the following ways:

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Rachel	(30 - 40 age group)	433 words written in 8 entries
Bailey	(18 - 29 age group)	254 words in 4 entries
Catherine	(30 - 40 age group)	408 words in 11 entries

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## Participant Diaries

The majority of the data collected for this study came from the participant diaries, which were the primary focus of the research design. Rachel, Bailey and Catherine began their journaling using Google Forms from April 29 - May 1, 2022, each on separate dates. The diary format was mostly unstructured but provided several prompts to help them begin writing, similar to the method used by Jacelon & Imperio (2005). During the introduction session each participant was offered the option of a daily reminder to complete the entry through text or email, which they all accepted.

Remembering to complete the journal entries proved to be challenging for all three participants. One participant would miss a day or two, then provide multiple entries the next day.

There were several instances where all three participants “did not have time to use Instagram” or, upon reflecting on how the platform was making them feel, chose not to use it. Towards the end of the journaling exercise, I began to receive similar statements as the Jacelon & Imperio study (2005), with participants feeling that they had “run out of things to say” or that “there is not much else to add”. These sentiments were expressed in the later diary entries and further fleshed out in the post-exercise interview.

### **Debrief Interviews**

The interviews were completed within one to three days of the participant diary exercise concluding, depending on the participant. Each interview was unique in that each conversation took its own direction, driven by the participant and lasted between 20 - 40 minutes. I had prepared a list of questions to help start the conversation, however, they proved to be mostly unnecessary as each participant had thoughts they wanted to share on the experience. I opened each session by declaring the intention of our time together to be a “space to debrief the exercise and share any thoughts they had,” which the participants used to fill the bulk of the time we spent. As part of my prepared question list, participants were also asked a variation of *Did you like the journaling process? What was difficult about this exercise?* and *Did you notice any differences from the start to the finish?*

A summary of each participant's experience in the study is explored below:



She began following these accounts to inspire her to lose weight, but Instagram soon began showing her targeted weight loss and fitness ads, which she later referred to several times as the content that would negatively impact her mood, making her feel “not good enough” (Bailey, Diary). She reflected on the fact that she felt Instagram was a more difficult place to be than Facebook because of the high presence of “Instagram models”, whereas Facebook was safer with all “friends and family”. She worries about the effects that this type of content will have on her young daughter (Bailey, Interview).

Her curation journey was occasionally a rocky one. She missed several days of journaling, writing in a later entry that she needed to take a break because “her mental health was suffering and Instagram just makes it so much worse” (Bailey, Diary). She tackled the Instagram curation process in stages: Some days she chose to focus on only removing content that she found upsetting, such as unfollowing a girl she knew in real life who went on to become what she referred to as an “Instagram model covered in tattoos and travels for work...wears a thong bikini...has big fake [gestures at breasts]...it makes me compare my life to her...” (Bailey, Interview). On other days, she focused on adding what made her feel good: “I followed a new account today...it inspired me to start doing that hobby again...It’s the first time in awhile that I’ve seen anything on Instagram that actually made me happy” (Bailey, [sic] Diary). Some of the content she enjoyed adding focused on crocheting and tattoo artistry because “their clients come in all shapes, colours and sizes and their artwork is phenomenal” (Bailey, Diary).

In her interview, Bailey said that participating in the study and curating her Instagram account had a tangible effect on her, helping her feel more in control of her social media feed, and that it gave her a “kick start” to go to therapy to help her process her reflections and experiences. She found written journaling “tedious” and would have preferred alternative

methods of recording her experience such as video journaling. While she wrote the least compared to the other two participants, her interview provided valuable information to supplement her experience and affirmed the sense of self-empowerment she feels she experienced as a result of this study.

### “Doing it for the Kids” - Catherine



**Figure 2.0: Word Cloud of Catherine’s journal entries**

*“Content curation to me means following pages that align with the way I want my life to look and feel good to my heart. It means unfollowing the pages that cause my anxiety to rise or don’t feel aligned with what I want in my life” (Catherine, Diary).*

Catherine had been experimenting with curating her feed since the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020 and she found herself online more often than she used to be. Noticing changes in her anxiety levels, she began unfollowing and muting accounts that triggered those feelings, instead, focusing on “what she actually wants to see” (Catherine, Interview). She had never paid much attention to body image content prior to this study, which sparked her interest in participating: “The journal questions were provocative, I guess in that it really got me thinking of you know, is there enough representation of different body types? Is there enough of what you are looking for on these platforms?”. It is important to her to “set a good example” for her 10-

year-old daughter who does not yet have her own social media accounts (Catherine, Diary). She brings a different awareness to curating her account than that of the other two participants in that she also looks for content that she can watch with her family.

Catherine sometimes uses Instagram with her children and like Bailey, has concerns for her daughter and the younger generation who are growing up with social media platforms. Her concerns included the possibility of online bullying, the types of content kids may come across, and frequency of use: "...we had magazines but it wasn't the same because you could consume it but it wasn't in the palm of your hand all the time" (Catherine, Interview). As the first generation of parents to be teaching children growing up immersed in these technologies, she wants to teach her daughter to have awareness of what she sees online. She expressed a fondness in her diary entries for posts that break down how filters can modify your appearance: "It's a good reminder that content on social media is often not real life and to not make comparisons of yourself based on what you see' (Catherine, [sic], Diary).

How often, and how long she spends on social media platforms is an important consideration for her. Catherine found that participating in this study actually increased her time spent on Instagram, a fact she did not particularly enjoy but found "a wake-up call to...just be mindful of like the amount of time and spending consuming this content" (Catherine, Interview). In increasing her usage, she noted that she was seeing more of her desired content, but also that she was seeing more advertisements than she did previously which was a negative.

Catherine provided the most separate entries, reflecting often on the types of accounts she would add and unfollow, paying particular attention to how each made her feel. Catherine found journaling to "be like a chore" when there were other things "she would rather be doing" (Catherine, Interview).





model of “keeping people engaged” (Rachel, Interview). Curating is something she sees as necessary to ensure the platform does what she wants. However, her diary entries and interview show a range of reactions, alternating between satisfaction with the space she built: “I seem to have my feed in a good place right now” (Rachel, Diary), but also expressing frustration at Instagram itself:

*“IG [Instagram] recently made a change and they’re starting to show posts that you’d normally only find on the explore page in my feed. And honestly I have a really negative reaction to this. I don’t want “related content” in my feed. My feed is supposed to be a space I’ve created for me, one that I can hit the end of and know I’m all caught up on. Not something that traps me into scrolling mindlessly for hours” (Rachel, [sic] Diary).*

Rachel describes her personal content curation as a process that comes and goes in waves. Conscious of her social media intake, she is quite selective of who she follows, or what types of photos she ‘likes’ because she is aware of the effort it takes to remove them from her feed. As soon as she realizes she is tired of a kind of content, she gets rid of it by unfollowing, or even using the “report” function if necessary. While she employs this technique herself, she also has concerns about what might happen if content online gets “too curated”:

*“... I do also have thoughts on that because I think, um, too much curation in some ways is bad. Things have started to contribute to things like you know, your major political divides. And so if you're only going to be shown what you like and you're lacking the stuff that you don't like, then you're kind of put in a bubble and push more to one side of things than you are to like, getting a better understanding of the world” (Rachel, Interview).*

That being said, however, Rachel expressed shock at how few people don’t know that “you don't have to accept the Instagram curated [content], like the algorithms” (Rachel, Interview). She has been teaching a family member how to regain control on her social media account and feels that the type of exercise this study employed could be a very different journey for someone “who had more to unlearn...[rather] than someone like me, who just gets sick of seeing stuff and blocks it out entirely” (Rachel, Interview).

Rachel finished the majority of her entries and had a lot to share about her social media journey in our debrief session. Like the other two participants, Rachel grew tired of journaling (“I’m not a journaler”) but found the reflective process “nice to put the thoughts down” (Rachel, Interview).

### **Data Analysis**

I employed the transcendental phenomenological analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) to describe the participant curation experience, supplemented with the five analysis techniques from Denscombe (2010). Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell (2004) employed this technique since it is a useful technique when “a researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand and has individuals who can provide a description of what they have experienced” (p. 32). This was an excellent fit for my study on content curation. The diaries were checked for accuracy during the debrief interview session, and the transcripts generated from Scribbl were reviewed along with the audio to ensure accuracy. In the one case where the audio file was corrupted, the participant confirmed accuracy of the transcripts. The files were then anonymized, removing any names and identifying information that was collected.

Analyzing the data was an iterative process and began during the data collection. Part of my initial data exploration included uncovering common themes in the journal entries during the submission process. While I was primarily checking for completion as the journal entries were being written, I noticed several common themes surrounding curation emerging early on which I made note of (Denscombe, 2010, p. 240). I reviewed the data multiple times over a two-week period while confirming transcript accuracy until there were no new realizations, a process that brought me “close to the data” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 275). My initial observations became themes, which were then coded using NVivo software. These themes were built into the data

presentation narratives. The thematic content and supporting quotes are listed in the following section along with textual support from the data to support them. The statements were “collected so that a reader can identify the range of perspectives” (Moustakas as cited by Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 23). These observations will be discussed further in the Findings and Discussion section.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity in research are important considerations for ensuring that the data collected is accurate. Reliability is a “concept used for testing or evaluating research”, whereas validity is a “qualifying check or measure for research” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 602). Reliability and validity can be difficult to define in qualitative research as it is a naturalistic approach, “that does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interests” (Patton as quoted in Golafshani, 2003, p. 600), a common occurrence in quantitative research. Quantitative research relies heavily on the credibility of the instrument, whereas qualitative research relies on the credibility of the researcher themselves as they themselves are the instrument. (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). An important technique that researchers use to ensure reliability and validity in qualitative phenomenological research is what Neuman (2012) refers to as bracketing, or what Moustakas (1994) calls the epoche. The epoche is “a conscious process of identification and subsequent quarantine of naturally occurring thought patterns” (Sheehan, 2014, p. 11), and is intended to help the researcher assume as much of a neutral position as possible prior to data collection (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 22). Prior to my data collection, I picked up my own pen to reflect on my past Instagram curation experiences. I further expanded this process by taking notes and memos throughout the data collection and analysis process (Neuman, 2012, p. 86). Additionally, the majority of my data was collected directly from the participants in their diaries

which further confirmed the validity and reliability of the results (Chan et al., 2013, p. 5). This helped to manage my own expectations and assumptions while interacting with the participants and analyzing the data.

## **Discussion**

The research questions enquired about the role of consciously curating body image-related Instagram content has on users within and outside of the platform, and to additionally look at the suitability of participant diaries as a tool for collecting this information. As this study progressed, it became evident to me that content curation has a prevalent role to play in improving the social media experience for women and increasing awareness of the effects of different types of body image-related content. That being said, while body image content was the primary focus of this study, it was difficult for participants to separate it from the overall experience using Instagram. While all three participants discussed the effect that body image content had on them, it was impossible to discuss this without touching on other types of content that also had an impact. While participants removed a lot of body image content, it was replaced by a myriad of other items, some of which could likely be labeled #BoPo, but were also joined by a lot of dog videos, crafts, artwork, and more. Posts containing medical misinformation, discussing politics, or what was referred to by two participants as a very general “other negative stuff” were also removed during the curation process.

While much of the literature explored in previous chapters focused on the effects of content on users sorted by #hashtags, I was not surprised by the lack of references to it in the data I collected. The participants were recruited from a Facebook group that described itself as a place for members who “value body-positive inspiration” (Acts of Beauty Insiders, 2022), Rachel was the only one who specifically referenced body positivity as something her feed “was

already curated for” (Rachel, Interview). This could have to do with the fact that hashtags on Instagram change depending on what resonates with users. Much of the body image-related content that was reported to me in the participant diaries lined up with Cohen et al.’s description of #BoPo, including diverse and unedited bodies in a range of sizes (2019a, p. 1548), however, was never referred to as such. Despite the recency of the research on #BoPo, has it already become an outdated category? Or alternatively, was it so commonplace an idea to these participants as to not warrant a specific reference? Insights as to how participants referred to the content they encountered online was a partial motivation in keeping the journaling unstructured; however, how users interact with and experience #hashtags on Instagram requires further study.

Despite the differences in methodologies employed between my research and the previous works referenced in the literature review, some similar observations were made. My data analysis found several common themes between participant experiences that are further discussed in the key findings and insights below.

## **Key Findings and Insights**

### **Curation as Causation**

Participants were never asked the question, “Why do you use Instagram?”. However, the answers to “why curate” also served to address that question, albeit in a slightly different fashion. The primary reason participants engaged in curating their Instagram account was to feel good using the platform or to feel inspired. All three participants alluded to the loss of that initial purpose in their reflections on why they wanted to curate. They are aware that they can have good experiences through the platform, presumably because they have had them and are interested in figuring out how to increase that. Another consideration is time; both Rachel and Catherine expressed the desire to regain some control of their time and not wanting to spend

hours on the platform. Curating their feeds felt like a viable solution to building an experience that showed them both what they want, in approximately the amount of time they wanted to look at it for. Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) (CT) examines the cumulative effect of viewing content and as Stein et. al., 2021 suggested could strengthen the application of Social Comparison Theory. CT claims that exposure to content through the mass media can impact the audience (Stein et al., 2021, p 88). The more exposure, the more likely the effect. Frequency of use remains a difficult concept to nail down for Instagram use, with two of the study participants making statements alluding to a lack of control or an involuntary loss of time spent on the platform as a negative effect. More study on the relationship between frequency of use and content viewed is needed.

### **Curation Significant Statements**

- It's the Interaction of what I want to see constantly and how does that affect me?
- Content curation to me means following pages that align with the way I want my life to look and feel good to my heart. It means unfollowing the pages that cause my anxiety to rise or don't feel aligned with what I want in my life.
- But I put my phone down and then I'd come do it because I noticed that the new accounts that I'm following, it was affecting my mental health and I'm starting to feel a little better.
- I've taken steps over the last couple years especially to reduce my anxiety while on social media, and that involved unfollowing all the content that didn't feel good
- I definitely feel like curating my feed has led to a more positive overall interaction on social media, since I'm not often seeing content that makes me feel uncomfortable or anxious. I don't find myself comparing my body to those I see online because I seek out content with more positive messaging or different themes like pets, art, baking, etc.
- Okay I can't see these things anymore. I need to really zone in on what I do want to see instead.
- this hit me harder than I needed it to. But maybe it's kind of what I needed, right?

## **I'm Looking At You**

“Comparison to others” was a theme I expected to find throughout the study, and its presence strengthens the application of Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954). SCT notes that individuals are driven to compare themselves to others they feel are close to themselves, of which social media platforms provide a multitude of opportunities (Stein et al., 2021, p. 88). An example of this could be Bailey's story of deciding to unfollow the girl she used to know who became a high-profile figure on the platform. Despite Bailey's awareness that the profile likely was not real, or at least not the whole story, the upward comparison triggered a negative reaction in her. This situation is an example of where content curation as a skill can benefit the user; there is nothing about this type of account that necessarily would or even should trigger a response from Instagram as this specific negative response was possibly only experienced by Bailey herself. Yet having the awareness and tools to deal with it helped improve her personal experience. While there are similarities between the effects of some types of content, what helps and what hurts can be extremely individual, and as such, users need the tools to determine and curate content themselves.

## **Comparison To Others Significant Statements**

- I've grown a life inside my own body and though it is a beautiful and amazing thing to do, there is no representation of our bodies anywhere.
- There isn't any self-hate that comes along with viewing the content on my feed like there is when I see content showing women for the male gaze. That lens twists things, makes you see yourself as flawed or not good enough. And I'm tired of it. So I'm going to keep filling my feed with things that don't make me feel lesser
- but looking at those same accounts now, those women and families have multiple kids and still have the same pre baby body and makes me think I could stand to lose quite few pounds.
- I can remember hopping on to scroll Instagram and seeing all the model bodies and still feeling like I wasn't skinny enough, that my body wasn't good enough. I still have days



like that years later even though I've been trying to clear up my feed of all the things that make me feel like I'm not good enough.

- Why do all the moms have all their shit together when most of us feel like we're doing the bare minimum?

In addition to upwards comparisons, concern for others was a surprising theme that emerged so significantly throughout the diaries that it needed to be acknowledged. Rachel, Bailey and Catherine were concerned for family members and members of the general public at points throughout the exercise with Rachel and Catherine making active points to share their learnings on content curation and general online navigation skills. This is an important consideration for future digital literacy initiatives; peer-to-peer learning should be explored as a venue for teaching content curation.

### **Concern for Others Significant Statements**

- I want to set a good example for my 10-year-old daughter, and although she's not on her own accounts yet she understands social media but maybe not the impact it can have on body image and self esteem.
- I hope my kids get to grow up in an environment where they and their peers are not bullied for their weight or size, or for their gender expression or the way they dress or decide to present themselves to the world.
- ... I do also have thoughts on that because I think, um, too much curation in some ways is bad. Things have started to contribute to things like you know, your major political divides. And so if you're only going to be shown what you like and you're lacking the stuff that you don't like, then you're kind of put in a bubble and push more to one side of things than you are to like getting a better understanding of the world.”
- And I can't imagine the sort of damage it's doing to people who are insecure in their bodies. I didn't always used to be where I am and to have the confidence I have, but not everyone is like me
- It was a reminder to try to see ourselves the way our kids see us, and it was also an important reminder to me that my own daughter watches and listens to the things I say to myself and about myself out loud, and she's at an age where she's vulnerable to

body image issues and influence by media.

- I feel like this [specific Instagram account] can be motivating for some people, but for anyone who struggles with body image or body dysmorphia or any kind of eating disorder, this much tracking and measuring can be counterproductive and lead to obsessive behaviors
- So I'm just...I'm terrified for what social media is gonna do for the next generation after.

### **Instagram and the Algorithm**

“The algorithm” is the ghost that haunted the backstories of my participants. An omnipresent force, it worked both for and against them, bringing them more of what they wanted, but also more of what they certainly did not. In Rachel’s case, when she curated her feed to suit her preferences the platform would change and require her to restart her efforts. Here we approach the line of how effective individual curation can be. The algorithm is one of the most important considerations for teaching users how to curate their content, yet thanks to Instagram’s obfuscation it remains the one we know least about managing. My participants each experienced the algorithm differently, citing ‘liking,’ ‘unfollowing,’ ‘ muting’, ‘reporting’, ‘restricting’ or “not looking at [specific content] too long” (Rachel, Interview) as important features to help manage it.

Instagram itself has been suggesting a kind of content curation by promoting the existence of its new Mute function, a “new way to control what posts you see on Instagram....With this change, you can make your feed even more personalized to you” (Instagram, 2022). I had expected to find more mentions of “mute” and “restrict” functions throughout the study; however, these features were not brought up in any significant way by any of the participants. Upon further reflection this makes sense as these functions allow you to restrict content from someone the user knows, without necessarily unfriending them and

potentially avoiding upset in a relationship. The majority of the content that my participants disclosed removing was not from anyone they knew personally, so it was potentially simpler to just fully remove it. The features are also fairly new, so it is also possible the participants did not know about them.

The point remains that we remain in the dark about exactly how the mysterious algorithm works. While we cannot teach Instagram users how the algorithm works, we can include a discussion about the opacity of this knowledge and how it will inevitably impact the user experience.

### **“The Algorithm” Significant Statements**

- You really notice the algorithm when you click on a single photo or video and then suddenly your feed is filled with it.
- that's sort of how I got to where I learned all the tricks with the algorithm, the reminders to Instagram to not show me something before they pay attention to it
- if I REALLY don't like it and want to change the algorithm, I'll deliberately remove the content. I'll give IG one thing, it does seem to at least temporarily stop showing me shit when I put some effort in to change it.
- I think the Instagram algorithms are better tuned to the type of content I'm interested in seeing,
- thanks Meta for using my data and selling me as a product

### **Participant Diaries**

Despite the sentiments expressed by all three of my participants growing tired of journaling, journals were a useful tool for creating a sense of mindfulness and reflection. Mindfulness as a technique is currently being explored as a treatment for a plethora of different conditions, including its positive effects on physical and mental health (Cresswell, 2017). The results are promising, however formal studies applying it to social media usage are lacking.

Additionally, written journaling is far from the only introspective tool out there, and similar benefits could be realized through completing audio or video recordings (as suggested by Bailey), or potentially even a one-on-one conversation or interview with a knowledgeable source. Knowing that the entries were being submitted for a study likely had a large effect on their completion rate, but how much, or how often reflection is required is also something that would differ between people.

It is important to mention that curation is an ongoing process, a practice that requires ongoing attention, not something that is simply done once. The participants who went through this study will likely need to continue the practice, as Rachel experienced especially in light of ever-changing social media policies and the inevitable adjustments to Instagram's algorithm.

### **Study Limitations**

Instagram is an incredibly new platform with a recent body of scholarship developing behind it. However, as demonstrated by the experience of the participants, the user experience has the possibility to be rocked by the platform's many changing parts including mysterious algorithm updates or feature updates. Further generalizations may be difficult to make because the platform has already shifted significantly from the time this study was completed. Despite the limitations, the value of this study is in its originality and new approach to user empowerment. While there is a need for Instagram to institute policy changes and add features to help prevent access damaging content such as #Thinspo, there is also a need to teach and inform users how to manage, sort and deal with the content that is upsetting on a personal level or even just the sheer volume of it.

I am an Instagram user, and I suspect, like the participants in this study, have moments when I enjoy the platform and times when I curse it. My insider perspective brought familiarity

with the topic being addressed and allowed me to “fit in easily and comfortably” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 211) with my research participants. An easy benefit of this; I was able to understand the terms they used in both the journal and interview process that may have confused someone outside of the community. However, while I was familiar with Instagram as a female user, each participant had individual experiences; this difference is used by Dwyer & Buckle (2009) to demonstrate that there is a space that researchers can occupy that is not exclusively an insider or an outsider (p. 60). This acknowledgement is important in understanding that members of a community can still separate themselves while providing valuable insight. This also aligns with my transcendental phenomenological approach of understanding the human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Cresswell, 2009, p. 20).

## **Summary**

Content curation is a simple but powerful concept. This research project explored how a group of participants experienced content curation on their personal Instagram accounts in a natural setting. Using participant diaries and post-exercise debrief interviews, three participants were given a semi-unstructured space to explore their personal Instagram curation experiences. This research examined the following questions:

- 1) *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?*
- 2) *Are participant diaries a useful tool for collecting this information?*

The findings of this study include several key learnings about the Instagram curation process that can be applied to further studies. As demonstrated by Bailey, newest to the practice of content curation, an awareness of content curation and simply beginning the practice can have a positive impact on a user. This had an impact on both her digital practices, and possibly on her

mental health outside of the platform. While the presence of body-image related content is a factor for improving the user experience, either by adding or deleting it from a feed, it may be impossible to separate it from the overall process. However, as demonstrated by Rachel, and to a certain degree Catherine, there is a limit to how successful this practice that comes as a direct result of Instagram's overall structure.

A range of awareness exists about curation, each impacted in some way by Instagram's algorithmic systems, as well as each person's perception of it. While the removal of some harmful content, such as #Thinspo could be done by Instagram itself, some content is not harmful or helpful across the board. As such, it is up to the individual user to understand how what they view impacts them. Adding and deleting content is a personal process, and comparison to others and frequency of use both play a role in this process. This will be further discussed in applications for future study in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

Users may need to update their relationship status with Instagram to ‘It’s Complicated’.

Despite having access to a large variety of content, previous research has shown that using the platform can cause a multitude of negative effects including anxiety and depression in women. Previous research has zeroed in on body image related content as a potential explanation for this phenomenon, focusing on the impacts of specific hashtags such as #thinspo, #fitspo and #BoPo. While this trial by hashtag has provided interesting insights into the effects of this specific content on viewers, much remains unknown about how women can create a more positive Instagram experience for themselves. Content curation has been suggested as one potential way to help mitigate the negative effects of using Instagram, while empowering users to build a better experience for themselves. My research aimed to explore the role of conscious content curation process of body image related Instagram content while answering the questions:

- 1) *What role can reflective, conscious curation of body-image-related Instagram content have on impacting users both within and outside of the platform?*
- 2) *Are participant diaries a useful tool for collecting this information?*

The final chapter of this paper will provide a conclusion to my research while summarizing my findings. Study limitations and future research opportunities in this area will also be discussed.

The findings of this study indicate that content curation can be a useful practice for helping women improve their experiences using Instagram and develop a sense of self awareness online. While I had originally intended for this study to focus solely on body image related content, it proved difficult for users to separate this from other types of content. While #Fitspo and #thinspo remain formidable opponents, in the process of building a curation practice online were inseparable from other types of content that could also cause a negative reaction in the user. As

demonstrated by the study participants, Rachel had already practiced removing political content that she found upsetting, while Catherine was removing content that she felt was not appropriate for her children. Body positivity content was mentioned as a beneficial addition to creating a positive experience, however it was overshadowed by other types of content that made the users feel good - most of which had nothing to do with bodies or weight at all. This included dogs, travel and crafting, all of which were defined as 'neutral content' in other studies had the most mentions by participants as positive additions to their feed. However, the removal of weight loss and diet content had a significant impact on participants, Bailey in particular.

Bailey, an Instagram user who had never engaged in curating her Instagram content before noticed several immediate positive improvements. This exercise helped prompt reflection and action to examine what she was consuming online and to start to make changes. She got rid of accounts that made her feel poorly, with a special focus on the "Instagram models" that sparked comparison between her life and theirs. This was tied to appearance, but also lifestyle, another piece of proof that examining the impacts of different types of content on users is not a straightforward process.

Rachel, and to some extent Catherine were better examples of the limits of this type of practice. They were able to create a space that seemed to be mostly good for them, however eventually ran into barriers from Instagram itself. The reality of the situation is that 100% user control on the platform is simply not an option. Even if it were, while it could potentially remove exposure to the nastier sides of Instagram like #thinspo, it could also take away from finding new desirable content that perhaps one did not know to search for. The issue of how to properly utilize the limited control that users do have remains as a gap in digital literacy.

Key findings from this study can be considered for future digital literacy initiatives. It



begins with curation as causation; building an awareness or helping remind the user why they are on social media in the first place. Asking them what they want to see, and encouraging them to allow those intentions to guide them in what they choose to engage with online.

It is possible for users to both compare themselves against others on Instagram, while also expressing concern for others either on the platform or in real life. These factors could have an impact on teaching curation practices; impacting receipt of the information as well as how to deliver these messages to the public. Content creators and influencers (or perhaps even the “Instagram models”) could be effective communicators of this message, although they are also working both for and against Instagram’s ever-changing structure.

The algorithm remains the most difficult portion of this process to navigate. It has the ability to impact content creators and consumers and Instagram’s intentions behind it are opaque at best. At this point, awareness of these facts are the best that we can offer a potential audience, however the media appears to be picking up on the negative effects of Instagram on users caused in particular by the algorithm at the time of writing. The effect coverage has on the public and Instagram’s large user base remains to be seen.

Participant diaries were a useful tool in collecting this information, however they are far from the only option available for inspiring and collecting participant reflection. Handwritten journals, video or audio recordings could likely also be employed for similar results. My experience with participants growing weary of journaling near the end of the session indicates that this likely cannot be used as a long-time practice, rather it may more so be an activity to spark awareness to develop an individual process. This way individual factors such as content, or even frequency of use can be examined at the individual level.

However, the relationship between frequency of use and what types of content were viewed

by the user warrants further investigation. Rachel and Catherine both discussed an unwanted loss of time using Instagram, something Rachel had been trying to use curation to fix. Cultivation Theory (CT) states that exposure to content can have an effect on the viewer, and more exposure may equal more effect (Stein et al., 2021, p. 88). A more curated, controlled social media feed could potentially create an impact desired by the viewer however Tiggeman & Miller (2010) and Cohen et al., (2017;2018) brought up that overall time spent online could result in more exposure, although not on purpose, to content that causes negative effects on the viewer. Given Instagram's ever-changing algorithm and the possible constant effort required to curate content, it seems that accidental exposure to undesired content is a likely possibility. Stamina to continue to adjust to both Instagram's changing algorithm and to deal with the influx of new content may also be an important factor; something that is quite individual and could be studied further.

The topic of digital content curation and its impact on the user is one that could benefit from a collaboration between psychology and communication research. While much of the literature examined in the review had psychology roots, it misses the essential connection between the fast-moving nature of social media and role of the platform in constructing the user experience.

This research project explored how the concept of content curation could be applied on an individual level to potentially help improve the experience of using social media. Navigating the sheer amount of content available online, the structure and business models of social media platforms and the presence of unwanted, or even dangerous content online is a larger task than many of us are even aware of. We, as users started using Instagram for a reason that I doubt was to feel bad; and learning how to best navigate Instagram to bring us back to those original reasons is a crucial first step.

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## Appendix A: Sample Participant Diary

### Adapted from the Jacelon & Imperio 2005 Study

#### Journal Entry

The purpose of the journal is to give the researcher a way to see what your reflections are on your daily Instagram use. Please spend at least 10 minutes a day writing into the Google Form diary. Remember to press submit at the bottom when you are done!

**What to do if you miss an entry:** Don't worry! Just come back and enter the diary again the next day. It's better for me to have some information, than no information at all.

#### Questions:

1. Did you visit Instagram today?
2. What did you use to view the platform? (Cell phone, tablet, desktop computer, etc).
3. How long did you spend on the platform (approximately). If you are using your cell phone, you can learn how to check this [for iphone](#) or [Android](#).

#### Free Journal Space

Please write about anything you think will help me understand your relationship and experience with Instagram use and body image. The following list contains some prompts to help you get started. Feel free to pick and choose items from the list, or write about what you feel is important in your 10 minutes.

1. What does the idea of content curation on Instagram mean to you?
2. Did you see any body image related content on Instagram today that made you feel self conscious? What was it?
3. Did you see any body image related content on Instagram that made you feel good, strong, empowered, etc? What was it?
4. Are there any body types that you wish you saw on your Instagram feed?
5. Did you follow any new accounts today? If so, why?
6. Did you unfollow, mute or restrict any accounts today? If so, why?
7. Did Instagram show you something (Suggested content) that you really liked? Or really didn't like?
8. Any other thoughts or comments?



## Appendix B: Recruitment Notice (Facebook Post text)

### Facebook Image:



Research study on the relationship between content curation, body image and Instagram use seeking participants.

Instagram use can contribute to negative mental health issues such as anxiety, lower body satisfaction and feelings of inadequacy; however it can also be an empowering and inspirational experience. The idea of content curation (actively selecting the types of content you want to see and removing what you do not; such as what a museum curator might do to build an art collection) has been suggested as a possible way to mitigate some of the negative impacts of Instagram use on body image.

My study is looking to further explore this concept through the process of personal reflection. I am looking for 2 - 4 female Instagram users (between 18 - 40 years old) who are interested in participating in a 10 day online journaling exercise. You will be asked to journal online using Google Forms every day for a 10 minute period on your Instagram use. Your participation in this study aims to shed light on the different factors that may contribute to these experiences and may inform future educational and awareness initiatives surrounding social media use.

This exercise will begin with a quick 15 minute interview on Google Meet, followed by a 20 - 30 minute post-exercise interview where we will debrief the process.

If you are interested in participating, please fill out the Google Form here:

<https://forms.gle/HwKFzXvhbioHj9hn8>

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to Courtney Wagner

([cmwagner@ualberta.ca](mailto:cmwagner@ualberta.ca)).

## Appendix C: Introduction and Consent Form



# UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

### INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

**Study Title: Instagram and the Art of Curation (Pro0011761)**

**Research Investigator:**

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The researcher will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

<https://calendar.ualberta.ca/content.php?catoid=6&navoid=803#University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants>

**Background:**

You are being invited to participate in this research study because of the interest you expressed through the Acts of Beauty Facebook Group recruitment post. Before you make a decision about whether to proceed with this study, Courtney will go over this form with you. I encourage you to ask questions if anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. The results of this study will be used to fulfill my graduation requirements for the Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology program (MACT) at the University of Alberta.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the practice of content curation in the relationship between body image and Instagram use. Instagram use can contribute to negative mental health issues such as anxiety, lower body satisfaction and feelings of inadequacy; it can also be an empowering, inspirational experience or anything in between. Your participation in this study aims to shed light on the different factors that may contribute to these experiences and may inform future educational and awareness initiatives surrounding social media use.

**Study Procedure**

The study will consist of 1 pre-interview on Zoom (15 minutes), a 10-minute journaling exercise once a day for ten days, followed by a 20 - 30-minute post-exercise interview where we will debrief the exercise and confirm the accuracy of the data collected from you. The post-exercise Zoom interview will be audio-recorded and a transcript will be prepared. You will be invited to review the transcript to check accuracy. Your privacy and confidentiality are assured through anonymized data, password-protected and encrypted computer files. Upon completion of this study, all audio/video recordings and transcripts will be destroyed.

**Benefits to the Participant**

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, by participating in this study, you will be asked to reflect on your experience using the platform Instagram. It is hoped that through this exercise you will increase your awareness of why and how you use the platform which may help increase your sense of control and help you optimise the use of the platform. There is no financial compensation for completing this study.

**Risk**

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study; however, not all risks can be identified at the outset, and participating in this research study may cause psychological or emotional stress while discussing situations and experiences that have caused you discomfort.

Security measures have been taken on the part of the researcher to ensure that online interactions and data collection remain secure, however there may be unanticipated risks associated with online data collection. Participants are encouraged to ensure their security and anti-virus software is up to date.

If any other risks are identified during the course of this research study, then you will be notified immediately. During any portion of this study, you can skip questions, take a break, or not answer anything you do not feel comfortable answering. Resources, where you can seek additional mental health assistance if necessary, will be provided to you.

**Voluntary participation**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to be in the study, you are free to change your mind and withdraw at any time up until two weeks after the data collection period is complete. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the data collected will be used unless otherwise requested.

**Confidentiality & Anonymity**

Protecting your privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity are of the utmost importance. Only I and my capstone supervisor will have access to this research study's records and results. You will not be personally identified in any transcripts, articles, presentations, teaching materials, or online postings (such as Facebook). Where appropriate, a pseudonym will be used. The safeguards in place to protect your privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity are password-protected files stored on encrypted hard drives and network storage devices. The data collected will be deleted after 5 years as per UofA policy. At your request, you may receive a copy of the completed research study. If so, it will have to be approved by a Research Ethics Board (REB).

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

**Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

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Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

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Date

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Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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Date